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TRANSLATING MANAGEMENT IDEAS: IMITATION MODES AND TRANSLATION OUTCOMES

What happens to management ideas when they move from one context to another? Are they reproduced as 'ready-to-wear' solutions, or do they transform into variations of the original idea? These questions have been at the forefront in Scandinavian institutionalism since its inception in the mid 90s (Czarniawska & Sevón, 1996). Whereas early studies of diffusion highlight the significance of adoption and non-adoption in the movement of ideas and practices from one context to another (Meyer & Rowan, 1977; Rogers, 2003), later research within the Scandinavian tradition favors a focus on translation whereby management ideas are contextualized in local settings (Czarniawska & Sevón, 2005; Nielsen et al., 2022; Wedlin & Sahlin, 2017). Although translation is driven by a desire to imitate (Czarniawska & Sevón, 2005), the result of translation processes is assumed to be a variety of practices emerging unpredictably from the same idea, leading to a general consensus among scholars that translation ”always involves transformation” (Czarniawska & Sevón, 2005, p. 8) and increased heterogeneity in organizational fields (Czarniawska & Joerges, 1996; Røvik, 2016; Sahlin-Andersson, 1996).

Despite the strong emphasis on transformation and field-level heterogeneity in translation research, a tension between transformation and reproduction has surfaced in recent discussions. Scholars have begun to question the "almost axiomatic status" of the transformation assumption in translation theory (Røvik, 2016, p. 292), pointing instead to the possibility that translation can involve different degrees of transformation "ranging from no or almost no change in the spreading construct to comprehensive local transformations" (Spyridonidis & Currie, 2016, p. 764). For example, in a study of the introduction of an accreditation system in Swedish pharmacies, Erlingsdóttir and Lindberg (2005) described

heterogenizing as well as homogenizing mechanisms. In a study of reputation management in Norwegian hospitals, Wæraas and Sataøen (2014) found that some aspects of the concept were copied faithfully whereas others were omitted. Lamb and Currie (2012) observed patterns of copying rather than innovation in their study of the translation of the American MBA model in China, highlighting the need “to take into account the mechanisms that generate copying” (p. 227).

Approaching translation from the Scandinavian institutionalist perspective (Czarniawska & Joerges, 1996; Wedlin & Sahlin, 2017), this paper addresses the relationship between imitation and translation outcomes. If we accept that imitation is the ‘motor’ of the translation vehicle (Czarniawska & Sevón, 2005), there seems to be a need to empirically examine how such different translation outcomes as transformation and reproduction both can result from imitation. We examine this link through a case study of the translation of *Public Leadership Pipeline*, hereafter referred to as PLP, in a municipal fire department in Denmark. The translation of PLP into practice followed different phases involving different imitation modes and translation outcomes, thereby providing a basis for examining aspects of translation relating to both transformation and reproduction.

Our research question is: How are unfaithful and faithful imitation connected in translation processes and which translation outcomes do they entail? Tracking the translation of PLP over a period of six years, the study contributes to translation research in several ways. First, as a counterpoint to previous theorizing and research that usually equate imitation with unfaithfulness, we address the need for increased attention to the existence of different and successive imitation modes; unfaithful and faithful imitation, that drive the translation process forward. Whereas unfaithful imitation entails changing an adopted idea so that it fits the local context better, faithful imitation does the opposite; not making changes to

the idea while changing the organization in accordance with the idea (cf. Ansari et al., 2010; Erlingsdóttir & Lindberg, 2005).

Second, we connect the two imitation modes with different translation outcomes. Previous translation studies usually focus on mutual transformation of the idea and the organization as the main translation outcome in the sense that “each act of translation changes the translator and what is translated” (Czarniawska & Sevón, 2005, p. 8). Our study, by contrast, shows that unfaithful and faithful imitation can lead to different combinations of ideational and organizational change and thus to different translation outcomes.

THEORETICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Our theoretical starting point for this paper is Scandinavian institutionalism, which is concerned with “the travels of ideas” (Czarniawska & Joerges, 1996, p. 13). This tradition sees translation as a vehicle for transferring and materializing ideas from one setting to another in a process that involves the mutual transformation of the idea and the setting. Local practices are turned into ideas, circulate, translate into new ideas and objects (presentations, books, memos, structures, narratives), subsequently into new local practices, and again into other ideas. Such processes entail “avalanches” of organizational change “with almost no resistance” (Czarniawska & Joerges, 1996, p. 19) because translation makes a circulating idea more acceptable and relevant in the local setting.

As such, translation theory is at the same time a theory of ideational and organizational change. Ideational change refers to changes in “what is translated” whereas organizational change refers to changes in “the translator” (Czarniawska & Sevón, 2005, p. 8). Both of these types of change are assumed to result from imitation, which serves as a basic mechanism in the translation of management ideas (Czarniawska & Sevón, 2005;

Sevón, 1996; Wedlin & Sahlin, 2017). Organizations imitate what they find attractive or identify with, or they imitate what they believe is beneficial to them. Whereas imitation also is a central concept in North-American neoinstitutional theories of mimetic isomorphism and decoupling (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983), Scandinavian institutionalism sees imitation as a reflection of a genuine desire to become more similar to someone or something. In this sense, imitation is not an outcome of a translation process, it is what drives translation processes: "Translation is a vehicle", and imitation is its "motor" (Czarniawska & Sevón, 2005, p. 7).

