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**CONDUCTING BEST PRACTICES
RESEARCH IN PUBLIC AFFAIRS**

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ABSTRACT

Over the past decade a broad cross section of research has been carried out under the rubric of best practices (Bendixson and de Guchteneire, 2003). This article takes a closer look at best practices research and its application to the field of public affairs. First, two questions are addressed: What is a best practice? And what is best practice research? Next, some of the major methodical criticisms of best practices research are addressed. The two major approaches (e. g., quantitative/microeconomic and qualitative/case study) to conducting best practices research are then identified and discussed. A recent qualitative/case study best practices research effort conducted by the Center for Community Partnerships at the University of Central Florida is then detailed. As part of this recitation, a tripartite schema to classify qualitative/case study approaches to best practices research is presented. The article concludes with some recommendations as to how researchers should conduct a qualitative/case study approach to best practices research and how policy makers and other stakeholders should interpret the research findings.

INTRODUCTION

Public affairs, like many applied fields, has long had an interest in best practices research (Bretschneider, Marc-Aurele & Wu (2001). Best practices research has been called the latest version of the inductive practice-to-principles approach (Overman and Boyd, 1994). Best practices research also holds out at least the promise of a new post ideological approach to public affairs where evidence takes center stage in decision making processes (Davies, Nutley & Smith, 1999; Sanderson, 2002).

While best practices research and its close relative benchmarking sprang from the management literature, and particularly the quality management literature (e.g., Crosby, 1980; Deming, 1986; Juran, 1988), it has been embraced by a number of disciplines including: public affairs, public administration, education, public health, medicine, nursing, mental health, social work, criminal justice and others (e.g., Hatry, 1999; Holzer & Callahan 1999; Martin, 1993). In discussing its application to public affairs, Altshuler (1992) has stated that “. . . the best way scholars can help improve public management is to search out, observe, and think hard about ‘best practices’” (p. xi).

The interest in conducting best practices research in public affairs is understandable. Societal resources are scarce, while social problems are abundant. In the words of Robert Dahl and Charles Lindbloom (1953):

In economic life the possibilities for social action, for planning, for reform – in short for solving problems – depend not upon our choice among mythical grand alternatives but largely upon choice among particular social techniques (p. 6).

If some government, business firm or non-profit organization has discovered a particular social technique (a best practice), why reinvent the wheel? But what exactly is a best practice? How does one go about conducting best practice research? And how does one avoid falling

victim to Herbert Simon's "satisfying trap?" Simon (1976) has argued convincingly that people look for solutions to problems that appear to work; these solutions may or may not constitute best practices. Bardach (n.d.) echoes Simon when he states that the extensive research needed to document a claim of best practice is almost never done. Consequently, Bardach prefers to avoid the term best practices in favor of what he calls "smart practices."

Simon and Bardach's comments address the Achilles heel of best practices research, the lack of generally agreed upon criteria as to what constitutes a best practice and the lack of methodological consensus as to how to conduct best practices research. While seemingly a contradiction in terms, *best practices research has yet to achieve consensus around its own best practices*. Unfortunately, when researchers present their findings and conclusions to policy makers and other stakeholders, the limitations of best practices research are not always made explicit. The result is that policy makers are not fully informed as to how much credence or weight should be given to something called a best practice.

WHAT IS A BEST PRACTICE?

