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## The Translational Diamond:

### Robust translation of magic concept in public organizations

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#### Abstract

*Public organizations are constantly offered new ideas and concepts that involve a substantial investment of resources when it comes to translating them into organizational practice. An especially powerful group of such concepts in the discourse of organizations comprises so-called "magic concepts" that both pose opportunities and challenges for public leaders trying to translate them. Although critical discussion about the value of popular concepts has been intense in existing research, there is still little knowledge about the factors that determine why some magic concepts have a pervasive influence, while others quickly go out of fashion and leave little trace in organizational practice. By combining insights from public leadership theory, implementation theory, institutional theory and organizational psychology, this article outlines four dimensions that are central to the robustness of the organizational translation of magic concepts. The article develops a conceptual model labeled 'The Translational Diamond', which suggests that the robust translation of organizational concepts depends on the level of both strategic and local anchoring, as well as the interplay between reflection and experimentation in the translation process. The Translational Diamond is applied in two embedded case studies, which offer insight into the variance between two organizational departments attempting to translate the same magic concept. The results illustrate how variance in the four dimensions of the translational diamond create different organizational impact.*

#### Introduction

Concepts play a crucial role in organizational development and have been researched across theoretical landscapes such as public administration, organizational psychology and business management (Kolb, 1984; March & Olsen, 1995; Morgan, 1983; Røvik, 2011; Scarbrough & Swan, 2001). Concepts can be defined as relatively abstract or generic ideas with more or less coherent, and often prescriptive views on organizational development (Braam, G., Benders, J. & Heusinkveld, 2007).

Some organizational concepts gain enormous popularity and spread rapidly across organizations. Such concepts are typically broad, normatively charged, and offer new solutions to previous challenges. Because of their apparent omnipotence, great promises and near universal application, Pollitt and Hupe label these "magic concepts" (Pollitt & Hupe, 2011). Examples of magic concepts that are currently enjoying immense popularity across many organizations are innovation, resilience and disruption.

Magic concepts are highly attractive and persuasive due to their ability to set a new course, create supportive coalitions and spur engagement. The problem with magic concepts is, however, that their strengths are inevitably accompanied by corresponding challenges. Magic concepts are fuzzy, ambiguous and hard to conceptualize, and have a tendency to suppress conflict and critique (Pollitt & Hupe, 2011).

The inherent strengths and corresponding challenges of magic concepts involve high stakes for organizations and public leaders attempting to engage in their translation. Successfully translated magic concepts may provide valuable organizing perspectives, while unsuccessful translation may involve considerable loss in terms of resources invested. It is these features of magic concepts that make them interesting, extreme cases of organizational translation.

While a substantial field of existing research takes a rather critical view of the value of organizational concepts, their existence and influence is irrefutable (Røvik, 2007). Organizational concepts exist and pose both possibilities and challenges for organizations. Adopting new concepts involves substantial investment of resources, and so organizations engaging with new concepts usually hope they will have a positive impact on organizational performance. However, it is not uncommon in the search for legality to accept the hypocrisy of superficially taking in popular concepts without actually putting them into use (Abrahamson & Fairchild, 1999; Brunsson, 1989; Clark, 2004; Morgan, 1983; Røvik, 2011). This practice has created substantial critical discussion about the value of organizational concepts.

While the value of organizational concepts has been critically debated in existing research, the discussion of how to secure robust translation of such concepts has received less attention. Robust translation can be defined as the ability of a concept to create lasting impact in all parts of an organization, by continuously adjusting and responding to organizational challenges and contexts. Robust translation, therefore, involves a delicate balance between maintaining a certain conceptual stability over time, while still evolving flexibly towards change (Czarniaska & Sevón, 1996; Jen, 2003).

The purpose of this article is to develop a conceptual framework for studying the robustness of the organizational translation of magic concepts, and to apply it to a case study of conceptual translation in two departments of a Danish municipality. Encouraged by previous research pointing to the lack of cross-fertilization and dialogue between the fields of translational studies (O'Mahoney, 2016; Wæraas & Nielsen, 2016), this article sets out to integrate theoretical constructs from public leadership theory, implementation theory, institutional theory and organizational theory to develop a conceptual framework for how organizations translate organizational concepts. Thus, the main contribution is to nuance and deepen our understanding of how magic concepts are robustly translated into practice.

The argument proceeds as follows. Key findings from theories on magic concepts, public leadership theory, implementation theory, institutional theory and organizational psychology were combined to create a theoretical model labeled 'the translational diamond'. Inspired by leadership theory and implementation theory, the interplay between sovereign, strategic leadership and local, distributed leadership is highlighted in the distinction between strategic and local anchoring. Drawing on institutional theory and theories of organizational learning, the importance of abstract reflection as well as concrete, experimental action in the translation process are underlined. Cases and methods are accounted for before applying the theoretical framework to a case study of two departments in the same organization that were actively trying to translate the same magic concept, namely "trust". This application illustrates how the outlined dimensions of translation vary and create different outcomes in terms of robust translation. Finally, the limitations of the results and their implications both for research and practice will be discussed.

### Theoretical framework

This section sets out the theoretical framework, firstly delving into theory about the role of concepts – and especially magic concepts – in organizational life. This is followed by an exploration of public leadership and implementation theory in order to provide insight into the dilemmas of securing strategic and local anchoring in the translation of concepts. The "talk" and "walk" of implementation in the translation of concepts are explored, drawing on institutional theory and learning theories from organizational psychology. Finally, the findings are operationalized in a conceptual framework labeled 'the translational diamond'.

### *Magic concepts*

Since DiMaggio and Powell's groundbreaking revisit to the iron cage, the idea of organizational isomorphism as a hunt for legitimacy rather than efficiency has had a significant impact (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). Organizations mimic each other, adopt fashionable trends, ideas and concepts and use them to appear legitimate. According to Hood, there is a constant power battle among organizational concepts that are central in the development of organizations and society (Hood, 2005). Such concepts become powerful as they circulate, not primarily because of their properties, but because of the way they are packaged, translated and made available (Czarniaska & Sevón, 1996; Røvik, 2011).

When such concepts become very popular and span both the academic and practitioner communities, they can assume the status of "magic concepts" (Pollitt & Hupe, 2011). Magic concepts appear omnipotent and often set themselves up as universal answers to present challenges. They are neutral in the sense that they avoid connection with a specific ideology or group of interests, cover huge domains, and have multiple, overlapping, sometimes conflicting definitions. Their "magic" abilities are connected with a high degree of abstraction, the use of binary oppositions, normativity, and the ability to solve previous dilemmas (Pollitt & Hupe, 2011).