A hallmark assumption in translation theory is that imitation involves an act of unfaithfulness towards the original idea whereby new versions are continuously developed. Early contributions to translation theory emphasize the unpredictable aspects of these processes, focusing predominantly on transformation and heterogeneity. Later studies, however, have focused on patterns, regularities, and rule-like aspects, albeit not prescriptive rules.[1] Sahlin-Andersson (1996) focuses on editing rules such as labelling, formulation, and packaging that enable an idea to circulate. Others draw attention to translation rules that are applied after adoption such as subtraction (Lamb & Currie, 2012), filtering (Boxenbaum & Gond, 2014), and omission (Røvik, 2016) whereby some components of an idea are removed if those components are deemed irrelevant or not compatible with the local context. Other translation rules imply copying the original idea and its components (Erlingsdóttir & Lindberg, 2005; Lamb & Currie, 2012; Røvik, 2016) or adding components to an idea through coupling (Gond & Boxenbaum, 2013), addition (Røvik, 2016), or bricolage (Boxenbaum & Gond, 2014) to create a better fit. The result is a mix of "something new, something old, something borrowed" (Frenkel, 2005, p. 147).

The existence of such rule-like aspects in translation processes challenges the view that translation is an unpredictable process. It also calls into question the notion that translation "always involves transformation" (Czarniawska & Sevón, 2005, p. 8), making it

essential to uncover how different translation outcomes relate to these regularities. Thus far, however, few empirical studies have systematically examined outcomes of translation processes that do *not* imply high degrees of ideational and organizational change. As a result, they have not sufficiently helped us understand how imitation can lead to such contradictory outcomes as transformation and reproduction.

To develop more insights into these matters, we propose to reexamine the role of imitation in translation processes. In doing so we build on studies that show how translation can involve 'literal' translation without significant reinterpretations, additions to or omissions from the adopted idea (Erlingsdóttir & Lindberg, 2005; Lamb & Currie, 2012; Nilsen & Sandaunet, 2020; Røvik, 2016; Wæraas & Sataøen, 2014). Similar to studies of organizational change (Greenwood & Hinings, 1996; Tushman & O'Reilly III, 1996), recent translation studies describe ideational change on a scale ranging from very little or no change to radical transformations (Lamb & Currie, 2012; Røvik, 2016; Spyridonidis & Currie, 2016), suggesting that translation should not be equated exclusively with transformation. Studies also describe variation in ideational and organizational change across different fields and organizations, indicating that adopted ideas may vary considerably not only with respect to their composition but also their effects on organizational structures and practices – varying from merely copying the name of the idea (isonymism) to copying a practice (isopraxism) (Erlingsdóttir & Lindberg, 2005). These arguments suggest a need to strengthen the view of translation as potentially being driven by both unfaithful *and* faithful imitation, in some cases perhaps only faithful imitation. Considering both imitation modes rather than just one of them would not only help us understand how translation could lead to reproduction and homogeneity but also how translation involves different degrees and combinations of ideational and organizational change.

Moreover, the notion of unfaithful imitation gives expectations of translation processes adhering to one single imitation mode. This seems logical if we assume that translation always adheres to unfaithful imitation, always involves transformation, and always is unpredictable. However, if we accept that faithful imitation can play a role in translation processes, then it is also necessary to better understand how faithful and unfaithful imitation relate to each other and to different translation outcomes, i.e. to different combinations of ideational and organizational change. To date we know very little about these relationships, despite the suggestion by previous studies that translation processes can display regularities or patterns. Thus, whereas we have growing insights into *which* regularities guide translation processes, we know less about *how* such regularities may complement or succeed each other in the same translation process and even less about their relative influence on translation outcomes.

METHODS

Research context

The Leadership Pipeline model was described by Charan et al. (2001) but builds on earlier ideas by Walt Mahler (Mahler & Drotter, 1986; Mahler, 1988). Relying on the metaphor of a pipeline to denote the leadership track, the model presents seven leadership stages ranging from manager of self at the bottom of the hierarchy to enterprise manager at the top, describing the skills, work values, and time priorities required to perform leadership tasks at each level and transition from one level to the next. Leadership Pipeline is concerned with the requirements, values, priorities, and skills for succeeding at each of these levels, the pitfalls a leader faces when promoted from one level the next, and how organizations can develop leadership talent for different organizational levels.

This model of a leadership pipeline was designed for large business organizations in the U.S. context. Because Danish public sector organizations are not for-profit organizations and typically follow more democratic leadership styles, the Leadership Pipeline model was not a particularly good fit with Danish public organizations. However, in 2010 a management consultancy worked out an adapted leadership pipeline model; a Public Leadership Pipeline (PLP), which they described in a working paper and made available to their clients, including the fire department studied here. Two years later they published a book (Dahl & Molly-Søholm, 2012), which presented the PLP model in more detail. Some of the most important differences from the American version included the addition of eight competence requirements (e.g. political flair, being a role model, creating leadership space in relation to political principals, and navigating on the public scene). The Danish authors also removed two hierarchical levels from the original model, thereby creating a pipeline model of five levels. These include managing self, managing employees, managing managers, functional manager, and enterprise manager (Dahl & Molly-Søholm, 2012).