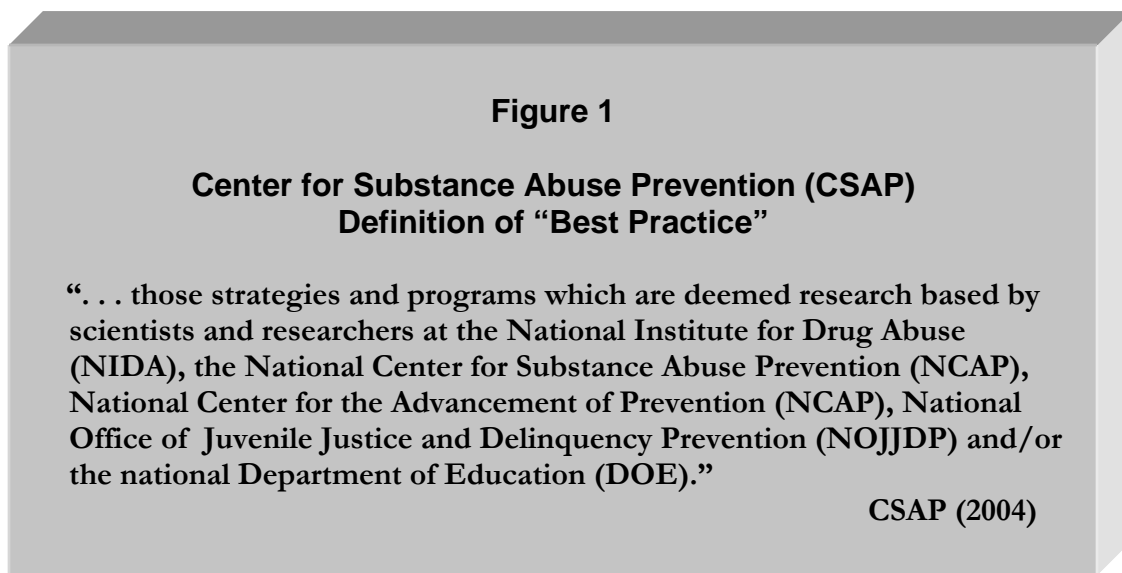
It is interesting how the term "best practices" has become so much a part of the contemporary public affairs lexicon that hardly anyone today bothers to define the term. For example, the U. S. General Accounting Office (GAO, 2003) recently completed a major study of contracting by the Department of Defense (DOD) entitled, "Best Practices: Improved Knowledge of DOD Service Contracts Could Reveal Significant Savings." No where in the report is the term "best practices" defined.

Unfortunately, the cavalier way in which some organizations tend to disregard definitional issues when it comes to best practices is not because of consensus on this issue, but rather the lack of consensus. Exacerbating the problem is the fact that when definitions

do exist, they tend to be professional discipline specific. And some professional disciplines apparently see little value in being concerned about definitions. A case in point is provided by the Association of Maternal & Child Health Programs (AMCHP). AMCHP's Center for Best Practices advises visitors to its Internet web site not to become "... fixated on definitions of terms," but instead to "... use definitions to move toward a common understanding" of best practices (AMCHP, 2004).

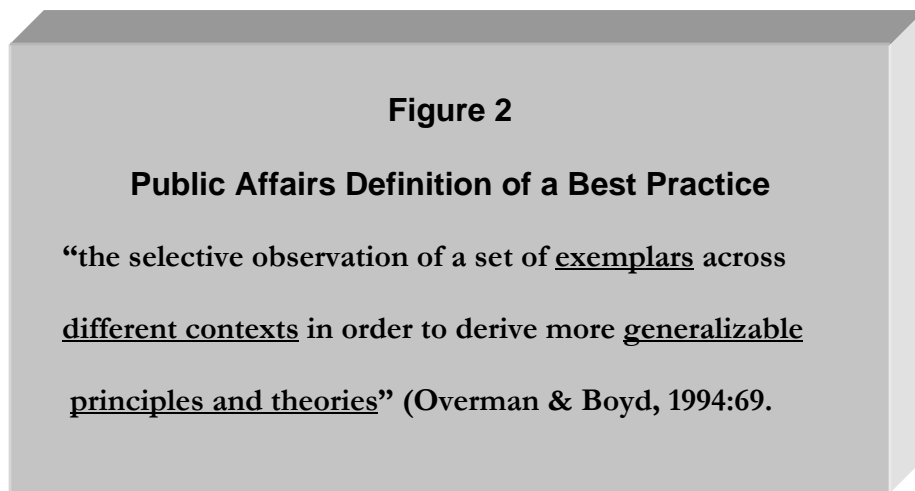
It is unclear, exactly how a common understanding of best practices is to be promoted when the term has no stability of meaning. One is reminded of the admonition made by Socrates over 2000 years ago, "Before meaningful dialogue can take place, we must first define our terms." Definitional ambiguity may serve the purposes of some professional disciplines, but it does a grave injustice to public affairs which requires researchers to work horizontally across numerous disciplines.

