ABSTRACT

Best practice research (BPR) is the method of choice for contemporary postbureaucratic reform theorists. Public management researchers increasingly examine "best practices" to advocate postbureaucratic principles of customer-driven, value-focused, entrepreneurial, market-oriented government. BPR and postbureaucratic theory may be a positive, practical, prescriptive, and innovative new paradigm in public management research and theory, but numerous practical and scientific challenges remain. BPR is theoretically self-validating, noncumulative, limited in scope, and politically skewed. BPR demonstrates the unique problems that arise when research and reform in public management become too closely linked. BPR successfully brought postbureaucratic theory to market, but it cannot now be responsible for evaluating the administrative reforms it has generated. The methodology of "reforms as experiments" is more suited for this task.

Theory development in the field of management traditionally has relied on practice and experience as the basis for its inductive claims. Research methods that observe the day-to-day workings of organizations and managers in order to develop new principles for reform have a rich history of successes. Frederick Taylor studied iron workers to discover and promote the tools of scientific management; Hawthorne researchers experimented with factory laborers to reveal a behavioral side to management; Herbert Simon studied municipal employees to understand the administrative behavior of decision making; Henry Mintzberg chronicled the activities of managers to develop theories of managerial work; Peters and Waterman examined top-company characteristics in order to advocate organizational excellence; and more recently, Osborne and Gaebler (1992) studied best management practices to prescribe market-oriented government.

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Each of these scholars derived new theories and principles from their research. Subsequently, that research has been used successfully, whether by the scholars or by others, to prescribe various reforms in managerial and organizational work. Unlike its social science parents or policy analysis sibling, the link between research and reform in public management is good—perhaps frighteningly good, particularly the new relationship between best practice research and postbureaucratic reform.

Best practices research (BPR) is the newest version of the method of inductive practice-to-principles research. BPR is different from most of its predecessors insofar as the observations seem more selective and less direct and the principles more prescriptive and less constrained. The contents of the theories that are derived from BPR are different too, increasingly presenting what may be labeled a postbureaucratic reform thesis, that is, a customer-driven, results-oriented, value-focused, entrepreneurial, flexible, and anticipatory style and form of government. BPR is the method of choice for postbureaucratic theorists. In this article we examine BPR as a method of research and assess its theoretical contribution to the continued development of public management.

There is an interesting paradoxical reaction to much BPR and its postbureaucratic perspective. Many react adversely to the BPR method of deriving a set of management principles from a selective review of best management practices, often culled from the private sector, and then generalizing it to various public management contexts. Best practice researchers, one could argue, have not reinvented only public management, but public management research methods as well. On the other hand, many react favorably to the practical nature and positive tone of both the examples and prescriptions for changing public management practice. One could equally argue that BPR has sparked a revival among many who practice and some who teach the public management profession. Postbureaucratic reform and reinventing government may be the most influential ideas in public management to come along in quite some time.

The problem is understanding not just the specific nature of BPR and postbureaucratic theory but also the more global problem of the connection between research and reform in public management. For most of its lifetime social science, including the professional disciplines of policy analysis and public administration, has been struggling to improve the use of knowledge. Most of the blame for the disconnection has fallen on social science method. The unique paradox of BPR is that it may have

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solved the utilization problem while it created other dilemmas and delusions along the way.

**WHAT IS BEST PRACTICE RESEARCH?**

It would be a mistake to think singularly about BPR, just as it would be a mistake to insist on one form of the case study or one method of hypothesis testing. BPR is not just one simple research technique; it is a new and still developing method of public management research. Some scholars would surely argue that BPR is not really an identifiable method of research in public management, others might argue that BPR is something we have been doing for some time now under a new label. Regardless, BPR terminology has been minted explicitly and its impact is felt already in the field of public management.

The most precise definition of BPR is the selective observation of a set of exemplars across different contexts in order to derive more generalizable principles and theories of management. For example, a management researcher might examine several cities that are reputed to have good budgeting systems and find that a common element in each system is the incorporation of outcome measures in the budget format. Given this finding, a principle of outcome budgeting could be prescribed for other cities in order to improve their budgeting practices and overall effectiveness. But this would seem a narrow definition to many, and rightly so. It is more engaging to provide the ideas of numerous scholars on what they think the best public management research should be, as well as to provide some specific examples of BPR itself.