From being almost unknown before 2010, PLP was adopted by 53% of Danish municipalities by 2017 (Nielsen et al., 2020). This increased adoption rate provides an important context for our case organization, a municipal fire department. Due to significant growth in employees from 30 to 320 and in budget from €1.2 to approximately €17 million from 1997 to 2015, it had become a structurally complex organization. Moreover, by 2015, only ten percent of the department's budget originated from municipal funds. The rest were revenues generated from services such as security, elderly transportation, meal delivery, and ambulance services. This growth created a perceived need for more professional and coordinated leadership. Because PLP had gained traction in the Danish public sector at this point in time, it caught the attention of the fire department's top management.

Data sources

Our study covers a six-year period from 2010 when PLP was introduced up to and including 2015 when the fire department merged with another municipal organization. We rely mainly on a retrospective longitudinal design, beginning in 2012 with interviews with the fire chief, but with the bulk of interviews conducted after 2015. The longitudinal design helped us (1) identify phases in the translation process, (2) investigate events and their consequences over time, and (3) identify relationships between unfaithful and faithful imitation modes. Main data sources include interviews, the fire chief's logbook[2] and other documents made available to us (Table 1).

TABLE 1

We relied on purposive sampling of informants (Ritchie et al., 2003) by selecting as many informants as possible that (1) were or had been in a leading position, and (2) had been involved in the attempts to create a leadership pipeline. The informants came from different hierarchical levels and functional areas, and with different affiliations to the fire department, thereby reducing the risk of convergent retrospective sensemaking (Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007). For example, in addition to the fire chief and the deputy fire chief, the sample included three operations managers, one assistant manager, one service manager, the chief of the ambulance service, one HR manager, and three external consultants. The consultants, who helped facilitate the process, provided valuable outsider perspectives that helped corroborate and supplement our own interpretations and findings (Table 1).

Overall, our sampling procedure is consistent with previous studies that underline the critical role of managers and informants who have first-hand knowledge of the translation process (Morris & Lancaster, 2006; Reay et al., 2013; van Grinsven et al., 2020; Waldorff & Madsen, 2022). Moreover, as a system for defining superior-subordinate relations, PLP only directly involves those who are appointed as managers. In our case, first-response personnel in non-managerial positions did not participate in creating the leadership pipeline. As a result, they did not satisfy our selection criteria and were not interviewed.

In total, we conducted 23 semi-structured interviews with 18 informants. Half of the interviews were conducted at the fire department, the rest by telephone. The authors had no relationship with the informants, professional or otherwise, that could have influenced the information we retrieved from them.

Data analysis

We relied on a temporal bracketing strategy (Langley, 1999) to trace change-directed activities of importance during the translation process, as these were conveyed to us by the informants and the texts. Two different phases were identified: (1) the transformation of the PLP model into a 'fireman version' that would fit the fire department's unique context, and (2) the transformation of the fire department so that it would fit the core features of the PLP model. The phases are connected because decisions made in phase 2 are results of decisions made in phase 1. Specifically, the decision in phase 2 to faithfully imitate PLP came from unsuccessful attempts in phase 1 to change the fire department in accordance with the tailor-made fireman version. The intentions of the translators remained the same in both phases with respect to generating desired organizational change, but the imitation mode and subsequent activities did not. Thus, each phase denotes a distinct mode of imitation that

changes from the first phase (unfaithful imitation) to the next (faithful imitation). Figure 1 shows the two phases and their respective activities and outcomes.

FIGURE 1

In keeping with the theoretical distinction between ideational and organizational change in translation theory, we condensed our findings from both phases into (1) ideational change-directed activities, and (2) organizational change-directed activities.

Ideational change-directed activities: Reflecting the standard expectation in translation theory that "translation changes what is translated" (Czarniawska & Sevón, 2005, p. 10), these activities concern the degree of change produced in the PLP model. Our assessments of these changes should not be understood as 'objective' in the sense that they involve numerical scales of change and no change. Consistent with the interpretive and constructivist traditions on which qualitative research in general and translation research in particular are built, we base our approach on the notion that the researcher is the research instrument (Pezalla et al., 2012). The researcher's skills, experience, and knowledge are crucial in generating patterns in the data. We relied on (1) managers' own descriptions of what they did to the PLP model, how, and why, (2) consultants' reports and retrospective judgements about what happened, and (3) written descriptions to assess the level of change in the PLP model.

Organizational change-directed activities: These activities concerned what happened to the fire department's structures, procedures, and practices during the translation process. In addition to the organizing of the process (e.g. seminars), we focused on activities relating to the degree of change in accordance with the notion that translation changes "those who

translate" (Czarniawska & Sevón, 2005, p. 10). Similar to ideational change, we inferred the degree of organizational change based on informants' descriptions, consultants' perspectives, and the contents of written documents.

We used thematic analysis (Gioia et al., 2012) to support the temporal bracketing strategy. In accordance with a distinction between first-order informant-centric codes and second-order researcher-centric themes (cf. Van Maanen, 1979), we progressively developed first-order codes as we analyzed the data. Examining these codes, we noted a number of tendencies that formed the basis for eight second-order themes that we generated from the first-order codes; these were researcher-centric "interpretations of interpretations" (Van Maanen, 1979, p. 541). When comparing these themes with each other and with the events detected through temporal bracketing, we were able to relate them with two aggregate dimensions (Gioia et al., 2012) denoting translation outcomes; disalignment and reproduction. Specifically, we noted the inclination of the data to connect high degrees of ideational change predominantly to phase 1 whereby the PLP model was translated into 'fireman', thereby reflecting an unfaithful imitation mode, but without yielding the organizational changes prescribed by the fireman version of PLP. By contrast, phase 2 was characterized by a strong tendency of reproducing the original PLP model in formal organizational structures and leadership arrangements, thereby reflecting a faithful imitation mode. Figure 2 presents the data structure and the links between codes, themes, and outcomes.