Another example of how professions address the issue of best practice definitions and how the lack thereof poses problems for best practices research in public affairs is provided by the Center for Substance Abuse Prevention (Figure 1). Not to put too fine a point on the



issue, but the CSAP seems to be saying that a best practice is anything that we or our professional colleagues say it is. Again, it is unclear how the CSAP approach contributes to an understanding of best practices or how it assists policy makers and other stakeholders in interpreting best practices research.

An arguably more useful public affairs definition of best practices (actually best practices research) is provided by Overman & Boyd (1994). According to Overman & Boyd's definition (Figure 2), best practice research involves the examination of multiple exemplars from different contextual situations in order to develop more generalizable principles and theories. This definition makes explicit several important points about best practices.



First, the use of the term *exemplars* suggests that a best practice is the “best-of-the-best” and not the “best-of-the-worst.” The implication here is that care must be exercised when deciding which types of cases to include in best practices research. A garbage can approach (i. e., throw everything in and sort it out later) would not be an appropriate methodology for use in best practices research.

Second, the point is made that exemplars should be selected from multiple contexts. By doing so, a best practice increases its generalizability and transferability and thus its usefulness.

Third, the purpose of seeking and identifying a best practice is made explicit: to derive principles and theories.

WHAT IS BEST PRACTICES RESEARCH?

Many scholars suggest that best practices research should include a set of *a priori* standards to guide the inquiry. For example, Oyen (2002) suggests that best practices research should include: a statement of purpose, the criterion or criteria to be used in determining that a particular practice constitutes a best practice, and an identification of the any major components or sub-components of the practice. Specifying *a priori* the criterion or criteria to be used in identifying a best practice keeps the researcher intellectually honest and reduces the probability that extraneous decision factors will creep into the research and affect the study results.

Bendixsen & de Guchteneire (2003) adopt a somewhat more prescriptive and policy maker oriented approach in arguing that best practices research must: present innovative and creative solutions to common problems, be sustainable and have the potential for replication. Bretschneider, Marc-Aurele, & Wu (2001) address the question of evidence and emphasize the point that best practices research must provide at least some empirical support for claims of best practices.

METHODOLOGICAL ISSUES IN BEST PRACTICES RESEARCH

Having attempted to define best practices and explicate best practices research, the discussion now turns to methodological issues. Best practices research has some major

methodological issues that should be understood by both those who do best practices research and well as those policy makers and other stakeholders who are consumers of best practices research. Three such major methodological issues are: (1) the question of theory, (2) research design concerns, and (3) the generalizability of identified practices.

The Question of Theory

In adapting best practices to a particular organization, researchers and practitioners might work together to theorize about what one would expect to occur given certain changes. While the use of best practices has been criticized by some as void of theory (Overman and Boyd, 1994; Bardach, 2003) this is one part of organizational change where theoretical development might prove useful. Bretschneider, Marck-Aurele, and Wu (2001) take the view that the role of the researcher is often to increase the understanding of cause and effect linkages and how they might be manipulated. Indeed, one role of the researcher using a best practice approach might be to help policy makers develop hypothetical expectations and identify “controllable causes” of policy, organizational or program outcomes (Bretschneider, Marck-Aurele, and Wu, 2001: 3). In contrast to the contention of some critics that best practice research lacks theory, this approach is theoretical and differs significantly from a “let’s just copy what someone else did and see what happens” tactic.