*BPR is pragmatic.* American management theory always has been imbued with philosophical pragmatism and the utilitarian spirit. William James was publishing his ideas on philosophical pragmatism at the same time Frederick Taylor was conducting time-motion studies at Bethlehem Steel. The words and advice of William James and John Dewey can be heard as echoes throughout the history of management thought in this country, right up to contemporary theorists such as C. West Churchman and Charles Lindblom and to contemporary best practice researchers. Pragmatism is the working philosophy for much of management (and policy) research.

Philosophical pragmatism reveals itself through the language-in-use by BPR practitioners. Pragmatists, for example, prefer the word *inquiry* to research, hence BPR authors often will use the term *inquiry* to describe their research activities and products.

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Inquiry suggests an open, social process of conflict resolution, problem solving, and social change (Lindblom 1990). "Pragmatism (inquiry) is willing to take anything, to follow either logic or the senses, and to count the humblest and most personal of experiences" (James 1975, 44).

The word best is another echo of the pragmatist philosophy conjuring up visions of Taylor’s "one best way." BPR implies that a researcher can pick the best or most successful practices and apply them to different situations. "The only test of probable truth is what works best in the way of leading us, what fits every part of life best and combines with the collectivity of experience’s demands . . ." (James 1975, 44). Altshuler (1992, xi) confirms that "... the best way scholars can help improve public management is to search out, observe, and think hard about ‘best’ practices."

Similarly, the word principle is a recurrent term in the BPR litany. Scientific purists intend principle to mean universal, generalized truths. Best practice researchers unabashedly use the word principles in the manner Simon described proverbs in his famous essay. Principles provide meaning and direction (Bardach 1987) and are intestable suggestions for practice (Behn 1992). "The truth of an idea is not a stagnant property inherent in it. Truth happens to an idea. It becomes true, is made by events" (James 1975, 97). The pragmatic philosophy and utilitarian spirit have led management theory and research on a relentless pursuit of applicability and practical relevance. BPR has brought researchers and practitioners together, collaborating on a post-bureaucratic reform agenda.

BPR is practice driven. The most distinguishing characteristic of BPR is that it pays tremendous homage to practical wisdom. Practitioners of BPR have a firm belief that all knowledge in public management is grounded in the activities of management: "... skilled practitioners constitute the primary reservoir of experience, or ‘data’. . . ." (Bardach 1987, 197). BPR not only begins with the practicing public manager; it ends there as well: "Public management research should improve public management practice" (Behn 1987, 200).

Perhaps the quintessential contemporary statement of practical wisdom in public management is Chase and Reveal’s How to Manage in the Public Sector (1983). Possibly the first of the BPR genre, this book has been compared to Chester Barnard’s classic, Function of the Executive, because it provides practical professional knowledge on the topic of managing organizations. In one
prologue to this short book, Harvard University’s Graham Allison and Mark Moore clearly distinguish the goal of public management research as providing professional knowledge for professional tasks. The senior author, Gordon Chase, was a well-seasoned public management practitioner, and this book is a practitioner’s guide to the art of public management with pages of prescriptive advice, giving particular attention to the political relations that a public manager must develop and maintain.

Some scholars worry about this primacy of practice in public management scholarship. Bardach (1987) believes that such "practitioner lore is abundant" and much of it requires more scholarly investigation. Laurence Lynn expresses a concern that too much effort is spent ". . . adding to the list of putative principles of management by canvassing yet another generation of practitioners and documenting still more self-serving claims of managerial derring-do" (Lynn 1993, 40) and that researchers and practitioners must both ". . . warm up to more systematic and scholarly methods of inquiry" (Lynn 1987, 178). Despite these more traditional social science warnings, BPR religiously follows a doctrine of practitioner primacy.

BPR is innovative and entrepreneurial. BPR is intertwined with recent theory and research on innovation and entrepreneurship. The BPR argument goes something like this: If it is a best practice it must be innovative and entrepreneurial; if it is innovative it must be a best practice, and all managers should be more entrepreneurial. Entrepreneurs should innovate, and best practice researchers should attempt to practice what they preach.