The high rhetorical value of magic concepts and their ability to fascinate make them interesting to public leaders who may use them for advertising, focusing, legitimizing and recruiting support for a certain cause or agenda. However, magic concepts also have significant limitations. They are imprecise, ambiguous and unstable, which makes the process of translating them into organizational life highly demanding and complex (Pollitt & Hupe, 2011).

The main difference between magic concepts and regular organizational concepts is their level of abstractness and popularity. While organizational concepts in general may vary in terms of how specific the recipe for translation is, magic concepts are by definition more open to interpretation and characterized by a high level of abstractness. Thus, magic concepts enhance inherent dynamics in the translation of organizational concepts in general, since even relatively narrowly specified concepts must undergo a process of de- and re-contextualization in order to be translated (Røvik, 2007). As such, magic concepts can be regarded as interesting, extreme cases of organizational concepts, since their translation is expected to enhance patterns and dynamics that will also be at stake in the translation of organizational concepts in general.

#### *The value of concepts in organizations*

The value of concepts in organizational life has been the topic of a multitude of academic work that has thrown light on the underlying dynamics and effects of using metaphors and concepts in organizational development (Brunsson, 1993; Cornelissen & Oswick, 2008; Newell, Robertson, & Swan, 2001; Røvik, 2011; Sahlin & Wedlin, 2008).

The debate about why organizations pick up popular ideas and concepts has revolved around the motives of gaining or maintaining legitimacy, and acting according to a logic of appropriateness (Clark, 2004; DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; March, 1981; Meyer & Rowan, 1977). In fact, several theoretical perspectives express skepticism about the real value of organizational concepts (Abrahamson & Fairchild, 1999; McKinley, Mone, & Moone, 1999). For example, management fashion theory makes the observation that over time organizational ideas often resemble bell-shaped lifecycles of booms and busts - much like fashions in other aspects of life. Therefore, concepts are mainly viewed as superficial phenomena that are constantly replaced by others. A similar critical argument is seen in institutional theories that posit that new ideas that do not fit with existing organizational values and practices will be rejected or decoupled, leading to symbolic changes rather than changed practices (Boxenbaum & Jonsson, 2008; Morgan, 1983; Pollitt & Hupe, 2011; Røvik, 2011). Especially new institutional theories introduce the idea that leaders in the public sector juggle with inconsistent demands, forcing them to create the appearance of adopting concepts, while the concepts are not actually put to practical use (Brunsson, 1989).

However, there are also more optimistic scholars who argue that organizational concepts can lead to the creation of new, generative insights and can spur institutional changes (Benders & Veen, 2001; Cornelissen & Kafouros, 2008; Forssell & Jansson, 1996; Heusinkveld & Benders, 2012; Kieser, 1997; Sahlin & Wedlin, 2008). According to Røvik, the view that organizational ideas are by

definition transitory and superficial creates the impression that organizational ideas function only as "decoration", while they can actually spur new action and practice (Røvik, 2011).

While the value of concepts in organizations has been heavily debated, there has been much less focus on factors that might determine the impact of concepts that are attempted translated. Although Pollitt and Hupe provide the general advice that magic concepts must be conceptualized and applied to the concrete context in order to be implemented effectively, they do not suggest that there are better or worse ways to do this. In this sense, their approach is relativistic. Magic concepts must be applied, but guidelines for bad and good translation are not provided (Pollitt & Hupe, 2011). Røvik argues that the translation of concepts requires de-contextualization as well as re-contextualization. Although this certainly sheds light on how concepts enter organizations, there is still little clarity about the factors that determine whether translation will lead to symbolic changes or changes in organizational practice.

The movement from ideas on paper to action on the ground has long been studied by political science, policy and public administration scholars under the heading of public leadership and policy implementation (Saetren, 2005). While implementation highlights the challenges of hierarchical translation in organizations, public leadership theory has been preoccupied with the schism of securing the legitimacy of democratic, sovereign leadership, while simultaneously acknowledging leadership as a distributed, collaborative or even emergent process that is not exclusively created by formal leaders (Grint, Smolovic' Jones, & Holt, 2016; 't Hart, 2014; Uhl-Bien & Carsten, 2016; Van Wart, 2013). Next, we will address public leadership theory and implementation theory, in order to explore factors of importance when anchoring the translation of concepts in the hierarchy of public organizations.

#### *The strategic and local anchoring of magic concepts*

The literature on policy implementation is substantial and involves top-down (Pressman & Wildavsky, 1973), bottom-up (Lipsky, 2010) and integrative approaches (May & Winter, 2009).

Top-down perspectives on implementation aim to secure democratic efficiency. This means that carrying out decisions made by elected officials is at the heart of top-down approaches (Pressman & Wildavsky, 1973). The approach is based on a classical, hierarchical understanding that measures the success of an implementation according to the extent to which centrally decided goals are carried out locally. Ideally, implementation in the top-down perspective is a linear process in which a central, strategic decision is loyally carried out by subordinates. This implies a classical, sovereign understanding of leadership, in which the formal leader is considered not only the legitimate but also (inspired by "great man theory") the most competent person to make organizational decisions (Bolden, Hawkins, Gosling, & Taylor, 2011; Parry & Bryman, 2006; Uhr & 't Hart, 2008). In this approach, leadership is mainly associated with the traits or actions of the formal leader, and key importance is attributed to securing decisions made by the legitimate leaders of the public sector. A central challenge is, therefore, to align so-called veto points in the process that might otherwise derail the original intentions of the strategic decision. However, this

perspective has been heavily criticized for its overly rational approach, its linear understanding of compliance, and its lack of insight into the importance of employees' and other relevant actors' engagement in the implementation process (Lipsky, 2010).

In reality, the accumulated impact of many minor adjustments or changes in the implementation process comprises a huge challenge in the top-down perspective (Nielsen & Winter, 2008). One of the earliest and most robust findings of implementation research is that the effect of policy implementation depends totally on the formation of local coalitions of individuals affected by the policy (Elmore, 1979). This implies a more relational understanding of leadership, in which leadership is best understood as a collaborative, distributed or shared process, which may be initiated and produced both by formal and informal leaders (Bolden, 2011; Pearce, Conger, & Locke, 2008; 't Hart, 2014; Van Wart, 2013).