Research Design Concerns

In addition to a lack of theory, best practices research is also frequently criticized for its lack of methodological rigor (Overman and Boyd 1994; Bretschneider, Marck-Aurele, and Wu, 2001; Bardach, 2000). Best practices research is generally not carried out using more commonly accepted evaluation research designs (e. g., classical test group/control designs, quasi-experimental designs, pre-test and post tests, etc.). Another frequent criticism of best

practices research is that it does not necessarily concern itself with outcomes and the measurement of outcomes.

While these criticisms are noteworthy, they do not offer a prescriptive solution. Public affairs best practices research is messy, it deals with messy social problems and frequently must employ messy data. Best practices research can not justify itself on the basis of methodological purity, but must rather justify itself on the basis of usefulness to policy makers and other stakeholders. There is also a temporal dimension to public affairs best practices research that is missing in other types of social science research. Public affairs best practices research that arrives too late to inform the decision making process is of little value regardless of its methodological purity.

Nevertheless, best practices researchers in public affairs have a responsibility to exercise care in communicating to policy makers and other stakeholders: any underlining theories or principles guiding the research, the identification of causal forces, an explanation of the data collection and management process involved, and the limitations imposed on the research findings as a result of research design and other methodological considerations.

Generalizability

Typically, what is presented to policy makers and other stakeholders as the result of best practices research is one or more models that can hopefully be used to improve policy, organizational or program practice. These models are generally tailored to a specific problem or issue, but not necessarily to a specific locality. In other words, contextual issues that may facilitate or mitigate against adoption of a particular best practice are seldom considered.

How transferable, or “generalizable,” is a best practice? As Overman and Boyd (1994) remind us, the successful transference of a best practice from one contextual setting to

another is problematic. The success of a best practice in one contextual setting does not necessarily insure success in another.

Given the limitations imposed by the above identified methodological shortcomings, should public affairs researchers and policy makers simply avoid best practices research? The answer is a resounding NO! Best practices research is still useful in discovering what works in public affairs. However, as a methodology best practices research will most likely always be considered suspect by more mainstream social scientists.

TWO APPROACHES TO CONDUCTING BEST PRACTICES RESEARCH

Bretschneider, Marc-Aurele & Wu (2001) divide best practices research into two major types: (1) the quantitative/microeconomic approach and (2) the qualitative/case study approach. This division is in keeping with traditional social science dichotomy of quantitative research versus qualitative research.

The Quantitative/Microeconomic Approach

Bretschneider, Marc-Aurele & Wu's (2001) describe the quantitative/microeconomic approach to best practices research as a combination of: the general systems framework (*inputs, process, outputs*), combined with a concern for the economics of production as complemented by statistical analysis. The quantitative/microeconomic approach involves collecting data on a group of exemplars and conducting statistical analysis to determine the best practice. Theoretically, at least, this approach to best practices research affords the research the most control over the exemplars to be included in the analysis as well as the decision rules to be employed in determining best practice. As a practical matter, however, finding comparable data for a set of exemplars can be challenging.

Several statistical tools are routinely utilized in conducting quantitative analysis including: ratio analysis, regression analysis and data envelopment analysis (DEA). Ratio analysis is generally considered to be the least rigorous of the three approaches. Regression analysis falls in the middle. And DEA is generally considered to be the most rigorous (Nyhan & Martin, 1999b). In at least two countries (Australia and the United Kingdom) one or more government agencies have gone so far as to publicly state that DEA is the preferred method of making best practice comparisons (Steering Committee for the Review of Commonwealth/State Service Provision, 1997; Public Sector Productivity Panel, n.d.). DEA then is increasingly being recognized as a **best practice in conducting quantitative/microeconomic best practices research** (Martin, 2002).ⁱ

In terms of a hierarchy of evidence for quantitative/microeconomic best practices research, DEA sits at the top, followed by regression analysis and then ratio analysis. Using this hierarchy of evidence, researchers can communicate to policy makers and other stakeholders how much confidence and weight they should have in an identified best practice.