The most visible and expensive of recent research efforts in public innovation is the Ford Foundation’s Innovations in State and Local Government Awards Program established in 1985 and administered by the John F. Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University. Every year since 1986, with a brief respite in 1989, a national committee has sifted through hundreds of nominations and applications to select the ten most innovative public programs in the United States. The objective of this research program is to identify innovative (best) practices in public management and programs and make them available for adoption and transfer to other contexts (Jordan 1990).

In another BPR effort, Doig and Hargrove (1987) combine the doctrine of practitioner primacy, using the term leadership, with innovation. These authors express their dissatisfaction with the usually pessimistic social science research literature on public administration, especially that of Herbert Kaufman, that favors

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interest group theory and more systemic explanations while it passes over the individual as entrepreneur. Various contributors to Doig and Hargrove’s volume present the evidence of thirteen individuals who "... held high level positions during a period of years when their agencies had devised new programs or significant innovations and who on first inspection appeared to be personally involved ..." (Doig and Hargrove 1987, 5). They conclude in postbureaucratic fashion that entrepreneurial skills are the centerpiece of successful public management leadership. BPR stresses the theme that individual entrepreneurial leaders do make a difference in organizational performance, certainly of more importance than policies, controls, or management plans (Behn 1991). BPR appeals to the practitioner, to the individual as reform entrepreneur and organizational savior.

**BPR is positive and prescriptive.** Few people like to read about the problems they encounter on their jobs, no matter how detailed and incisive the analysis may be. Most professional managers would much rather read about the solutions than the problems and thus be given hope and promise for the future. Best practice researchers respond to this sentiment by avoiding negative analysis and focusing instead on possibility and change. One strength of BPR is its ability to take complex events, such as reorganizations or budget formats, make them appear simple, and make the ‘lessons learned’ even more simple. On this point, Osborne and Gaebler’s *Reinventing Government* (1992) is the envy of every best practice researcher. By drawing on a diverse set of best practices from all levels of government and many different geographical areas, these authors distill their findings into ten easily remembered principles. Each principle is intended to be a prescriptive guide for public managers to use in analyzing and changing their own practices back home.

Barzelay (1992), in his imaginary dialogue on management reform, portrays both the Defender and Social Scientist as preservers of the institutional status quo and portrays the Possibilist as the individual who sees new possibilities and argues for change and a new order. The Possibilist is the best practice researcher who attempts to convince his audience by sketching hypothetical scenarios to resolve the immediate problem at hand. Defender and Social Scientist are skeptical critics of ideas that may lead to new forms (Barzelay 1992, 22-23). This is a familiar dialogue repeated over the centuries between the Socratic skeptic who is surprised and defeated by his own wisdom and the political executives accompanied by BPR chorus who are apprehensive and incognizant of their own ignorance (Plato 1971). The need for both reform and conformity provides the ultimate justification for

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both death and reinvention in best practices research and postbureaucratic theory.

BPR is commercial and user friendly. Altshuler boldly claims that "Public management ideas are generally imports from the world of business" (1992, viii-ix). If BPR is any indication, this also may be true of public management research methods. In the private sector literature, the research on marketing and commercial innovation is especially attentive to best practices. In 1986, Arthur D. Little consultants Nayak and Ketteringham published the book Breakthroughs! which told the stories of twelve significant commercial innovations, from post-it notes at 3M to the Sony Walkman. These authors express dissatisfaction with traditional scientific literature which they assert depicts commercial innovation as a smooth and rational progression. Their research into best practices reveals a much more herky-jerky process of innovation, entrepreneurship, and creative marketing.

In the private sector BPR has commercial value. Arthur Anderson, for example, maintains a proprietary knowledge base of global best practices that helps identify problems and solutions they encounter in their management consulting. In a recent proposal to a large public management organization they promise to bring to bear the "... generic best purchasing practices throughout the world for all types of organizations ... " on the problems of the organization. Such BPR is reminiscent of Bertrand Russell’s critique that James and Dewey were both guilty of developing a philosophy that reflected the material, practical, and commercial values of American society. Postbureaucratic principles have commercial value, and BPR is an appropriate means for bringing these principles to market.