Whereas lack of willingness to carry out central decisions and goal displacement are considered the central problems of implementation in the top-down approach (O'Leary, 2006), local modification and interpretation of central decisions is considered a fundamental condition in bottom-up approaches. According to Lipsky, street-level bureaucrats are essentially free to develop their own "coping devices" for simplifying, and often distorting, the aims of central decision-making (Lipsky, 2010). Rather than assuming that policymakers can or should directly control implementation through clear lines of top-down authority, bottom-up research essentially understands implementation as a collaborative process in which involvement, delegation and shared leadership are the key to anchoring new policies locally (Baronas & Louis, 1988; Denis, Lamothe, & Langley, 2001; Meyers & Vorsanger, 2003; Sabatier & Mazmanian, 1980). This suggests that in many circumstances, policy is best developed at the bottom among those who are affected by it and will carry it out in practice (Gronn, 2002; Hill, 1998). Drawing on Røvik, it can be argued that concepts may be spotted, taken in, translated and spread from all levels of the organization (Røvik, 2011).

The top-down and bottom-up approaches each have their inherent strengths and weaknesses. The bottom-up approach acknowledges the powers of distributed and emergent leadership and the importance of engaging lower level actors in implementation. The top-down approach stresses the need to anchor the rights of democratically elected or selected formal leaders to actually implement the policies that have been decided on. Whereas the top-down approach can be criticized for not allowing frontline workers the discretion to adopt and adjust central decisions to local conditions, the bottom-up approach can be criticized for creating democratic decoupling and for allowing too extensive variance in implementation (Hjern, 1982; Sabatier, 1998).

Consequently, several attempts have been made to combine the two approaches in a theoretical synthesis, suggesting that implementation must be designed in processes that secure anchoring both at the strategic and the local levels of public organizations (Nielsen & Winter, 2008; Sabatier, 1998).

The important dialectic between **strategic and local anchoring** will be incorporated as two central dimensions in the theoretical model of 'the translational diamond'. Strategic anchoring refers to the level of engagement among central decision-makers such as political leaders, top administrative leaders, administrators and central union representatives. Local anchoring will refer to the level of engagement among leaders and employees at local institutions. Thus, strategic anchoring does not refer to a unidirectional, top-down controlled translation of ideas. Instead, the translation of ideas is viewed as a spiral-like process in which ideas can circulate within an organization in an osmosis-like interaction between levels (Røvik, 2011). For example, strategic anchoring can be strengthened by central leaders providing local employees or leaders with lenses or frames that give them the power to translate local and concrete variations of ideas that float freely in the organization (Weick, 1989).

Leadership theory and implementation theory address the importance of creating interplay between the different hierarchical levels and actors of public organizations in creating a real impact on organizational practice. However, while some scholars touch upon learning and evolutionary aspects of implementation (Lane, 1998), these theoretical fields are generally less preoccupied with experimentation in the process of implementation.

In the following, we move on to explore the dialectic between experimentation and reflection in the process of translating magic concepts, drawing on institutional theory as well as organizational psychology.

#### *The walk and talk of magic concepts*

A common saying stresses the importance of "walking the talk", implying that ideas or policies may very well dominate the discourse of organizations without necessarily causing corresponding actions in practice. March introduces the distinction between concepts in reform programs (talk about the reform) and their implementation (action pertaining to the reform). A central point is that the coupling between talk and implementation can be vague or even absent in administrative reforms (Boxenbaum & Jonsson, 2008; Brunsson, 1989; Olsen & March, 1989; Røvik, 2007)

While engaging in discourse, debate and discussion may certainly provide important insights, the importance of experience provides a basis for strengthening implementation. Experimental learning helps modify or reinforce behavior as a result of inferences drawn from the consequences of previous behavior. Experimental learning involves practical experimentation, the interpretation of outcomes, the translation of inferences into action and the formulation of learning that can be passed on to others (March & Olsen, 1995).

The dialectic between experimentation and reflection as a source of learning and development is also central in organizational psychology. Kolb argues that organizational growth is best facilitated by processes in which experience is used to validate and test abstract concepts, and vice versa, optimally creating a continuous feedback process (Kolb, 1984). In other words, organizational learning is supported by a combination of two different strategies. The first strategy is to perceive



new information through actively experiencing the concrete, tangible qualities of the world. The second strategy is to perceive, grasp, or take hold of new ideas through symbolic or abstract representation: thinking about, analyzing or systematically planning (Kolb, Boyatzis, & Mainemelis, 2011). The learning process is reciprocal. Experience modifies reflection, but reflection also transforms perceptions of practice. The process of learning involves a movement from actor to observer and from concrete involvement to abstract detachment. The point is that development in one mode spurs development in the other, and that this dialectic creates a tension that is central to organizational growth (Bruner, 1966).

Organizational ineffectiveness can ultimately be ascribed to a lack of mutual feedback processes caused by a tendency to emphasize either reflection or action at the expense of the other. Another central point drawn from this inference is that organizational concepts are continuously modified by experience and tacit knowledge (Baumard, 1999). This means that the translation of organizational concepts will benefit from establishing feedback loops, ensuring that development in one mode can benefit development in the other.

In other words, the robust translation of concepts is not achieved solely through reflective, analytical "talk", but is very much dependent on concrete experimentation: doing the "walk". In the next section, these two central dimensions of securing *"talk as well as walk"* in the translation of concepts will be incorporated into the development of the conceptual model 'the translational diamond'. The dimension of "talk" refers to the level of reflective activities aimed at deepening, nuancing, conceptualizing or debating the concept. The "walk" dimension refers to the level of experimentation aimed at trying out concrete solutions and actions, as well as picking up inferences about the success of such experiments.

#### *Conceptual model: the translational diamond*

In this section, insights from the theoretical fields described above are merged into a conceptual model labeled 'the translational diamond'. Public leadership theory and implementation theory remind us of the important dialectic between strategic and local anchoring at all levels in the hierarchy, and of balancing both the legitimate power of formal leaders and the power of distributive, shared and collaborative processes of leadership. Institutional theory and organizational psychology address the need to support the interplay between reflection and experimentation in the process of translating magic concepts.

These two insights can be joined in a conceptual framework that illustrates the dimensions of strategic anchoring versus local anchoring as well as experimentation versus reflection in the process of translating magic concepts. The model is depicted in Figure 1, labeled 'the translational diamond'.