The Qualitative/Case Study Approach

The qualitative/case study approach involves the, “mining of the practice literature” to identify exemplars that are considered best practices based upon “research” as well as the “recommendations and stipulations of experts” (Manela and Moxley, 2002: 12 and 14). Unlike the quantitative/microeconomic approach, the qualitative/case study approach has no generally agreed upon hierarchy of evidence to identify best practices. The lack of a hierarchy of evidence, combined with the definitional anarchy that manifests itself most

obviously in the qualitative/case study approach, creates significant problems for public affairs researchers.

Because public affairs research is inherently interdisciplinary, researchers undertaking a qualitative/case study approach to best practices research encounter a number of different terms used to identify and substantiate claims of best practices across professional disciplines. These terms include: expert opinion, best practices, evidenced based practices, outcomes based, evidenced based analysis, promising practices, scientific practices, emerging practices, researched based practices, smart practices, superior approaches, cute stories and others.

A recent article in *Nurseweek* drives home the problem confronted in conducting a qualitative/case study approach to best practices research. The author (Ling, 2000) struggles to differentiate between evidence-based practices and best practices and notes that while the terms are often used interchangeably, “Although an evidence based practice can also be a best practices, a best practice is not necessarily an evidence based practice . . . a best practice may be an innovative teaching approach developed by staff or a new method for department communications. If it produces superior outcomes, it would be a best practice; however, it would not be evidence based because it would lack scientific evidence” (p. 3).

How does one make sense of all this verbiage? What do these myriad terms really mean? Are they saying different things or are they simply saying the same thing differently? These questions need to be asked and answered in order to develop a hierarchy of evidence similar to that of the quantitative/ microeconomic approach. Armed with such a hierarchy of evidence, researchers can then inform policy makers as to how much confidence and weight they should have in the identified best practice.

BEST PRACTICES IN COMMUNITY MENTAL HEALTH/ SUBSTANCE ABUSE SYSTEMS: THE CASE OF ORANGE COUNTY FLORIDA

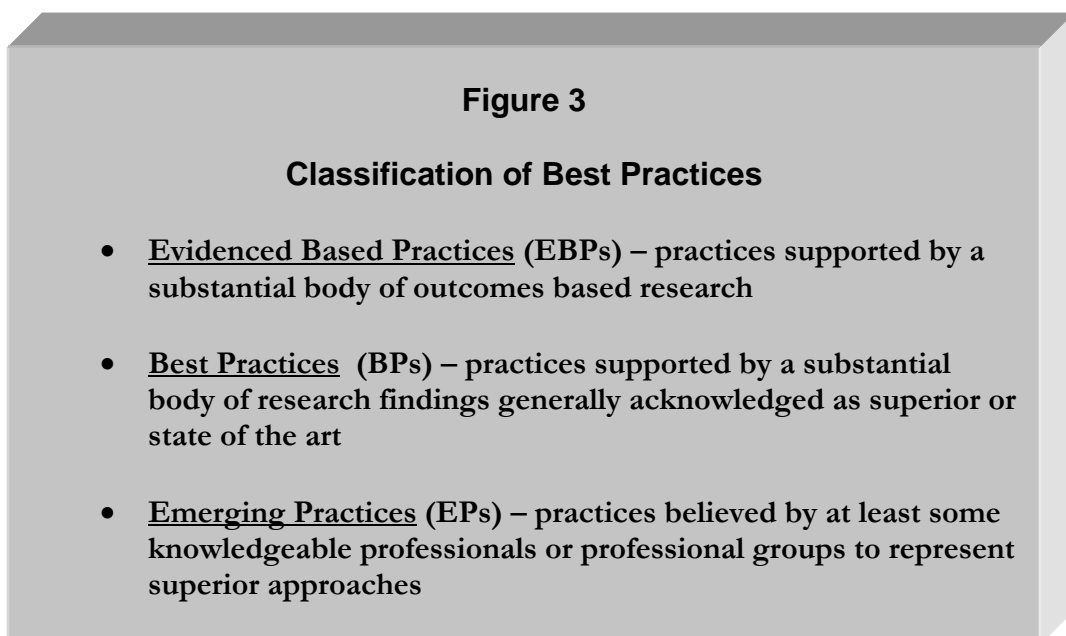
A close encounter with the definitional anarchy and the hierarchy of evidence problem that characterizes best practices research using the qualitative/case study approach, was recently experienced by the Center for Community Partnerships (CCP) at the University of Central Florida in Orlando. The CCP had been commissioned by the Florida Department of Children & Families and Orange County Government to conduct a best practices study of community mental health and substance abuse service systems (Martin et al., 2004). The CCP was charged with determining best practices for a variety of services and then comparing them to current community practices. The nine services for which best practices were to be determined included: (1) information and referral, (2) entry and assessment, (3) jail diversion, both pre-booking and post-booking, (4) case management, (5) assertive community treatment, (6) assisted outpatient treatment, (7) specialized community support services, (8) supportive housing, and (9) financial management practices.