In the most explicit formulation of postbureaucratic theory with a distinct private sector semblance, BPR scholar Barzelay (1992) describes the Minnesota Striving Toward Excellence Program (STEP)—itself a Ford innovative practices winner. The STEP program was in many ways a private-sector-driven reform effort to reduce the cost of government and make Minnesota the best managed state in the nation. The postbureaucratic paradigm and the attendant best practices of this study are built primarily on the concept of a customer-driven service organization. The study suggests that "... the specific rhetorical phrase ‘the public interest’ should be confined to books on the history of American politics and administration. A desirable substitute expression is ‘results citizens value’” (Barzelay 1992, 119). The latter phrase sells, while the former only mires public management deeper into the bureaucratic muddle.

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Social scientists, particularly those who practice their science in the professions, are always pressed to apply what they have learned to practice, yet knowledge use is something which social science researchers historically never have been really good at. BPR, however, pays much closer attention to its practitioner and political customers, making itself attractive to prospective buyers. BPR clearly endorses administrative reform of the bureaucratic archetype; it is deliberately antibureaucratic, using the concepts of policy entrepreneurship— notions such as results citizens value or the tools of total quality management and outcome-oriented budgeting.

The Invisible College of BPR

It is not difficult to recognize the path of BPR footprints as it leads from one scholar to another within the literature on public management. Lynn (1992, 1993) makes the invisible college visible by naming the "policy community" as responsible for BPR, or as insiders would understand, "adding the 'M' to APPAM." The policy community of public management researchers began at Harvard’s JFK School of Government where scholars looking enviously at the business school understood both research and reform to be tied to real cases of management practice and deliberating senior executives (Reich 1990).

BPR distinguishes the research and theories of the policy community from the social science monotony and bureaucratic tedium of public administration. Best practice researchers from the policy community are policy oriented, strategic minded, prescriptive, and focused on the political executive. The policy community produces management research that is exceedingly erudite, fashionable, intriguing, intellectually ambitious, didactic, even tendentious. Although the differences between the policy community and the public administration community are perhaps only in outlook, style, emphasis, and ideology (Lynn, 1992), those differences prove tremendously important in the marketplace of reform (Knott and Miller 1987). Within the policy community some contemporary best practice researchers have become evangelical in their pursuit of the postbureaucratic paradigm, prompting Lynn (1993) to conclude its product to be more art than science.

BPR and Postbureaucratic Theory as Paradigm

It seems unavoidable that we consider the question of paradigm. Barzelay (1992) explicitly grants paradigm status to postbureaucratic theory. Trying to ignore the loaded use of this

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term, a paradigm is "... the entire constellation of beliefs, values, techniques and so on shared by members of a given community..." (Kuhn 1970, 175). There have been relatively discrete points during the modern intellectual history of management when research method (technique) and reform theory (values) that are supported by a community of scholars (beliefs) could be said to have created such paradigmatic constellations: scientific method sustained scientific management; behavioral methods supported human relations theories; and systems technique complemented systems theories of management. BPR and postbureaucratic theory may indeed form a new constellation of public management research methods and reform theories.

Exhibit 1
The BPR-Postbureaucratic Reform Paradigm

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>BEST PRACTICE</th>
<th>POSTBUREAUCRATIC</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>RESEARCH</td>
<td>REFORM</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pragmatic</td>
<td>Anticipatory</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Practice driven</td>
<td>Strategic</td>
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<tr>
<td>Positive</td>
<td>Results directed</td>
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<tr>
<td>Prescriptive</td>
<td>Executive leadership</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Commercial</td>
<td>Market oriented</td>
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<tr>
<td>User friendly</td>
<td>Customer driven</td>
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<tr>
<td>Innovative</td>
<td>Entrepreneurial</td>
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BPR is pragmatic and practice driven; it focuses on individual leaders and practical innovations. BPR is a process of inquiry into possibilities and principles; it is commercial, user friendly, and innovative. Postbureaucratic theory maintains similar goals of market-oriented, customer-driven, and entrepreneurial reforms. It is geared toward executive and political leadership and providing results of value to an empowered customer of public services.

In this the newest version of practice-to-principles research, contemporary public management researchers use BPR to support and promote postbureaucratic principles of reform. This possible paradigm of research method and reform theory works well enough to create and sustain the effort of Vice President Gore's National Performance Review. But certain problems and delusions also are created with such paradigms of research and reform. What are the challenges to BPR and postbureaucratic reform paradigm?