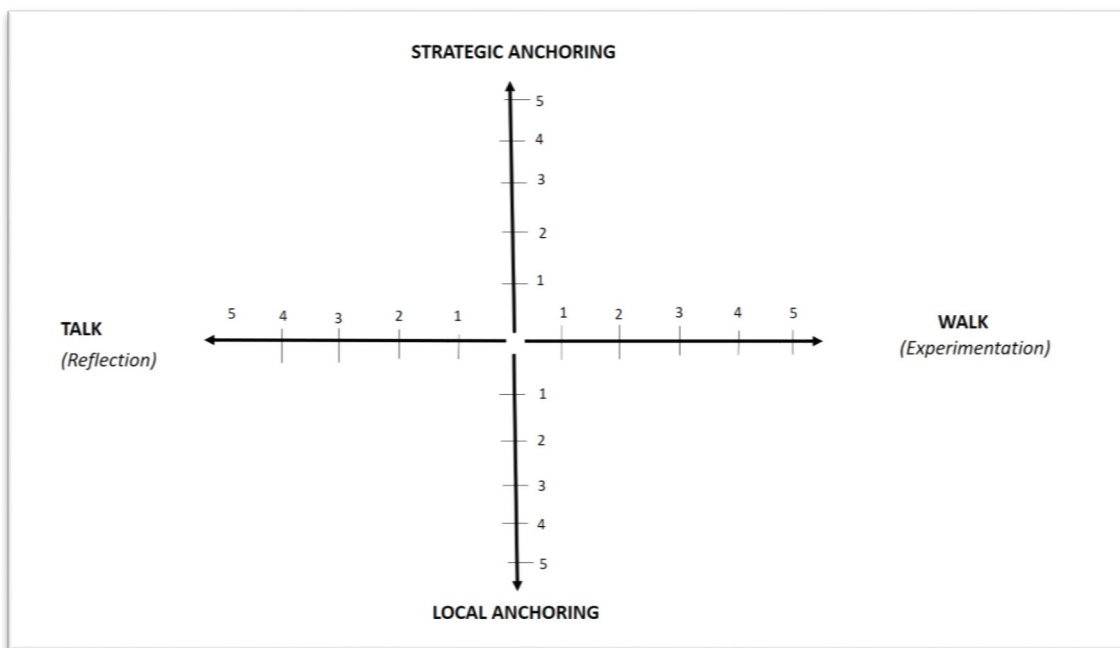


Figure 1: Translational Diamond

Building on the presented theory, an important foundation is that all four dimensions are individual and are considered equally important in processes of conceptual translation. When assessing an organization's translation of a magic concept, each axis will be marked separately, creating four peaks in a more or less balanced diamond. The conceptual model is normative in the sense that high scores along all axes are viewed as more supportive to the robust translation of magic concepts than low ones.

Small or warped diamonds signify potential challenges, and big, balanced diamonds are associated with a more robust translation. However, diamonds can be expected to evolve during the translation of a concept. Therefore, the time of assessment must be taken into consideration. When a concept has just been adopted, the translational diamond is likely to be smaller than after time and resources have been invested in translating it. As such, the diamond will always be anchored in a concrete context and a given point of time.

The scales of the four dimensions are operationalized in Table 1, below, and are constructed as a continuum of five degrees on which an organization, at a certain point of time, matches each of the dimensions in the translational diamond. However, ultimately the assessment will always be qualitative.

Strategic anchoring refers to the engagement invested in the translation among central power holders such as politicians, administrative top leaders, administrators and central union representatives. This can also involve central forums of collaboration between management and unions. Strategic anchoring does not necessarily refer to a unidirectional, top-down understanding of implementation, but can also involve open, explorative approaches in which central actors

invite local actors to participate in setting strategic agendas. The level of strategic anchoring can be reflected both in formal documents and centrally initiated activities aimed at translating the concept. These can take the form of reports, vision statements, central guides, presentation materials or evaluations, as well as activities aimed at discussion, education, promotion or knowledge sharing about the concept. Strategic anchoring can range from low to extensive engagement in the translation of the organizational concept. Low strategic anchoring refers to when few or no actors engage in translating the concept, whereas extensive strategic anchoring reflects a situation in which (almost) all relevant central actors are engaged in the translation.

Local anchoring refers to the level of engagement among the frontline of the organization that is engaged in its core tasks. Local actors are frontline workers, but so are local leaders and union representatives. Local anchoring can be reflected in local written materials such as agendas, protocols, project descriptions, as well as in concrete activities aimed at supporting the concept, for instance dialogues at meetings, local projects, and new procedures or collaborative forms. Local anchoring can range from low to extensive engagement in the translation of a given organizational concept. Low local anchoring refers to a situation in which no or few actors engage in translating the concept, whereas extensive local anchoring reflects a situation in which (almost) all relevant local actors are engaged in the translation.

The dimension of "talk" refers to the level of reflective activities aimed at deepening, nuancing, conceptualizing or debating the concept. Talk about the concept can be seen in vision papers, speeches, conferences or meetings that include information or dialogue about it. Sometimes, reflective activities are spurred by the search for more knowledge about the concept, either theoretically or through surveys in the organization in question about how employees perceive or experience the concept. The level of talk can vary from low to extensive reflective activity when it comes to translating the concept. "Extensive talk" refers to a situation in which the organization is engaging massively in analytical or reflective activities aimed at translating the organizational concept. Conversely, "low talk" refers to a situation in which the organization is not engaging at all in analytical or reflective activities aimed at translating the concept.

The "walk" dimension refers to the level of experimentation aimed at trying out concrete solutions and actions, as well as picking up inferences about the success of such experiments. This can involve concrete changes in tasks, new forms of collaboration, new projects or trial actions related to the translation of the concept. The level of walk can vary from little to extensive experimentation and concrete action in the translation of the concept. "Extensive walk" refers to a situation in which the organization is engaging massively in concrete experimentation aimed at translating the organizational concept, while "low walk" refers to a situation in which there are only vague signs of the organization experimenting concretely with activities aimed at promoting the organizational concept.

	<b>(5) Extensive degree</b>	<b>(4) High degree</b>	<b>(3) Some degree</b>	<b>(2) Moderate degree</b>	<b>(1) Low degree</b>
<b>Strategic anchoring</b>	Extensive engagement in translating the concept among central actors	High engagement in translating the concept among central actors	Some engagement in translating the concept among central actors	Moderate engagement in translating the concept among central actors	Little engagement in translating the concept among central actors.
<b>Local anchoring</b>	Extensive engagement in translating the concept among local actors.	High engagement in translating the concept among local actors.	Some engagement in translating the concept among local actors.	Moderate engagement in translating the concept among local actors.	Little engagement in translating the concept among local actors.
<b>Talk (Reflection)</b>	Extensive analytical activity and abstract reflection in the translation of the concept.	High analytical activity and abstract reflection in the translation of the concept.	Some analytical activity and abstract reflection in the translation of the concept.	Moderate analytical activity and abstract reflection in the translation of the concept.	Little analytical activity and abstract reflection in the translation of the concept.
<b>Walk (Experimentation)</b>	Extensive experimentation and concrete actions involved in the translation of the concept	High experimentation and concrete actions involved in the translation of the concept	Some experimentation and concrete actions involved in the translation of the concept	Moderate experimentation and concrete actions involved in the translation of the concept	Little experimentation and concrete actions involved in the translation of the concept

*Table 1: Operationalization of the four dimensions in the translational diamond*

In the following, the conceptual model of the 'translational diamond' is applied to a case study of two separate organizational units in a Danish municipality aiming to translate the same magic concept: that of trust. This allows us to see how two departments in the same organization, that are trying to translate the same concept, experience different robustness in the translation due to different levels of the four dimensions of the translational diamond. First, however, we examine the concept of trust, arguing that it qualifies as a magic concept.

