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Title: Strong, Transparent Public Institutions and Meta-governance

Year: 2021

Version: Accepted manuscript

Please cite the original version:

Asaduzzaman, M. & Virtanen, P. (2021). Strong, Transparent Public Institutions and Meta-governance. In: Leal Filho, W., Azul, A.M., Brandli, L., Lange, Salvia A., Özuyar, P.G. & Wall, T. (eds.) *Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions,* 1-12. Encyclopedia of the UN Sustainable Development Goals. Cham: Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-71066-2_125-1

Strong, transparent public institutions and meta-governance

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Synonyms: Network building, coordination of public institutions, public organisations, governance of governance, sustainable development

1. Introduction

We live in a time of leadership populism in public institutions. The meritocratic belief that few are right and the rest are wrong' still pervades administrative elites even as 'experts' are routinely undone by the 'wickedness' of the problems facing them, leading to a populist backlash in many countries as the narrative of 'common sense solutions' is deployed to replace expertise. Numerous examples can be used to illustrate this development - the UK Brexit referendum, the electoral victories of self-styled anti-establishment (and quite often anti-democratic) leaders throughout Europe and the World (e.g. Sanders 2019). The rise of populism is stress-testing public institutions globally. It is then reasonable to ask – as Ansell et al. (2017) have done – how do governments in general and public institutions in particular tackle enduring ambiguity and uncertainty in their systems and environments?

In recent decades, there has been a massive paradigm shift both in the theory and practice of public administration and public institutions across the globe. The driving forces and factors of this paradigm shift are due to globalisation, the pluralisation of public service delivery, the development and innovation of information and communication technology, the increasing role of non-governmental sector organisations in poverty alleviation and ensuring the well-being and safety of citizens, the massive political and administrative corruption in postcolonial countries and the failure of the centrally planned economy model.

Reflecting on the developments in institutional economics, new institutionalism and public sector management doctrines, this entry builds upon Hartley´s (2018: 212-213) notions on public leadership and the management of public institutions as a complex, contested and physically grounded practice which is about mobilising a wide variety of people, publics and divergent interests. The context for public leadership and public institutions is complex and fast-changing and in order to understand it, sensitive antennae are needed to interpret the context for and among

others. This is the point of departure for sensemaking – and in particular that kind of sensemaking which takes place through meta-governance and collective "making sense of things" among top civil servants and the leaders of public institutions.

As a result, the theoretical focus of public administration has gradually shifted from traditional public administration to new public administration, new public management, new public governance, partnership administration, network governance and meta-governance (Bourgon 2017; Greve 2015; Gjaltema et al. 2019; Kooiman & Jentoft 2009; Klijn & Edelenbos 2007).

The central role of public administration is to provide effective and efficient public services to its citizen through strengthening the capacity of both central and local public institutions. For a better functioning society and safer planet, a friendly, inclusive, service-oriented and contextual public administration is essential. Malfunctioning administrations or public institutions have enormous consequential impacts on governance ranging from corruption to poverty and terrorism. Weak and non-transparent public institutions can jeopardise the process of development and growth. The World Bank (2020) notes that strong institutions matter for reducing poverty and promoting environmental sustainability. Development policies are not implemented across the developing countries, partly due to the weak and incapable nature of public institutions.

Institutions have a huge impetus to build strong and capable public policies and public organisations to fuel the notion of sustainable development. Effective, accountable and inclusive institutions enable people to work together effectively and peacefully. Transparent institutions ensure equal rights for people and a chance to improve their lives as well as providing access to justice when they are wronged. Strong and transparent public institutions provide an important in measuring successful and unsuccessful states and societies. The policy makers, development practitioners and international development agencies argue that good governance and the sustainable development of developing countries depends on their ability and willingness to strengthen the quality of their public institutions. Public institutions are thus vital platforms and strong vehicles to promote democracy, ensure good governance and sustainable development in any society. The quest for sustainable development will remain an elusive and merely theoretical notion unless priority is given to building institutional capacity and transparency.

Keeping the above contexts in mind, this contribution intends to discuss the significance of strong public institutions in sustainable development in the light of meta-governance. In the broader perspective, meta-governance has to be viewed as a vital theoretical platform for effective, efficient, capable and strong public institutions. The chapter is divided into five sections. After the introduction, the second section provides some theoretical background to the key concepts of public institutions, governance and meta-governance. The third section concerns meta-governance and addresses the notion that meta-governance can be viewed a as a mechanism to better govern public institutions. The fourth section discusses the nature of institutional change and the deployment of meta-governance dynamics in the evolution of public institutions. Conclusions and policy recommendations are discussed in the fifth and final section.