As expected, the research team encountered a variety of different terms for best practices across the various programs and professional disciplines. It quickly became apparent that in order to successfully carry out the research and then to be able to communicate the findings to policy makers and other stakeholders, the use of a definition as well as some sort of taxonomy of best practices (preferable using a hierarchy of evidence approach as an organizing principle) would have to be created.

The first step for the research team was to mine the practice literature in each of the nine service areas in order to identify those exemplars considered to be best practices based upon research or the recommendations and stipulations of experts. This step included the process of identifying the major components and sub-components of various service practices.

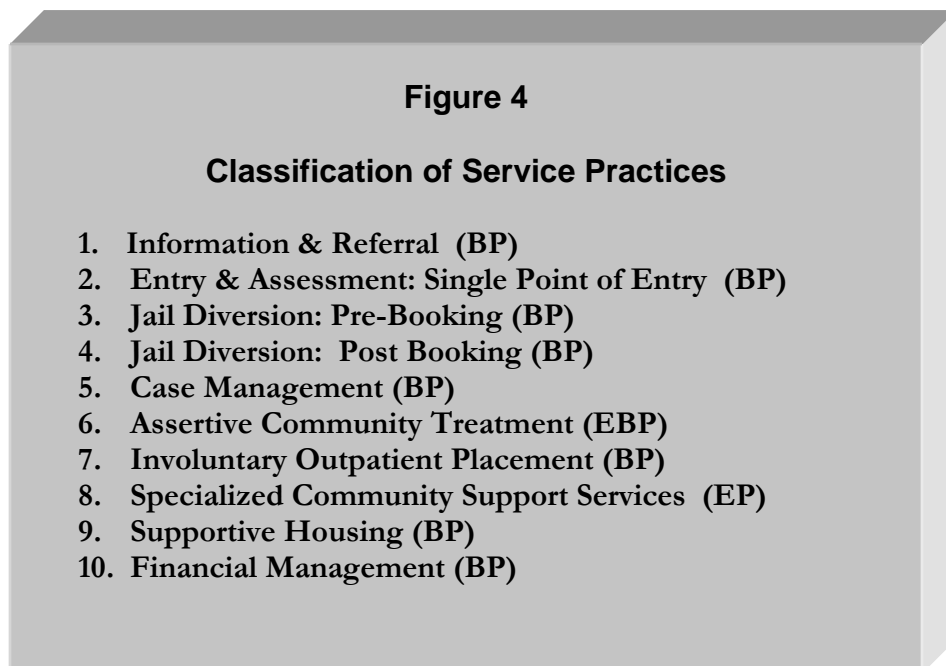
The second step was to develop a taxonomy based on a hierarchy of evidence. In accomplishing this task, the research team opted to utilize a grounded theory approach. Following this inductive methodology as elaborated by Strauss & Corbin (1990), the practice literature was again mined for cases that explicitly identified the criterion or criteria used in identifying best practices. Open and axial coding were used to group the identified cases into categories based on the “storey” the cases seemed to be telling. The research team developed three categories: *evidenced based practices*, *best practices*, and *emerging* (or promising) *practices*. Subsequent to this task, the research team discovered that in another study of best practices, Bhatta (2002:101-102) had arrived at essentially the same three categories.