#### **Trust: a magic concept**

In recent times, research on trust has become a major field in the domain of public administration and in the social sciences as a whole (Bachmann & Zaheer, 2006). Trust covers huge domains and is often positioned as an omnipotent, yet neutral answer to the current challenges. Trust features many of the inherent qualities of magic concepts. Its popularity is not only high in academia but also among practitioners in the field (Covey, 2006; Morreale, Shockley-Zalabak, & Hackman, 2010; Schoorman, Mayer, & Davis, 2007). Trust is an evocative, but also elusive concept and is highly attractive due to its ability reduce transactional costs (Gambetta, 1988; Möllering, 2006).

The broad scope of the concept allows for ample interpretations that frame trust as anything from a feeling to a decision, a value or a function (Luhmann, 2000; Möllering, 2001; Möllering, Bachmann, & Lee, 2004; Rousseau & Sitkin, 1998). Trust is approached both as a rational and as a moral or spiritual phenomenon (Al-Qutop & Harrim, 2014; Corner, 2009; Daniel, 2010; Uslaner,

2002). Trust is sometimes viewed as the opposite of control and sometimes as a parallel supplement to control (Bijlsma-Frankema & Costa, 2005; Edelenbos & Eshuis, 2012; Luhmann, 2017; Weibel, Searle, Den Hartog, & Six, 2009). In other words, there is plenty of room for simultaneously spurring excitement and mobilizing new directions with a concept like trust that is ambiguous, fuzzy and unequivocal to operationalize in the context of an organization, qualifying it as a magic concept as defined by Pollitt and Hupe (Pollitt & Hupe, 2011).

### Introduction of case & methods

Empirically, the study draws on an embedded case study in Copenhagen Municipality, which is the largest public organization in Denmark. Copenhagen Municipality constitutes a unique case for studying attempts to translate the magic concept of trust in a public organization. In 2012, the former Minister of Economic and Interior Affairs, Margrethe Vestager (currently European Commissioner for Competition) launched a national reform of trust. While this reform was later criticized for creating very little impact at the national level, Copenhagen Municipality embraced the ambition as a frontrunner and launched its own reform of trust in 2012. While the ambition to pursue trust has been on the strategic agenda ever since, the translation has been carried out with huge variation across the different municipal administrative areas. Hence, the case of Copenhagen offers a rare opportunity to illustrate how a magic concept has been translated in two different administrative areas, and how different approaches have implications for the robustness of the translation.

The two selected cases are the Social Administration (6,000 employees) and the Health and Care Administration (10,000 employees), which have both invested significant resources in translating the central reform of trust in their respective areas. Although in some ways the cases are similar, there are somewhat different premises for translating trust in the two cases. The Social Administration is a relatively deep organization with up to six hierarchical layers responsible for regulatory tasks such as intervention in dysfunctional families and providing benefits for disabled citizens. The Health and Care Administration typically has four hierarchical layers and mainly tackles service tasks such as care and rehabilitation for the elderly. Another difference between the two administrations is variance in their task portfolio. Whereas the Social Administration covers a multitude of different tasks, there are three main groups of tasks in the Health and Care Administration.

This qualitative study draws on a total of 22 interviews, equally distributed across the two administrative areas. In order to gain insight into the translation of trust at all levels, interviews were conducted with leaders (6), local union representatives (2), and employees (4) at the local level, as well as with administrative staff (4), top managers (2), central union representatives (2) and politicians (2) at the central level. Interviewees were selected based on their involvement in the implementation of the trust reform, and interviews were based on the informants' experiences of concrete initiatives or activities aimed at translating trust. The interviews were semi-structured and constructed around a number of themes covering both the form of anchoring

and the interplay between reflection and experimentation in the translation. Interview guidelines were adjusted to fit the different roles and contexts of the informants. To strengthen the validity of the study, the interviews were combined with an analysis of formal, relevant documents from the two administrative areas, such as reports, vision statements, guidelines aimed at local leaders, presentation materials from conferences, internal work documents, protocols and speeches. In addition, observations from five relevant meetings were made (three in the Health and Care Administration, and two in the Social Administration). The empirical material was collected between 2013 and 2014 and offers insight into perceptions of the implementation of the trust reform at that time.

The empirical data was coded in NVIVO along the two dimensions of strategic versus local anchoring, and reflection versus experimentation. In the interviews, the level of each dimension was assessed qualitatively based on the experiences and views of the interviewees. In the observations, coding was based on the presence and engagement of local and central actors (strategic and local anchoring), the type of activity the actors engaged in (reflection and experimentation), as well as discussion about challenges in the process. Policy documents were coded in a similar way with a focus on which strategic or local actors were involved in the processes and the extent to which reflective and experimental activities dominated the formal documents and communication about the trust reform.

Given that variation as opposed to representation was the central criterion for the selection of cases, the coding is solely used to illustrate dynamics in the combinations along the four dimensions of the translational diamond.

## Findings

The results from the Health and Care Administration will be presented first, followed by an analysis of the results from the Social Administration. After that, the results from the two cases will be compared and discussed.

### Translation of trust in the Health and Care Administration

The trust reform in the Health and Care Administration was initiated with a high degree of political support and designed as a cascading model focusing progressively on management systems, leaders, employees and citizens. A strategic decision was also taken to start the implementation in the home care area, followed by care for the elderly, and lastly rehabilitation. This top-down chronology of implementation meant that local level actors were involved later in the process than, for example, administrative staff. However, extensive information was provided about the timeline of the process at all levels of the organization, especially among its leaders. The Mayor, the CEO of the Administration, and the central forum of collaboration with union representatives are all engaged in the trust reform and play important roles as ambassadors of the trust concept. All relevant, central actors are engaging massively in the translation, which contributes to mobilizing attention and securing coordination at all levels. Therefore, the level of strategic

anchoring in the translation of trust in the Health and Care Administration can be characterized as extensive.