2. Public institutions, transparency, governance and meta-governance

This section presents the theoretical background to the key concepts related to the governance of public institutions. Depending on how public institutions are

conceived from systems thinking perspective, the governance model can relate to governance (closed systems perspective) or meta-governance (open systems perspective).

This contribution approaches **public institutions** from a broad perspective. Public institutions operate in the public sphere and domain. This point of departure introduces the need for transparency and public accountability. Overall, public institutions consist of democratic institutions (e.g. the parliament, the presidency, the judiciary, the comptroller and national audit office), various public organisations (the police, government agencies, civil service, regional and local government authorities), economic institutions (e.g. national banks, finance commissions), and transnational organisations and donors (e.g. the World Bank, International Monetary Fund, the International Labour Organisation). Noteworthy here is that major public organisations take on the qualities and characteristics of an institution as they become vessels for societal ambition, combining reliable performance with high levels of legitimacy and good service quality. Public institutions also embody the idea of impartiality which relates to a series of criticisms stemming from the fields of public administration, public choice, multiculturalism, and feminism. Overall, public institutions build upon the practices of democracy, the rule of law, and the effectiveness of public organisations. (E.g. Boin & Christensen 2008; Goodin 1996.)

Public institutions are important for sustainable development for a number of reasons. For example, Uphoff (1992) lists the various benefits as follows:

- for sustainable development, institutions, especially at local levels, are important for mobilising resources and regulating their use with a view to maintaining a long-term base for productive activity,

- available resources can be put to their most efficient and sustainable use with location- specific knowledge, which is best generated and interpreted locally,

- monitoring changes in resources' status can be quicker and less costly where local people are involved; making adaptive changes in resource use is speeded up where local decision-making has become institutionalised,

- while local institutions are not always able to resolve resource management conflicts, if they are absent, all conflicts must be dealt with at higher levels, yielding slower and often less appropriate outcomes,

- people's behaviour is conditioned by community norms and consensus, so preserving or instituting practices that are environmentally sound requires more than just individual incentives and persuasion, and

- institutions encourage people to take a longer-term view by creating common expectations and a basis for cooperation that goes beyond individual interests. To the extent institutions are regarded as legitimate, people comply without (or with fewer) inducements and sanctions.

Transparency is one of the central pillars of strong public institutions. It is seen as a prerequisite for and the underpinning of public trust and as a keystone of quality governance. Building citizen trust through transparent processes is vital for sustainable development. Transparency refers to unfettered and easy access by the public to timely and reliable information on decisions and performance metrics in the public sector. Rational and trustworthy public services and collective decision-making lead public trust and create a level playing field for businesses, thus

contributing to well-functioning markets and economic growth (Armstrong 2005). As a founding principle transparency has consequential impacts, for example, it encourages trust, trust promotes empowerment, empowerment supports participation, participation leads to inclusiveness, inclusiveness buttresses equality, peace and justice, all of which are necessary for sustainable development.

Joseph Stiglitz, recipient of the Nobel Memorial Prize in Economic Sciences in 2001, has written about the possibilities and limitations of government: according to Stiglitz (1998), public institutions are part of the policy-process and policy-making is a dynamic process, with today's decisions shaping options and coalitions in the future. Stiglitz (ibid.) makes a substantial point that secrecy – in contrast to transparency – makes explicit government failure from two perspectives. First, it makes it harder to establish credible commitments among decisions-makers and stakeholders. Those excluded by secrecy from the process feel fully justified in trying to change the outcomes of public policy or the performance of public institutions. Second, secrecy aggravates the problem of positional goods and destructive competition. This will lead to outcomes that promote further divergence between winners and losers. Making government processes more open, transparent, and democratic, with more participation and more effort to find consensus is likely to result not only in a process that is fairer, but one with outcomes that are more likely to be in accord with the general interest and thus are for the benefit of society as a whole.

Before conceptualising **governance**, it is apposite to note that the terms 'government' and 'governance' are not same, although both share goal-oriented objectives. Simply, government occurs when those with legally and formally derived authority and policing power execute and implement activities. On the other hand, governance refers to the creation, execution, and implementation of activities backed by the shared goals of citizens and organisations, who may or may not have formal authority or policy making power. Richards and Smith (2002) very clearly differentiated between the terms. To them, government is bureaucracy, legislation, financial control, regulation, and force, governance, on the other hand, refers more to a growing use of non-regulatory policy instruments. For Richard and Smith (*ibid.*), governance focuses attention towards proposed, designed and implemented cooperation by non-state actors working together with state actors. More broadly, the concept of governance also relates to neoliberalism and the New Public Governance (NPG) and was designed to reflect the shift from hierarchical, vertical authority structures to diffuse, often horizontal or networked decision-making structures where hierarchy and authority were either absent or opaque.