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THE PRACTICAL CHALLENGE TO BPR

Probably the toughest criteria for assessing BPR can be derived from its avowed value to the public management practitioner community. BPR should be challenged on the claims that undergird its reform agenda.

BPR does not learn from experience. Direct experience is a powerful motivation for learning. Many would argue that it is the only true way learning occurs. BPR creates the delusion of learning from experience. Actually, BPR has a bias toward very short-term experiences only and does not look at the longer term and unintended consequences of reform efforts identified as best practices. This is why yesterday's innovations and top performers are today's problems or busts. The irony of best practices becomes starkly evident in Mark Moore's analysis of police leadership as one of the Impossible Jobs in Public Management (Hargrove and Glidewell 1990). Moore presents the case of Daryl Gates, chief of police in Los Angeles, "... the very model of a modern police executive: cool, tough, exacting, self-disciplined, and purposeful. ... His department had an enviable reputation for integrity, professionalism, and efficiency" (1990, 85). This is hero worship, not research (Dobel 1992).

Many scholars have expressed concern about the limited nature of our personal and organizational learning horizons. The core of the learning dilemma is that "we learn best from experience but we never directly experience the consequences of many of our most important decisions" (Senge 1990, 23). Chunking and hiving may seem to be immediate remedies to large unmanageable bureaucracies, but what are the long-term consequences of such best practices? What is best today may be trouble tomorrow. BPR ignores the dynamic nature of the managerial world by attempting to stabilize both the theory and practice of management into simple prescriptions for today's bureaucratic symptoms.

BPR does not listen to all practitioners. BPR operates under the delusion that all managers are the source and the willing target of its prescriptive advice. Actually, BPR reacts and responds to only certain groups of managers who are the in-crowd of political reformers and organizational advocates for change. There is an inevitable link between administrative reform and political agenda that BPR is unable and apparently unwilling to avoid.

For every manager excited by the prospect of postbureaucratic reform, there is another who objects to the faddish nature of
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any new management theory. It is a bitter irony to hear BPR researchers state with conviction the efficacy of their new and innovative practices, yet find these very practices dressed in the clothes of some prior reform. Often, after the rhetoric of reform is washed away, managers find themselves making the same productivity measures (measuring outcomes), needs assessments (client surveys), and agreements (partnerships) as they have in the past. But there is something more injurious than just a sense of managerial deja vu that comes with the changing of the political guard and administrative reform agenda.

When managers ostensibly imbued with the old bureaucratic paradigm say something like "It won't work here" or "We've done that before," they risk being called obsolete or old guard, not up with the current thinking in management and ultimately banished to the organizational backwaters. BPR naively presumes a politics-administration dichotomy. Best practices are the preferences of political and organizational reform leaders and may work only because they are supposed to work. They receive more money and more attention in the first place and organizational improvements are as much a Hawthorne effect as real progress. That BPR invariably points toward some postbureaucratic or market-oriented changes in government structure and operations may be progress, but it is certainly no accident.

BPR does not accumulate practice wisdom. Another delusion of the best practice methodology is the accumulation of practice wisdom. Evidence of such cumulative experiences is lacking. Olivia Golden (1990) produced a study of the innovative practices publicized by the Harvard/Ford project and found only enough evidence to validate the theory that such innovations develop through a process of "groping along." Rather than accumulate practice wisdom across contexts, each innovation struggles through its own process of self-discovery. In a vaguely familiar way, BPR seems headed in the same direction as was leadership research years ago—from describing great men, to prescribing great traits, and eventually to claiming transformational (that is, postbureaucratic) qualities. Neither leadership nor BPR have delivered us to the promised land, nor is it likely that they will.

BPR mistakes its loosely structured prescriptive principles for cumulative practical wisdom. Not too long ago Bush administration officials, in Applying the Best to Government, (President's Council on Management Improvement 1987), recommended changes in the personnel practices that are remarkably similar to recommendations in the Clinton/Gore reinventing plan. Rather than implement, assess, accumulate, and refine practice wisdom,

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BPR repeats its prescriptions in pragmatic fashion until they become true, are made true by events. The eventual result is a situation analogous to education reform in which we move on to the next reform before we know whether the current reform has either failed or succeeded. In the absence of a more systematic method of theory appraisal than BPR, we never can assess post-bureaucratic BPR as reform or rhetoric.