Following the lead of much of the health, mental health and human services literature, the highest form of evidence was labeled “evidenced based practices” or **EBPs**. To be considered an **EBP**, service practices, including major components and sub-components, had to be supported by a substantial body of outcomes based research (see Figure 3). Service practices supported by a substantial body of research evidence generally acknowledged as



superior or state of the art (but not necessarily outcomes based), were identified as “best practices” (**BPs**). Finally, practices based on preliminary research or practices believed by at least some knowledgeable professionals or professional groups to represent superior approaches were labeled as “emerging practices (**EPs**).

Using this tripartite classification schema, the research team was able to classify (as **EBPs**, **BPs**, or **EPs**) the research practices (including major components and sub-components) that comprise each of the service areas (Figure 4). Only the practices that constitute assertive community treatment met the “substantial body of outcomes research” criterion to warrant being identified as an evidenced based practice (**EBP**). Eight other service areas had substantial bodies of research evidence sufficient to warrant the label of best practices (**BPs**). Finally, one service, specialized community support services, was labeled as an emerging practice (**EP**) given the lack of research evidence supporting this practice.



When decision makers and other stakeholders were presented with the research team's analysis, they found the tripartite classification beneficial in understanding and interpreting exactly what type of evidence supported each service area's claim to being a "best practice."

Researchers are responsible not only for conducting best practices research, but also for communicating the results in a useful manner to policy makers and other stakeholders.

While researchers have expended considerable effort on the former, much work needs to be done with respect to the latter. The overuse of the term "best practice," as well as its definitional ambiguity, has led to confusion about what constitutes a best practice. While these problems are resolving themselves with respect to the quantitative/microeconomic approach to best practices research, much remains to be done in the area of the qualitative/case study approach. To this end, Figure 5 presents a set of guidelines that can be used by researchers conducting qualitative/case study approaches to best practices research in public affairs. The guidelines can also be used by policy makers and other stakeholders in interpreting the results of best practices research.

By following the nine principles identified in Figure 5, it is hoped that the conduct of best practices research in public affairs can be improved and that policy makers and other stakeholders will become better consumers of best practices research.

Figure 5

**Proposed Principles for Conducting & Reporting
Qualitative/Case Study Best Practices Research In Public Affairs**

1. The study should provide an operational definition of “best practices.”
2. A generic, more inter-disciplinary, definition should be preferred to a more narrow single professional disciplinary definition.
3. The decision criterion or criteria for determining a best practice should be made explicit at the outset of the research.
4. The decision criterion or criteria for determining a best practice should be based on a hierarchy of evidence approach.
5. Exemplars included in the research should constitute the “best-of-the-best.”
6. When exemplars are included on the basis of theories or principles, they should be identified.
7. Exemplars included in the research should be drawn from multiple contexts in order to increase the generalizability of the findings.
8. When exemplars have major components or sub-components, they should be identified.
9. When communicating the research findings to policy makers and other stakeholders, the methodological limitations of best practices research should be made explicit.

NOTES

DEA is a non-parametric statistical approach based upon the frontier analysis work of Farrell (1957) and extended by Charnes, Cooper & Rhodes, (1970). DEA is a commonly employed quantitative approach to best practices research (Nyhan & Martin, 1999a) and has been used to determine best practice service providers in: *schools* (e. g., Callen, 1991; Lovell, Walters and Wood, 1994), *human service programs* (e. g., Martin, 2002; Byrnes, Freeman & Kauffman, 1997) Ozcan & Cotter, 1994), *court systems* (e.g., Lewin, Morely Cook, 1982), *police services* (e. g., Nyhan & Martin, 1999a; Public Sector Productivity Panel, n.d.), *hospitals and health care agencies* (e. g., Cruise & Nyhan, 2000; Juran, Kaspin and Martin, 1994).

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