An ambition to create suitable room for the local translation and application of the concept of trust is evident both in official documents and among informants at all levels. This ambition is reflected in local processes, in which leaders, union members and employees engage in figuring out how to translate the trust reform at the local level. The local anchoring is therefore visible in the sense that several local leaders are preoccupied with the concept of trust, are investing resources in it, and feel responsible for securing its local translation. However, at present, most work is taking place in small work groups that are dedicated to the local reform of trust. This means that many employees are only engaged in the process to a relatively limited extent.

Local processes also pose challenges. A central question, particularly for local leaders, is to which degree local translations of trust can differ, and to what extent they must be horizontally coordinated. For example, trust can be translated as total freedom from rules and top-down performance management in one rehabilitation center, and as a slight enhancement in autonomy in another, similar rehabilitation center. While local actors appreciated this central framing and respected the need for some coordinated translation, in some cases the room for interpretation was perceived as unclear or too narrow. When this happened, the extensive processes involved in conceptualizing trust caused frustration among local actors, who in turn experienced that this reduced their engagement in translating trust at their institution. Local leaders, in particular, varied somewhat in their engagement: while some expressed a compelling enthusiasm, others admitted that although they found the ideals behind the reform admirable, they also had reservations about the possibilities of actually implementing the intentions behind the trust reform. While these leaders expressed their loyalty to the strategic agenda set out by central actors, they found that their own engagement was somewhat affected by these concerns. Thus, although a fair number of local actors were engaged, many employees were only involved to a limited extent in the process of translating trust. In addition, some local leaders expressed concerns about the process that tended to negatively affect their engagement. Summing up, some engagement among local actors was detected.

The process of translation was supported by an extensive number of arenas for reflection at all levels of the organization. Dialogues among administrators, leaders, union members and employees were arranged to encourage reflection on how to make sense of trust as a concept. A core challenge at the central level was to figure out how to relate and distinguish trust from the previous stream of ideas. Consequently, the reflective activities have revolved around fitting the translation of the new concept of trust together with existing concepts in the organization (Røvik, 2007). The Health and Care Department has, however, been less occupied with creating or collecting organizational knowledge about existing levels of trust in the organization. Instead, reflective resources have revolved around helping the actors in the organization to coordinate how they make sense of the concept of trust at an analytical level. Several leaders considered

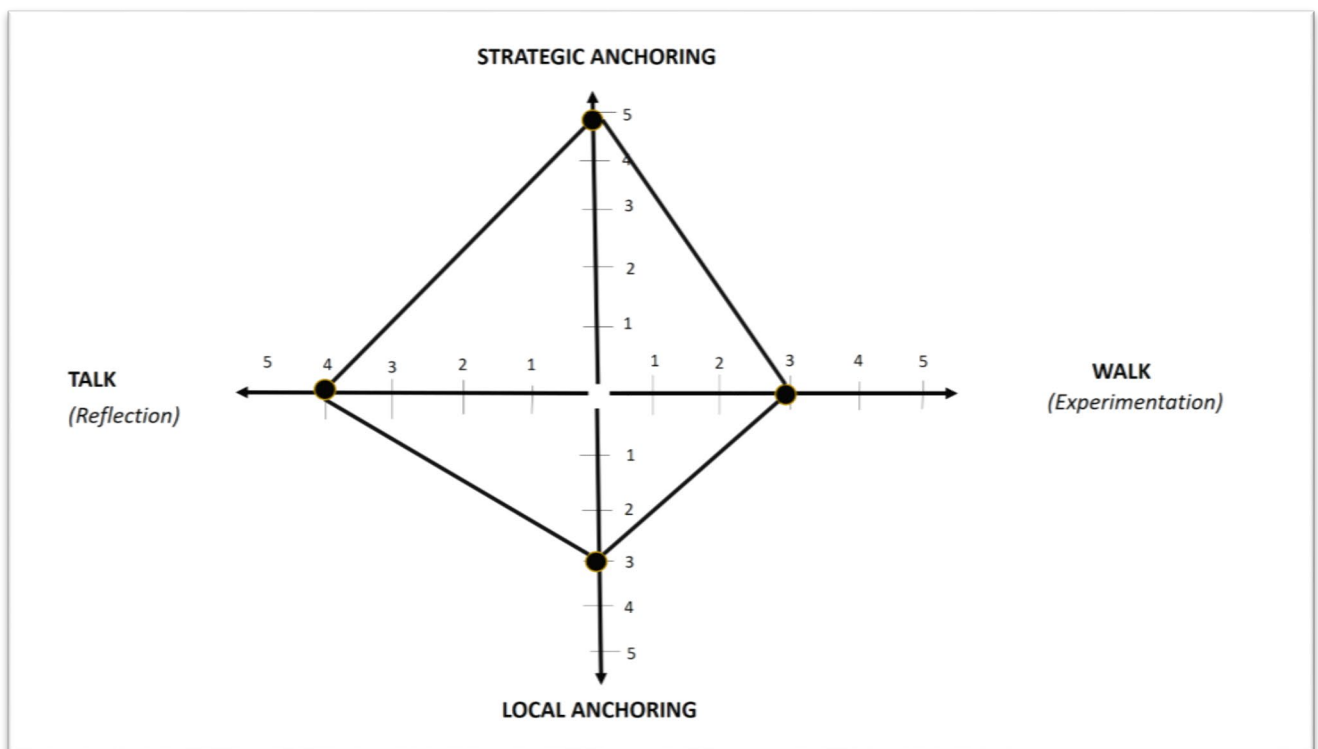
reflection to be vital in the operationalization of the concept, thus narrowing down the practical implications of trust.

*"The challenge has been to structure something that I think is very fluffy. Because if I can't operationalize it, I lose my employees' attention."* (Local Leader - Health and Care Administration)

Reflection is needed to operationalize the fluffy, magic concept that carries the risk of disappointment if no real differences are experienced at the practical level. Arenas of reflection are used to provide information about the intentions and framing of the trust reform, but also as a way of designing trial acts that are tested at the practical level. The experiences garnered during these processes of "trying out" the operationalization of the trust concept are often brought up in the reflection arenas, and spur the adjustment and development of the ongoing translation. While the dialectic interplay between reflection and action progresses in some areas, the concrete, practical implementation is experienced as difficult or vague in other areas. Thus, experimentation varies considerably in the involved processes (Kolb et al., 2011). Thus, while a high degree of reflective activity can be observed across translational processes, only some experimentation and concrete action can be related to the translation of trust at the given time.