FIGURE 2

FINDINGS

First phase: Unfaithful imitation

The fire chief became acquainted with PLP at a Danish university, where he was enrolled in an executive leadership training program for public sector managers. He immediately thought that PLP was a good fit because it seemed well-aligned with his department's hierarchical features:

> "It was Thorkil [co-author of the book *Leadership Pipeline in the Public Sector*] who came and talked about it. And then I thought – that's it. That's what I am going to use. It's a hierarchy… So, it fits a uniformed corps, I thought, when I heard about it. There is order – boom, boom, boom." (fire chief)

A recurring theme in the interviews was the favorable fit between PLP and the fire department. The cultural practices in the fire department of emphasizing efficiency and doing things right were perceived as consistent with the basic idea in PLP of systematically clarifying leader-subordinate relations. As a fast-response, almost military organization (Weick, 1993), the fire department depended on hierarchical features that PLP would reinforce. This compatibility fostered the perception among managers that PLP was a legitimate management idea rather than a misfit, thereby reducing resistance to its adoption. Accordingly, informants noted the following:

> "I believe a strength of our organization is that [PLP] fits incredibly well." (assistant manager)

> “The fire service is the right place to start with [PLP] because we have a fully established hierarchy where it matters how many stars you’ve got on your shoulder.” (manager, ambulances)

The fire chief’s goal was to use PLP to create a self-propelling organization with clear role expectations assigned to every manager according to a leadership profile that specified the competences, skills, time priorities, and work values needed for each level. According to a newsletter distributed by the fire department in 2012, the traditional way of managing fire departments is very hierarchical with one single strong leader at the top. The fire chief used to “dictate everything ranging from purchasing boots to deciding who mans the tiller truck.” This worked well when the fire department was small, but was “not feasible in a large, modern organization”. Due to unclear role expectations and the resilient hands-on fireman culture, a frequent source of confusion in the department was the tendency for managers, including the fire chief, to “drive out with the tiller truck to put out fires and smell of smoke” (consulting firm’s report).

The top management team saw PLP as an opportunity to create clarity in leadership roles at different levels. However, even though PLP was already adapted to the public sector and had a favorable cultural fit with the fire department, it was not ‘ready-to-wear’ due to the idiosyncrasies of the fire department. The consulting firm with which the fire chief had contracted therefore recommended the development of a tailor-made ‘fireman’ version of PLP with unique fit for the fire department – a process involving significant ideational change.

Ideational change-directed activities: Two unique features of the organization were particularly significant for the process of creating a fireman version of PLP. First, over the years the department had developed a flexible way of working despite its strict hierarchical

culture. Firemen and managers were used to working across functional areas and to address problems regardless of where and when they arose. Second, even if the organization was "super hierarchical" with respect to its cultural practices, it had a rather "flat leadership structure" (fire chief) that made it "very easy for an employee to go to the nearest leader and say whatever they wanted" (service manager). Our informants, therefore, described ideational change on a general level, noting the need to adapt PLP "so that it would fit our organization" (operations manager 1), that "…we softened up the PLP model" (vice emergency manager), and that "we made the model fit our organization" (fire chief). As summed up by the deputy fire chief: "Our people didn't understand what the PLP book said. So we translated it into 'fireman.'"

The specific changes in the contents of PLP occurred through additions and omissions. As for additions, the informants stressed that they partly merged existing leadership practices in the fire department into PLP, partly invented new elements in order to create the best possible fireman version of PLP. For example, the top management team decided to use an existing leadership practice referred to as "the 4-R model of leadership" as an "operationalization of Leadership Pipeline" (consulting firm's report). The purpose of this addition was to obtain a more flexible balance between the managers' strict 'jurisdiction' within their own leadership level and the need for managers to accept responsibility for other processes in the organization. For the same reason the top management team invented a card borrowing system to be used within the PLP framework:

> "We invented a borrowing card, which we could use to borrow a task from the person who owned it, if that person permitted it. Then we could borrow it as long as it was a project, and when it was handed over to operations, we would return the borrowing card." (fire chief)

Another addition in the fireman version of PLP was the previously deployed practice of alternating between "foreign affairs" and "interior affairs" at the top level of the department. The deputy fire chief described this practice in the following way:

> "I do the political and the externally oriented stuff, because we have divided up – which by the way is an addition to the model – this thought of having [different] internal affairs and external affairs roles… [The fire chief] and I are extremely tight pair mates, back-to-back. If I am looking in, he is looking out." (deputy fire chief)

As for omissions, a critical change was to include only five of the eight competence requirements from the PLP model. Three of them were omitted partly because they were not perceived by the top management team as relevant, partly because fewer competence requirements meant less translation work. Moreover, the existing two-level structure of the fire department did not fit with the fine-grained five-level hierarchical structure of PLP. As a result, two hierarchical levels were removed from PLP in order to match the local structure. This change entailed the exclusion of managers of managers and managers of employees, both of which were essential in the original PLP version (Dahl & Molly-Søholm, 2012). The fireman pipeline model thus consisted of the top level with the fire chief and the deputy fire chief, and three functional units (fire, ambulance, and services), each controlled by a functional manager who also served as manager of employees within their unit.