**Best practices are not transferrable.** Another delusion of BPR is that most, if not all, best practices can be adopted by others who need them. Here again there is no evidence that best practices are transferable across contexts. The classic examples come from the cost efficiency audits of the 1980s. Following the example of the Grace Commission, in 1988 the state of Arizona conducted a year-long audit through the offices of Arthur Young. The final report included three hundred recommendations for streamlining government which would culminate in $242.2 million in savings. Further analysis by the governor’s office revealed that 108 “recommendations” were current practices and another 86 were "determined to be [politically] unfeasible" (Mofford 1989, 2). Of the 106 remaining best practices, many would require the cooperation of other branches of government and at best would result in less than $50 million in savings.

The Vice President’s National Performance Review, rich in post-bureaucratic and reinventing rhetoric, staff, and consultants may prove to be another example of reforms that do not really transfer. While managers are more likely to try something new if given the credibility of research, successful transfer and adaptation requires more than the rhetoric of reform. That reforms are inevitable does not make them right. Scientific methods historically have provided challenges to political and administrative reform agenda.

**THE SCIENTIFIC CHALLENGE TO BEST PRACTICE RESEARCH**

BPR borrows from the ideas and ideals of social science to frame its own strategies for both research and reform. As with any paradigm claim, it is instructive to examine the new method against the backdrop of normal management and social science research methods.

Classic positivist research in social science proceeds from theory to hypothesis to observation in order to validate or, more precisely, falsify theoretical claims. BPR does not validate concepts and ideas, nor does it prove theories and hypotheses, and
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certainly it makes no pretense towards these ends. Neither does BPR pretend to use random or systematic sampling methods; it relies on reputational samples and word of mouth and agreement to identify the sample groups. From the logical-positivist perspective there are a number of problems with BPR.

BPR is not theory-testing research. The role of theory is problematic in BPR. Since most BPR begins with observation of practice, little time is spent on understanding existing theoretical frameworks that may serve to explain what the researcher is attempting to observe or uncover. This can lead not to new discoveries but to reinventing theories, for example, renaming "... the use of market-like incentives to achieve public purposes ..." (Schultz 1977) as market-oriented government (Osborne and Gaebler 1992). Under such reinvented schemes classic management principles such as "separation of line from staff" are recast in the terminology of postbureaucratic theory to yield something like "reorganize to separate service from control" (Barzelay 1992). Best practice researchers armed with postbureaucratic principles know what they are after even before they get there, and they quickly discover the truth of their ideas.

BPR violates threats to validity. All our scientific logic tells us that the sum of all best practice exemplars does not lead to a principle, yet BPR-derived principles often become theoretical prescriptions which have tremendous influence over practice. Normal experimental controls are obviously absent in the design of BPR research. BPR probably violates every threat to validity that Campbell and Stanley ever imagined. As for internal validity, there are obvious problems of maturation, selection-maturation interactions, and reactive effects to measures, and perhaps most egregious, a frequent, perhaps even deliberate, confounding of selection and treatment.

Ignoring the positivist ideal, there is a great tendency to describe BPR as a form of case study research. This tendency derives from the fact that BPR often will take selective observations in order to develop new theoretical claims. From the positivist perspective, the case study is capable of providing evidence that may challenge a particular theory. From the interpretive perspective, the case study is useful for discovering new explanations and developing grounded theory. But BPR does neither. When one begins to compare the depth and breadth of the research on best practices with more classic case studies in the field of public administration and management, including the BPR icon Essence of Decision (Allison 1971), some stark differences emerge.

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*BPR is not sufficiently probing.* One strength of case study research is the rich diversity of variables or phenomena studied within a particular context. The case study provides historical and thick descriptive information on its topic and subjects. BPR ignores history and focuses not on causes and understanding of events but on the simple description of successful practices. While a case study is a dynamic and evolving demonstration of complexity, BPR results in a retrospective and simplified snapshot of how some phenomena occurred, retold by its most enthusiastic participants and filtered through the lens of postbureaucratic theory.