Summing up, strategic anchoring is extensive, since the level of engagement among all the central actors is massive. Local anchoring, however, is not at the same level, since only some of the relevant local actors are engaged in the translation of trust. The translational processes are characterized by a high level of reflective activities that spur a common understanding and operationalization of the concept. However, only some experimentation is occurring in the translational processes. When plotting in the assessed levels of the four dimensions of translation in the Health and Care Department, a slightly warped diamond of translation biased towards strategic anchoring and reflection appears.





We will now turn to the analysis of translating trust in the Social Administration.

#### Translating trust in the Social Administration

In the Social Administration, the trust reform is anchored at the political level, and administratively a so-called "Secretary of Trust" coordinates a number of initiatives and projects that can all be seen as part of the strategic anchoring of the translation of trust. In addition, a "board of trust" has been appointed consisting of actors both from the central and local levels, to review progress in the implementation of the trust reform. The political leader of the department is also very active in the media as a trust ambassador. This central emphasis on trust as a concept is acknowledged at the local level:

*"It has an impact on the organization when they keep saying 'trust' at the central levels and let it spread like ripples in the water."* (Leader at a local, social institution)

A central aspect of the secretary's tasks has been to support solid analysis and knowledge about the concept of trust. One of the first major activities was a comprehensive analysis that identified the main barriers for building more trust into the organization. The analysis has worked as a foundation for formulating a strategic paper called the 'Five Principles of Trust', which provided broad directions for the translation of trust, although it did not point to concrete initiatives or suggested actions. While the administrative personnel allocated to the Trust Secretariat are extremely devoted to the trust translation process, several actors noted that this was not the case among all administrators. In fact, several central actors have experienced limited engagement in some of the administrative offices that are only peripherally involved in the trust reform.

Therefore, central anchoring is assessed as high, given that most central actors, although not all, are engaged in the trust translation process.

Although central anchoring is high, the implementation of the trust reform is more abstract and involves less framing of the process at the local level. A central reason for this is that the variety of tasks is very broad, which means that there is much more variation in the way the local areas are organized and regulated. For that reason, the relatively simple cascading model of the Health and Care Administration is not seen as suitable in the Social Administration. As a consequence, the central framing is deliberately kept open, and allows extensive room for local translation. While this invitation is certainly welcomed by some of the leaders involved, a major difficulty is how to get an overview of the progress of the implementation. However, the general impression is that local anchoring is scattered and characterized by a few frontrunners among leaders.

*"From here, and until people actually translate trust into something that affects the way they work.... We are not there at all. There is a long way to go."* (Leader in the Social Administration)

Most institutions have not really started engaging in the translation, and only a small segment of the employees even know that a trust reform is taking place. Thus, in terms of local anchoring, the Social Department is still engaged at a low level involving only a few of the relevant, local actors.

The Social Department has invested many resources in seeking knowledge, analyzing drivers and barriers in the organization, and creating reflective debate about the concept of trust. A widespread value in the Social Department is to "think carefully before acting", which means that the involved actors are prepared to spend the necessary time to collect the knowledge needed and to engage in ongoing dialogue about the concept of trust. The translation process is extensively reflective and substantial resources are devoted to debating the interpretation of trust and conducting extensive analyses about the barriers experienced in terms of creating more trust. The reflective ambition is also clear at the local level, where many of the activities related to the translation of trust are taking place through talk. As such, the level of reflection is assessed as extensive.

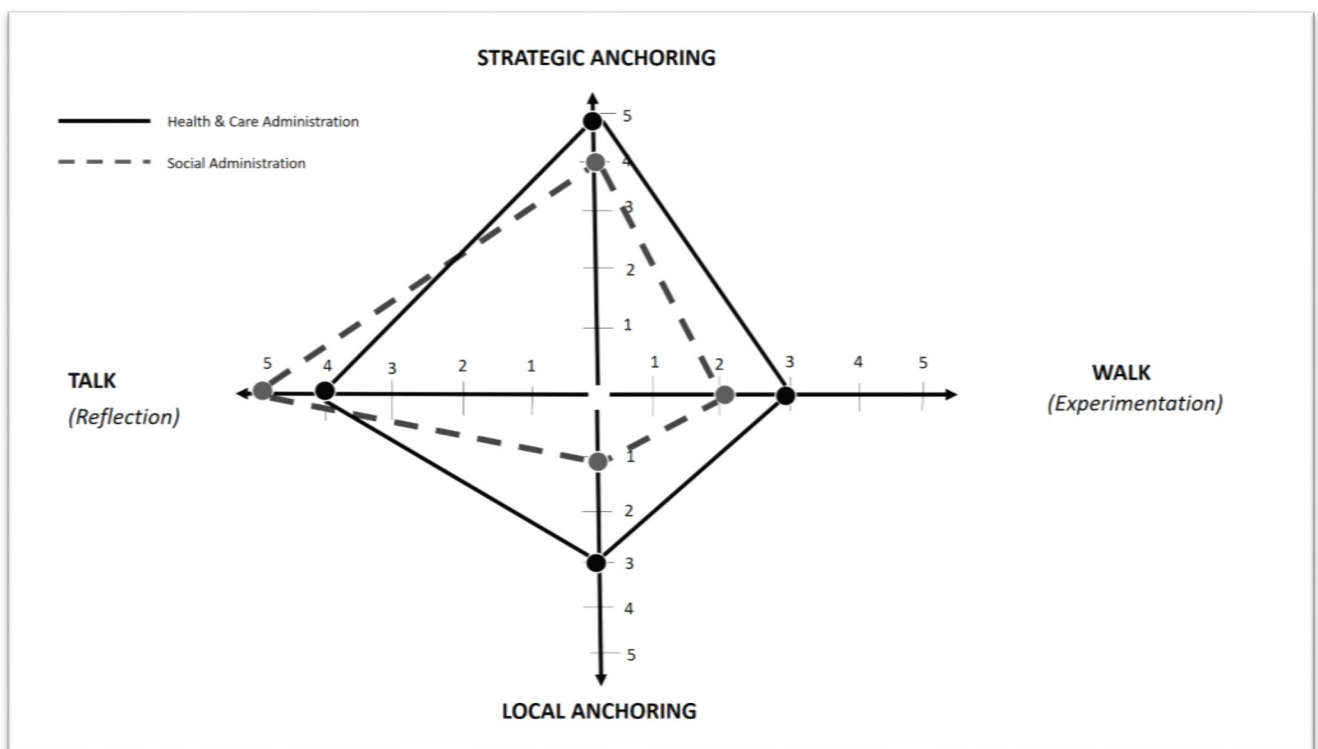
Although many reflective activities have been established, there has been much less experimentation and trial action during the implementation process. Although the administration is supporting a few, central projects with concrete changes related to the trust reform, the organization appears to only experiment moderately at a practical level. Similarly, leaders in some workplaces have experimented with local initiatives, but these appear to be frontrunners in the translation rather than representing the average leader and workplace. Thus, the level of experimentation and "walk" is assessed as moderate. There appears to be a general experience of having "talked" more than "walked" in the trust reform process:

