

A Critique of  
Life Histories of Innovation: How New Practices Become  
Routinized

John  
Not Job - You did a  
PARTICULARLY GOOD JOB OF  
IDENTIFYING STRENGTHS &  
WEAKNESSES OF THE DESCRIPTION  
OF THE PRACTICE.  
Your two concerns (Borden's  
manuscript) were "A" & "B".  
Am "A" ~~the~~ JOB

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for  
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RESEARCH AND EVALUATION IN PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION

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Life Histories of Innovations: How New Practices Become  
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As is noted by Eleanor Chelimsky in the introduction to Part I, this article by Robert K. Yin "is an example of process analysis". A manager desiring this type of evaluation is often interested in information that will be useful for policy formulation or policy execution purposes. In this particular instance (page 37) Chelimsky asserts that this process evaluation is not complementary to a separate outcome evaluation but rather is a stand-alone process evaluation, "asking the cause and effect question, 'What have been the organizational and other factors that have led to the routinization of new practices?'"

Indeed, in commenting on innovations in urban bureaucracies in the first paragraph of his article, Yin states that "Little is known, however, about how such practices become routinized—i.e., how they become part of "standard practice." Yin implies that this is the fundamental question addressed by this research. The article itself does not clearly state the specific questions addressed by the research, although one can deduce what the questions might have been from the conclusions he draws. Yin also indicates that "an understanding of the routinization process" is necessary to develop a full theory of organizational innovation. It

seems to me arguable that the evidence he presents is better suited to the more general task of contributing to an understanding of the routinization process than to identifying the factors "causing" routinization of innovative practices.

The key concept studied by Yin was the routinization of innovative practices in urban bureaucracies. His particular focus was upon administrative events (policies and practices which he labeled cycles and passages) which he identified as "needed to sustain any organizational practice over time." Yin specified ten such organizational events as variables, defined them as either cycles or passages, and accompanied each event with a question to assist the researcher in determining the presence or absence of the event. Given relevant findings (data), the concepts and variables are adequately formulated to permit analyses of the relationships between them. Yin has used these events (variables) to define routinization. For example he states that "they provide objective measures of routinization; the more passages or cycles achieved during a life history, the more routinized a practice may be considered to be." (Do these events cause the innovation to be routinized or merely reflect the fact degree to which the innovation has been routinized?)

This process evaluation was conducted through the use of what Yin refers to as a life history approach - six types of innovations were studied by examining their life

histories through case studies. The case studies were conducted in 19 urban areas and corroborating evidence was obtained from telephone interviews at 90 other urban sites in the United States. The evaluation was retrospective and a deliberate attempt was made to gather data on a sample of old innovations - some "adopted over 10 or 15 years ago." (p. 72). Beyond the identification of the various (109) sites, the innovation, and 1970 population, Yin provides no information regarding data collection. We do not know what data was gathered or what sources were used to provide the data. The general methodology of conducting site visits to generate the information and using a larger number of sites to conduct telephone interviews for corroboration purposes seems to be sound and economical. The basis is not stated for selecting the sample urban areas used in the study. The author states that the six types of innovations were selected to assure a "variety of settings and bureaucratic practices". Footnote 2 reveals that the methodology established a chain of evidence from field observations to conclusion for each case study. "Basically, the methodology involved the tabulation of key events in each life history." Assuming that the data gathering methodology was appropriate, this type of tabulation should provide a useful format for data analysis. It would have been very helpful if the author had included more information in the article on the chain of evidence and

the findings related to the tabulation of the key events.

Yin does not provide information regarding the methodology employed (other than the number of sites, 109) which would be helpful in dispelling concerns for the external validity (generalizability) of the findings. Basically, the article doesn't provide any access to the data which enables the reader to independently arrive at conclusions related to this research. Because we don't know what data was collected or how it was analyzed, it difficult to determine the internal or external validity of the data. The author has developed an interesting set of variables (events) which he presumably has applied to the 109 cases, but nowhere are that data displayed or analyzed. Chronologies of four life histories are provided, but there is no way to determine how

representative of the 109 case studies they are.

Yin also includes a diagram (figure 1) titled, "Complete Life History of a Local Service Innovation" in which he identifies the three maturation stages of innovation; improvisation, expansion, and disappearance. In the diagram he identifies the events (variables) which accompany the expansion and disappearance stages. Without some explanatory note, this appears to contradict his conclusion (p. 75) that "The life histories showed that what was most important was the basic occurrence of passages and cycles, and not necessarily their chronological sequence." In short, while the author has constructed what seems to be a sensible conceptual framework for the research of the routinization of innovations and has arrived at what appear to be common sense conclusions, he has failed to communicate his data, data analysis plan, or findings in a manner which convinces the reader that his research supports his conclusions.

Two points were particularly bothersome to this reader. Chelimsky and Yin both indicated that the research dealt with causes of routinization of innovations. While the events (variable, practices, passages, cycles) represent conditions that common sense might tell you enhance the possibility of routinization, data was not presented to establish a causal relationship. Secondly, the author devoted 15% of the space of the report to tables 1 and 2, the list of cities and

their populations. The inclusion of this data, coupled with the absence of succinct and useful information from the interviews, caused me to wonder why the author failed to provide additional data to support his conclusions. Yin says the life histories were analyzed but no data/findings are presented about those life histories. Although the ten events are mentioned, no data is presented regarding the relative frequency/importance of their appearance in the interviews. No breakdown of the data is presented by city, variable or type of innovation. Although Yen concludes that routinization of the innovation depends upon a trained innovator, the establishment of a core practice, the effectiveness of the innovation, and the support of top agency administrators, he provides virtually no data to support those conclusions. The overall design of the project does not seem to measure what causes innovation to replace existing standard procedures.

The author has identified a number of institutional factors which are important to the routinization of innovations. His Figure 1, Complete Life History of a Local Service Innovation, virtually constitutes a theory of action for promoting innovation. My present work with the Department of Health and Human Services involves the development, evaluation, and replication of innovative projects. This article tended to confirm information I had gathered from past experiences. In addition to my

government employment, I am involved in a private marketing enterprise. I intend to apply this research article to a (innovative) product we are marketing. Specifically, I want to translate the "Life History" into a "theory of action" for establishing the product as a routine item for use by local agencies.