Organizational change-directed activities: The process of translating PLP into fireman was a time-consuming process, especially with respect to the requirements for the leadership profiles needed for each leadership position. A participatory approach was followed whereby all managers in the fire department regularly met in a series of seminars to

discuss, reinterpret, and adapt PLP. Aided by the consulting firm, the top management team presented the PLP requirements for each management position in the hierarchy and solicited detailed feedback from subordinates with respect to what they thought the specific contents of the leadership profiles should be for their level, including skills, priorities, and work values. In addition, the consulting firm provided coaching to each leader with the purpose of arriving at a better understanding of leadership in different hierarchical levels within the fireman version of PLP.

Despite the hard work, the process of creating the custom-made fireman version proved to be difficult. For example, an element in the fireman version of PLP was for managers to act as role models for their subordinates. Because each manager understood the meaning of role model differently, problems arose in obtaining the same type of change in the managers' behavior. According to the fire chief,

> "…despite intensive adaptation of processes and the presence of a common concept – in this case *role model* – a lack of common language results in different understandings of role model among managers at the same level, in the same context and with the same goals and values." (MA paper, fire chief)

In our interviews, the fire chief spoke repeatedly about the challenges of not having a shared leadership language. He expressed frustration that the fireman version, with its differentiated leadership requirements across functional units, made it more difficult to talk about common requirements for leadership:

> "We hadn't gotten far into the process before we noticed that we weren't speaking the same language anymore. It wasn't just inside the organization; it was also when

relating to others on the outside … We began to discuss the PLP model. If we remake it completely, then it becomes unrecognizable.” (fire chief)

The omission of several hierarchical levels in the fire department’s formal structure also became a significant problem because it involved no change in the fire department’s structural hierarchy. This limited pipeline meant that no manager could ever expect to advance more than one level, and no management-aspiring regular fireman could, at best, advance more than two levels. The opinion of the manager of ambulances was that “something went wrong in the translation – from the top level, there was only one level down.” The fire chief lamented the lack of organizational change:

“I really had a hard time seeing any changes. We were only describing something that we already had. So, in reality, not much happened. Other than us jokingly asking each other: “Well, what’s your name? My name is functional manager.” So, in reality, the change was not as comprehensive as I had expected.” (fire chief)

Adding to that, the time-consuming, energy-intensive character of the translation work put extra strain on the top management team:

“We tried to describe it and draw it up, and we made people say what these things meant to them … But when we saw how the first chapters kept referring to later chapters, we realized that we had to translate the entire book into fireman. We simply did not have the energy for that.” (deputy fire chief)

Translation outcome: The fireman version of PLP was a product of unfaithful imitation of the original PLP idea as it was tailor-made to fit the fire department. It materialized into a large number of objects such as memos, presentations, papers, charts, and narratives, and it generated many meetings and discussions. However, even if much organizational change-oriented work was undertaken to change the fire department in accordance with the fireman version, the fireman version was perceived as a 'bad translation'. It resulted in few, incremental, and ineffective organizational changes that turned out to be poorly aligned with the original intentions of the top managers to create a more professionally managed department. Towards the end of 2012, the fireman version was eventually discarded along with its materializations.

Second phase: Faithful imitation

Given the experience of not achieving organizational change in accordance with the fireman version of PLP, the fire chief concluded that the fireman version was too "relaxed" and "not sharp enough", leaving them only with "some squares on a drawing" devoid of the contents of the original PLP model. He explained, "whoa, there's way too much we leave behind if we translate it to our own language. So, we went back to the original PLP model." Similarly, the deputy fire chief explained:

> "The intention was to stay in the fireman version. But, the fireman version became deficient … Something got lost in my way of interpreting it. If you translate it, then you veer too far off the story. The road was a pretty good one, but we had to return to start and practice the origins [of PLP]." (deputy fire chief)

An external consultant described this shift in imitation mode in the following way:

> "At some point [the fire chief] pulled the emergency break and said, 'this is not good enough'. We were formulating a Leadership Pipeline in fireman terms, but then he just stopped. Pure and simple. He thought it became watered down, he would much rather have the original PLP than something we had cooked up on our own. He thought it lost an edge." (consultant 1)

The new and faithful approach implied taking advantage of the obedient and efficient fireman culture. The process was controlled by top management without workshop discussions, in sharp contrast to phase 1, no longer soliciting input from lower-level managers concerning the leadership profiles at different hierarchical levels. Instead, the top managers let the descriptions in the PLP book (Dahl & Molly-Søholm, 2012) determine the revised leadership profiles. The fire chief and the deputy fire chief made it clear that they were in charge and that the process of creating a leadership pipeline was to happen "by the book". Thus, as in phase 1, a recurring theme in the interviews was the significance of the fire department's hierarchical features, but this time these features were associated with high faithfulness. The second phase was "dictatorial" (fire chief) and "definitely not a participatory process" (manager, operations, fire 2). Yet, the approach was not unfamiliar:

> "Reaching solutions through discussions fits extremely poorly here. We are not the types to discuss things… if we are going to be successful, it has to be a top-down process." (deputy fire chief)

"… Some of the feedback from our [internal] survey was that [the employees] were missing some sense of direction. They were missing the dictatorial way." (assistant manager)

Similarly, the perceived cultural fit between PLP and the fire department made possible the decision *not* to make changes in PLP. In addition to using cultural fit as an argument for adopting PLP, as was done in phase 1, in phase 2 cultural fit was an argument for leaving PLP intact. This was also supported by the fact that PLP was already a partly contextualized translation from a U.S. business setting to a Danish public sector setting (Dahl & Molly-Søholm, 2012).