*"We need this to materialize soon, because we have talked about it for so long in so many contexts that we are getting worn out just talking about it."* (Leader at social institution)

This challenge was echoed by several leaders and administrators, who sensed a growing impatience in the organization. Although the trust reform is considered positive, the lack of action over a longer period of time appears to be undermining the legitimacy of trust as a concept. As stated by Pollit and Hupe (Pollitt & Hupe, 2011), magic concepts can create disappointment if actors discover that they do not lead to any practical changes.

Summing up, the level of strategic anchoring in the Social Department is assessed as high, since most, although not all, central actors are engaged in translating trust. Local anchoring, however, is low, since only a few local actors are engaged in the process, while most employees are not even aware that a trust reform is underway. While the level of "talk" is extensive given the massive resources invested in reflective activities, the level of "walk" is assessed as merely moderate since organizational practices are characterized by limited and scattered attempts at experimentation.

After plotting the assessed scores of the Social Department, an even more warped diamond appears, with challenges related to local anchoring and experimentation. Especially the extensive level of reflection is contrasted with a low level of experimentation.



*Figure 3: The translational diamonds in the Health & Care Administration and the Social Administration*

If we compare the two cases (Figure 3) it becomes clear why the translation of the concept of trust in the two administrative areas differs in impact. While both translational diamonds are warped towards strategic anchoring and reflection, levels of frustration and translational challenges are notably higher in the Social Administration than in the Health and Care

Administration. Using the translational diamond, this can partly be explained as a consequence of the Social Administration's challenges in establishing strong feedback loops between the highly prioritized reflection and the less supported experimentation in the translation process. Although both administrative areas had experienced challenges with regard to local anchoring, this challenge was particularly strong in the Social Administration due to a larger diversity in local tasks and regulations, as well as a deeper hierarchy. Although both administrative areas had experienced some indications of frustration and potential symbolic change, the translation of the trust concept appeared more robust in the Health and Care Administration than in the Social Administration.

### Discussion and conclusion

Without being oblivious to the critical discussion of the value of magic concepts, this article takes the discussion one step further in a more pragmatic direction. Hence, the question at stake is not "if" magic concepts should be translated, but rather "how" the translation should be supported once the organizational decision to pursue a concept has been made. While symbolic change may serve other organizational purposes than effectiveness, this article is preoccupied with the understudied question of how such concepts are robustly translated into organizational practice.

The article provides a conceptual framework, the translational diamond, which integrates insights from different theoretical fields engaged in translational studies, contributing to a much-needed theoretical cross-fertilization. Drawing on public leadership theory, implementation theory, institutional theory and organizational psychology, the conceptual framework integrates four key dimensions to address what occurs when public organizations and their leaders attempt to translate magic concepts. Strategic and local anchoring, as well as sufficient reflection and experimentation in the translation, are argued to be vital to the robustness of the organizational translation.

The conceptual model is applied to two case studies, which offer insight into the variance of two organizational areas attempting to translate the same magic concept. The results illustrate how variance in the four dimensions of the translational diamond create different challenges and organizational impact in the two different cases.

The originality of the "translational diamond" is its focus on "how" rather than "whether" the translation of magic concepts should be attempted. In addition, the diamond's integration of theoretical constructs from leadership theory, implementation theory, institutional theory and organizational theory offers a more nuanced understanding of central dimensions impacting organizational translation at a practical level.

Although the translational diamond embraces a distributive understanding of leadership, which allows actors other than formal leaders to contribute to leadership, there is no doubt that public leaders play a central role in translating organizational concepts. Given their position as potential veto players, and given the powers invested in them, formal leaders are key actors in decisions about which concepts are given organizational attention, how many resources are allocated to

translation, and how the translation processes are framed. For public leaders, the translational diamond may serve as a conceptual framework that can spur their understanding of, and reflection about, how to support the translation of magic concepts in their organization. For example, archetypically warped diamonds can illustrate the problems that might occur if translation is not sufficiently anchored in all four dimensions. Translating organizational concepts involves respect for the inherent dilemmas of securing a balance between strategic and local perspectives, as well as the strengths of securing feedback loops between reflection and experimentation. These dimensions will not necessarily be equally balanced at all times in the process of translating magic concepts. The conceptual model of the translational diamond may help leaders to understand the current status of a translation and guide them in their endeavor to support a better balance. This could be done, for instance, by introducing the model as a dialogue tool among central actors responsible for project activities related to the translation of a concept. By establishing a common understanding about the importance of the four dimensions, the "translational diamond" may provide an opportunity to reflect upon the current status in the translation process as well as to discuss weak spots and ways they could be strengthened. Ultimately, the "translational diamond" could also be used to formatively evaluate the impact of implementation processes or reforms in the public sector.

While this article argues that strategic and local anchoring and the interplay between reflection and experimentation play a crucial role in the translation of magic concepts, there may be other factors at stake in the process. For example, Røvik argues that the skill of the individual translators engaged in the process is important for creating a robust translation (Røvik, 2007). In addition, magic concepts are potentially involved in a power battle with other magic concepts that are constantly competing for organizational attention (Hood, 2005). Such power dynamics may substantially influence actors' engagement in translation, but are not within the scope of this article.

A central argument in the "translational diamond" is that bigger, balanced diamonds reflect more robust translations than smaller, warped diamonds. The results support this assumption. Although the translation of trust involves challenges in both departments, there are much more severe difficulties in the Social Department, which is characterized by a notably smaller and much more warped diamond than the Health and Care Department. However, the data does not offer generalizable results that can determine whether the types of translational diamond identified in this study are typical of the public organizations or administrative areas in focus. It would certainly be interesting to validate the translational diamond through other studies that could indicate whether differences across countries, administrative areas or other contextual factors influence the shape of the translational diamond. The translational diamond could also serve as a powerful tool in backtracking and mapping translated concepts through its lifespan in an organization.

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