*BPR is not sufficiently critical.* BPR results in superficial descriptions reconstructed by persons interested in making these very descriptions appear better than they may be. Often very little effort is made to triangulate or corroborate evidence and claims of key informants used in BPR. This is true with single cases of best practice, but it is even more acute when numerous best practices are the evidentiary base. BPR is neither phenomenological nor ethnomethodological in probing for hidden explanations or shared understandings of why things work the way they do; instead it accepts appearance as reality. Doing BPR is more like presenting a descriptive case for one's theory than it is like finding new theories through grounded, empirical observations.

When compared against the backdrop of normal social science research methodology, it is clear that BPR fits no traditional mold and adheres to no particular restrictions. It is a hybrid of traditional social science methods with elements of inductive reasoning, selective sampling, tightly prescribed variables, and highly focused or limited analysis. If scientific restrictions are relaxed as they are by best practice researchers, "the mechanism that tells the scientific community what problems may lead to fundamental change must cease to function. And when that occurs, the community will inevitably return to something much like its pre-paradigm state, a condition in which all members practice science but in which their gross product scarcely resembles science at all" (Kuhn 1970, 101).

**CONCLUSIONS**

Either best practice researchers have discovered something new or they are practicing a preparadigm science of their own reinvention. It may be true that BPR brought postbureaucratic theory to market, but it cannot now be responsible for gauging the efficacy of the reform outcomes. Administrators trapped by their own bureaucratic propensity are especially susceptible to the delusions of BPR and prescriptions of postbureaucratic theory:

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Trapped administrators have so committed themselves in advance to the efficacy of the reform they cannot afford honest evaluation. For them, favorable biased analyses are recommended, including capitalizing on regression, grateful testimony, and confounding selection and treatment (Campbell 1988, 288).

Add BPR to the list of analyses that are recommended for the trapped administrator.

This is not to say that BPR and postbureaucratic principles do not represent valuable contributions to the body of knowledge in public management. Together they are bold and creative, visionary and potentially transformational. Postbureaucratic theory contains many elements that have a progressive and intuitive attraction to public management scholars and practitioners. Further, BPR and postbureaucratic theory have bridged the uncertain connection that traditionally exists between research and reform. Unfortunately, its very success on this count creates its greatest problem, for trying to assess the paradigm status of BPR and postbureaucratic theory for our present vantage point is "... like trying to push the bus in which one is riding" (Berger and Luckmann 1967, 13). Clearly, BPR cannot be used to judge the worthiness of the very reforms it evokes. For this another, more objective, methodological approach is needed. Having conceded the field to the postbureaucratic reform agenda and become engaged in a rather remarkable experiment, public management researchers now must turn their collective attention to viewing postbureaucratic reforms as experiments.

Viewing BPR-inspired reforms as experiments, as would Campbell (1988), not only increases the distance between research and reform in public management but also creates numerous opportunities for testing the alternative rival hypotheses of postbureaucratic theory and traditional administrative theory. For example, postbureaucratic theory suggests that agencies dedicated to clear missions are more effective than those encumbered by onerous rules and procedures. Goodsell (1993) responds that agencies dedicated to the Constitution and laws of the land are more effective than those focused on narrow-niche mission statements. Postbureaucratic theory also maintains that agencies engaged in competitive bidding for tasks, internal rivalries among subunits, and competition for clients are more effective than those not so engaged. Goodsell (1993) implies that agencies concerned with the ideals of equal opportunity and open scrutiny are more effective than those not so concerned. Finally, while BPR advocates that regarding clients as customers empowers the general public, Frederickson (1992) argues that regarding citizens as customers diminishes the noble concept of citizenship and thereby impoverishes the general public.
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These are not trivial differences, and determining which set of hypotheses is best supported by the data and experience is likely to take decades. This requires that we do not abandon the notion of reforms as experiments for the more seductive best practices research program, especially while the reform agenda proceeds. Meanwhile, we must continue to seek new sources of ideas within public management as well as new methods for discovering and describing these ideas. In this light, we are attentive and even sympathetic to the connection of BPR to postbureaucratic theories, but best practice researchers must recognize the limits of their work, reflect on the arrogance of their program, and take a well-deserved place in the growth of public management research and knowledge.

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