Ideational change-directed activities: The decision to restart the translation process meant that PLP was no longer an unfinished prototype. Rather, in fireman language, the book had hierarchical authority. Its contents were to be treated as a "recipe" (fire chief) or "rulebook" (operations manager, fire 2) to be understood literally so that PLP could be reproduced in organizational structures and leadership arrangements. Both the fire chief and the deputy fire chief emphasized their experience from the first phase as a learning process that ended with the knowledge that "you should be loyal to the concept" (deputy fire chief). Our informants described the approach in the following way:

"...we received the book... and we stuck to it. ... Because when you launch something of that magnitude, you have to stick to a rulebook." (operations manager, fire 2)

"We looked at page 1; what does it say that we need to do there. Page 2; what do we need to do there – and so on. We treated it as a recipe with which to go to war." (fire chief)

The top management team was well aware of the role of faithful imitation in their approach. The fire chief described their idea of leadership pipeline as "a pure copy" of PLP, far removed from the locally adapted fireman version they originally had in mind. Insisting that no effort was made to tailor the original PLP idea, the top management team applied all their efforts towards recreating the idea by changing the organization's structures and leadership practices. Accordingly, in phase 2 none of the elements of PLP were deliberately omitted, nothing new was added, and PLP did not materialize in any new objects such as memos or presentations whose contents differed from the book. An external consultant, who was surprised by this faithful imitation of PLP, said that his consulting firm "would not recommend such a completely hard, top-down, and direct import" (consultant 1). Instead, he preferred to "plan for an adaptation", which had been his focus in the first phase of the process as he had never experienced that "direct import" had worked.

Organizational change-directed activities: In phase 2 the focus of the top management team shifted from adapting the idea to adapting the organization, thereby changing the underlying mode of imitation:

> "When we took the original model, we said: What is required to adapt the organization to it? And then something happened, then it started to hurt, because now, we were getting momentum. We aren't only describing what we already have. Now, we are changing *ourselves.*" (fire chief, emphasis added)

Important organizational changes included the vertical expansion of the hierarchy from two to five levels and allocating different responsibilities to different leaders based on their hierarchical position. The result was a longer leadership pipeline through which

managers could advance, in contrast to the fireman version. The fire chief summed up these changes in the following way:

> The organization is now divided into five levels; the [fire chief], as the head of the organization … functional managers, who are managers of one or several functions; manager of managers; and manager of employees. … all the activities of the organization including employee development, competence plans, recruitment and selection procedures, leadership development, and organizational operations have been formed by Leadership Pipeline. (MA paper, fire chief)

As part of this work, the top management team introduced all leadership profiles, including the eight core competence requirements, work values, and time priorities required at each hierarchical level and changed the formal leadership procedures and practices of the fire department to match the PLP requirements. The top management team also initiated an organization-wide leadership program to develop the required leadership skills, "based on what was written in the [PLP] book" (fire chief).

The focus in phase 2 gradually turned into "doing" leadership pipeline in accordance with the book and within the strict hierarchical context of the fire department. This did not mean that PLP turned into a one hundred percent replica in actual structures and practices. Informants acknowledged that "we may have had some other things with respect to values" (deputy fire chief) and "there wasn't much done about the development dialogues" (fire chief). Nevertheless, the core features of PLP were taken very seriously. For example, the differentiated hierarchical levels entailed a challenging situation for some managers who did not succeed in acquiring the necessary skills for their level. Top management addressed this

problem partly by offering leadership training, partly by downgrading some of them to a lower hierarchical level or even dismissing them:

> "If the managers did not live up to what was in the Leadership Pipeline model, then this was used as an argument for why they weren't good enough for their job." (fire chief)

For those who were seen as leadership talents, the opposite was the case as the changes in the organizational structure opened up greater vertical mobility opportunities. An informant told us that he ended up where he did (as functional manager) because the top management team "really looked at what kind of potential you have".

The organizational and leadership changes entailed by PLP were comprehensive but did not compromise the important hierarchical nature of the fire department culture, the top-down leadership philosophy, or the core activities related to fire and rescue services. If anything, the changes reinforced the hierarchical features. The number of management levels and managers more than doubled, and the responsibilities of the managers were more differentiated according to hierarchical placement. Some informants even felt that the distance between the top management and the lower levels had grown so much that "there were some bosses who had no idea what was happening on the floor anymore" (assistant manager). Consistent with PLP, this distance was the result of decentralized leadership tasks, which the fire chief and his team saw as a sign of successful organizational change. An informant noted the following:

> "It ended up working really well, actually... Decisions were made at the lowest possible level. That is, those who were responsible could make the decisions. Only

when more stars on the shoulders were needed was the issue brought further up... I think it was mission accomplished." (operations manager, fire 1)

Hierarchical organization once again came up as a theme in the interviews and texts, reflecting an important contextual factor that made it possible for the department to reproduce PLP. The fire chief was convinced that the hierarchy culture helped the process:

> “ [the hierarchy culture] made it easier to build the leadership pipeline… The entire phase was top-down managed from beginning to end … and this was done in the way we normally work; full speed ahead and learning things by heart.” (fire chief)

This perception was shared by multiple informants, including an emergency manager who said, “we implemented [PLP] the way we always do things” and the manager of ambulances who observed that “they decided things [regarding PLP] the way they put out fires: Problem, solution, go ahead, fire, water, extinguish – *bam*.” An external consultant commented:

> “It was fascinating to see the way in which they chose to implement Leadership Pipeline, it was very ‘fireman’. When there is an emergency, you click your heels together and don’t ask questions. They thought it would be better if they implemented Leadership Pipeline the same way they put out fires: ‘We ring the bell and off we go’… The pipeline model that they ended up making was not ‘fireman’, but they worked on it in a very ‘fireman’ way, as if it were a matter of life and death.” (Consultant 1)

Translation outcome: The second phase resumed the translation process with a much more faithful imitation mode compared to the first phase. It entailed discarding any omissions and additions made to the PLP idea at the beginning of the process, taking instead the PLP book as a blueprint for hierarchically imposing organizational change. These organizational change-oriented activities resulted in the reproduction of the PLP model in the sense that PLP retained its form and content while the fire department changed largely in accordance with PLP. The prescribed organizational changes were executed 'by the book' – a rather familiar approach for the top-down controlled fire department. Thus, in contrast to the first phase, the emphasis in the second phase was on the transformation of the fire department rather than of PLP.

DISCUSSION

The tension between transformation and reproduction in Scandinavian institutionalism has become more pronounced over the years as more studies have begun to pay attention to the regularities of translation, in contrast to early contributions that emphasized its unpredictable aspects. Our study seeks to bring additional insights into this tension by (1) developing an understanding of imitation as a motor with two alternating modes that in succession drive translation processes rather than just one mode and (2) connecting different imitation modes with different translation outcomes.

Translation and imitation modes

Translation theory generally stipulates that the modus operandi of translators is to adapt an imported management idea into a modified version (Wedlin & Sahlin, 2017), thereby reflecting an unfaithful imitation mode. Whereas the notion of unfaithful imitation

undoubtedly is a useful conceptual lens through which to study translation processes, it does not fully capture the breadth of the complex translation work that occurred in our case. Specifically, we note that the "almost axiomatic status" (Røvik, 2016, p. 292) of the assumption that translation always involves ideational transformation, and therefore is driven by unfaithful imitation, is only consistent with the first phase of the translation processes studied here. What we found in phase 2 were intense efforts made by the fire department to keep PLP intact while at the same time changing the organization, consistent with a notion of faithful rather than unfaithful imitation.

Thus, our study shows the need for translation scholarship to acknowledge that translation can be driven by faithful *and* unfaithful imitation. Given that imitation is the motor of the 'translation vehicle' (Czarniawska & Sevón, 2005), the differences between the first and the second phase with respect to the translators' approach to the PLP idea point to two distinct 'gears' of this motor; faithfulness and unfaithfulness, between which translators may switch to move the translation vehicle forward. Both of them imply considerable work: Whereas previous studies reveal the continuous translation work that is needed to change an idea (Cassell & Lee, 2017; Waldorff & Madsen, 2022), consistent with our findings from phase 1, the findings from phase 2 show that keeping an idea more or less intact during the translation process also requires energy and effort.

Understanding translation processes requires greater appreciation of the way in which these imitation modes work. As such, our study supports previous studies of patterns and regularities in translation processes such as translation and editing rules (Lamb & Currie, 2012; Morris & Lancaster, 2006; Nilsen & Sandaunet, 2020; Røvik, 2016; Sahlin-Andersson, 1996; Wæraas & Sataøen, 2014). In our case, the findings contribute insights into how such regularities could relate to each other and to overarching imitation modes. Different imitation modes will not shape the translation process equally at the same time and could alternate in

dominance from one point in time to another. Moreover, the findings suggest that each imitation mode activates a certain set of translation rules: When unfaithful imitation is the dominant mode, additions to and omissions from a management idea are relevant translation rules whereas copying plays a minor role. Conversely, when faithful imitation is dominant, copying is the general rule whereas additions and omissions are downplayed.

Imitation modes and translation outcomes

Figure 3 presents a framework for analyzing translation outcomes. Previous translation studies have mainly focused on the outcome referred to as mutual transformation. This outcome results from unfaithful imitation and involves high degrees of ideational and organizational change whereby both the translator and the object of translation change significantly (Czarniawska & Joerges, 1996; Morris & Lancaster, 2006; Nielsen et al., 2014). This is an outcome that we did not observe in our case. Neoinstitutional studies have added the possibility of decoupling (Bromley & Powell, 2012; Meyer & Rowan, 1977; Westphal et al., 1997), which occurs when neither the idea nor the organization changes much and the idea is used symbolically to acquire legitimacy benefits – also an outcome not observed here. Instead, our study completes the framework by drawing attention to disalignment and reproduction and by relating the two imitation modes, unfaithfulness and faithfulness, to these outcomes.

FIGURE 3

The first translation phase of our study shows how unfaithful imitation can result in few, incremental, and ineffective organizational change. The translators failed to create desired organizational change despite the locally tailor-made and culturally acceptable fireman version of PLP. This combination of high degree of ideational change and low degree of organizational change denotes a failed translation; a translation involving poor alignment between the "translator" and "what is translated" (Czarniawska & Sevón, 2005, p. 8). Following Callon's (1990, p. 145) view of failed translations, the fireman model and the fire department were *disaligned* in the sense that they lacked "equivalence" and "common measure". This is in contrast to prevailing organizational translation theory, which suggests that ideational change can be expected to increase acceptability and cultural fit with the organization (Amis et al., 2002; Czarniawska & Joerges, 1996).

Thus, our findings provide an important counterpoint to the notion of mutual transformation in translation processes. They show that unfaithful imitation could come at a severe price by leading to a "watered down" version of the original idea, as observed by the fire chief. Although such an idea will be perfectly acceptable from a cultural standpoint because it represents little threat to the status quo, its dilution reduces its "productive value" (Suddaby, 2010, p. 15) and therefore the amount of organizational change it is able to generate. It follows that translators face a potential trade-off with respect to ideational and organizational change: Too much ideational change could prevent intended organizational change whereas too little could generate resistance.

The second phase shows how faithful imitation can result in reproduction. This outcome implies a combination of no or very little ideational change and a high degree of organizational change in accordance with the contents of the adopted idea. In our case, we observed how the fire department was transformed to faithfully fit PLP but not vice-versa. This finding is arguably unusual in the sense that it departs from standard conceptualizations

of mutual transformation and an ecology of translation whereby ideas and contexts are translated at the same time (Wedlin & Sahlin, 2017). A previous study by Erlingsdóttir and Lindberg (2005) of the translation of an accreditation system in a clinical chemical laboratory is one of few that demonstrates an outcome similar to ours. Noting that the translation process, in their case, involved strong aspects of homogenization and faithful copying, the authors concluded that “practices and people were adjusted to the requirements of the standard and not the other way around” (p. 49), consistent with the findings from our study.

Given the lack of studies that have observed reproduction as a translation outcome, it seems crucial to understand why faithful imitation and reproduction were such important modes and outcomes of the translation of PLP. From our data, two factors emerge as particularly relevant in this respect; hierarchical organization and cultural fit between PLP and the fire department. First, the strongly hierarchical context of our case organization stands in contrast to the argument in translation theory that power is decentralized in a way that makes anyone capable of adapting a circulating idea for their own use (Wedlin & Sahlin, 2017). An often studied translation context is professionalized settings where top management faces difficulties in imposing change “because professionals hold discretion to openly or secretly resist change in their practices" (Reay et al., 2013, p. 964). Such settings are typically found in health care organizations. Not surprisingly, health care is a frequently chosen setting in empirical translation research (Nilsen & Sandaunet, 2020; Reay et al., 2013; Vossen & van Gestel, 2019; Wæraas & Sataøen, 2014; Waldorff, 2013).[3] Translation is much less researched in strongly hierarchical organizations where members lack the same leeway as professionals to resist or modify change. Fire fighters, for example, work in paramilitary units governed by strong hierarchical authority (Weick, 1993). This type of context could be able to counteract the unpredictability and heterogeneity-producing features of translation. Under conditions of robust hierarchy cultures relying on elites’ sense-giving and centralized

command, translation processes may simply have less space to move in unpredictable directions. Translation research should be more sensitive to these and other high faithfulness conditions that could offset the unpredictability and heterogeneity-producing aspects of translation.

Second, our findings suggest that cultural fit between the adopted management idea and the adopting organization facilitated reproduction. Existing studies tend to describe circulating management ideas as abstract and disembedded (Czarniawska & Joerges, 1996), being "fish out of water" (Tracey et al., 2018) with low legitimacy in their new environments – especially if these environments are dominated by strong professional values – and therefore requiring substantial modification. Given this view of management ideas, it is not surprising that many empirical translation studies discover cases of high degree of ideational change.

In the case of the fire department, however, PLP cannot be described as a cultural misfit. Not only was PLP a translation from the more universal, North-American original version (Charan et al., 2001) into a public sector version (Dahl & Molly-Søholm, 2012), it was also a god fit with respect to the fire department's values and practices concerning its hierarchical way of organizing and leading. In contrast to culturally incompatible management ideas (Canato et al., 2013), a compatible idea is arguably less likely to need as much transformation. For this reason it is also less likely to end up as a diluted version of the original idea and more likely to preserve its productive value. Thus, because high cultural fit can be assumed to entail less ideational change whereas low cultural fit could necessitate more ideational change, the findings suggest that fewer reinterpretations, omissions, and additions, if any, will occur when a management idea is perceived a good cultural fit with an organization, thereby paving the way for reproduction as a translation outcome.

CONCLUSION

After almost three decades of translation research, much is known about the fate of circulating management ideas after their adoption into concrete organizational settings. Still, additional insights into imitation and translation outcomes remain to be discovered. Our contribution has hopefully not only shown the potential in addressing how faithful and unfaithful imitation could relate to each other over time and to different outcomes, but also that future research should continue to examine how and when translation processes involve changes in "the translator" and "what is translated". Because our findings are rooted in one single case, we encourage future research to further examine how shifts in imitation modes occur and whether these shifts imply shifting towards faithfulness or unfaithfulness and whether they imply ideational change alone or ideational change in combination with organizational change. The notions of imitation modes and translation outcomes should provide useful starting points for analyzing such dynamics in order to determine what changes and what remains the same in translation process, and ultimately when ideational change becomes associated with organizational change and when it does not.

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Notes

[1] The notion that editing and translation rules are not prescriptive means that they are not made explicit as formal guidelines for any translation process (cf. Sahlin-Andersson, 1996).
[2] The logbook contains detailed descriptions of 15 events from the process of creating a leadership pipeline. The logbook describes these events using headlines such as «what happened», «who were involved», «why did it happen», «what was my role», and more.
[3] Some aspects of health care (e.g. emergency rooms) have similarities with fast-response organizations such as the police, the military, and fire departments with respect to their hierarchical features.