Overall, governance is a lucrative, growing and dynamic idea. Its meaning is changing and moving fast around the discourse of public administration and development. According to Jessop (2002), governance is a polyvalent and poly-contextual concept and its meaning varies by context and it is being deployed for often quite contrary, though not plainly contradictory, purposes. Central to this theoretical debate is the question whether the governance notion can really provide a compelling theoretical entry-point for the analysis of contemporary social transformation and transformative development or a compelling practical entry-point for dealing with complexity. In addition, keeping alive all of its inherited dominant features (for example bureaucratic and political elitisms and the politicisation of public bureaucracy, weak electoral systems, weak taxation policy, massive corruption, environmental degradation, winner takes all etc.), it should be asked whether governance is – as a concept – able to promote sustainable development,

ensure peace and justice and promote a better functioning society for future generations. Indeed, is it even deployable in understanding the operations and functions of public institutions in a complex world?

These questions give rise to the need for a discussion on the concept of **meta-governance** in the discourse of governance as it relates to public institutions. Adopting a meta-governance approach seems to be one possible way (in response to governance failure) to fill the theoretical and practical gaps in the governance concept making it more constructive, effective, efficient, collaborative and service-oriented, as understood from the perspective of public institutions. Meta-governance was introduced to describe a kind of counter tendency to the shift from government to governance, namely the shift from government to meta-governance, i.e. the 'organisation of the conditions of self-organisation'.

By definition, meta-governance refers to the management of global governance complexity and plurality linking a range of networks, partnerships, public and private actors and the emergence of new models of economic, social, and political governance (Albareda Waddock 2016). In addition, meta-governance is defined as 'the governance of governance' (Peters 2010, see also Frasen 2015, pp.295-297).

There is already plenty of support in the research literature for the meta-governance concept, suggesting that a broader view of governance is required. This is essential, firstly, because governance, in practice, fails in terms of numerous, often basic, governing tasks related to the issues outlined above on, for example, the lack of coordination, oversimplifying the problems to be governed, erratic inference about the contexts of the problems and a misfit between the scale of the governance apparatus and the scale of the problems faced (Jessop 2011). Secondly, meta-governance is viewed as a response to the more specific challenges of non-hierarchical modes of governance (Peters 2009).

According to Jessop (2003, p.142) one of the leading proponents of the concept, 'meta-governance involves a process of reflexive self-organisation of independent actors involved in complex relations of reciprocal interdependences,…based on continuing dialogue and resource sharing to develop mutually beneficial joint projects and to manage the contradictions and dilemmas inevitably involved in such situations'. He (2011, pp. 113–116) further identifies four modes of meta-governance such as:

- redesigning of markets so that incentives are better aligned and improve outcomes,

- constitutional design innovations that adjust the mandate and scope for action of relevant parties,

- redesigning of network relations so that interactions among relevant governing parties may become more efficient and effective, and

- interventions designed to promote trust, loyalty and commitment among governing parties thus smoothing governance processes.

3. Meta-governance and the governance of public institutions

Traditional public management paradigms – those of the New Public Management (NPM) and the New Public Governance (NPG) – do not 'fit' easily into a discussion on the role of management and leadership in public institutions. The theory of meta-governance – or governance of governance – however

focuses on how values, norms and principles underpin governance systems and governing approaches as well as on how to deliberatively guide governance process in networks (e.g. Kooiman & Jentoft 2009; Klijn & Edelenbos 2007).

As noted previously, meta-governance is not a new phenomenon. It appeared for the first time in the public administration and political science literatures in the mid-1990s and has proliferated extensively during the last couple of decades. The early 1990s accounts of meta-governance were rather abstract and theoretical and lacked empirical grounding. In their seminal work on meta-governance, Gjaltema et al. (2019) contended that meta-governance should be perceived as an umbrella concept in the governance literature since meta-governance is often referred to in very general terms such as the governance of governance or the organisation of self-organisation.

Gjaltema et al. (*ibid.*) define meta-governance as a practice, by (mainly) public authorities, that entails the coordination of one or more governance modes by using different instruments, methods and strategies to overcome governance failures. The value of this definition is that it goes beyond the unproductive dichotomy in the 'from government to governance' debate by introducing four different but somewhat overlapping types of meta-governance: network meta-governance, multilevel meta-governance, meta-governance of multiplicity and meta-governance of modes. All of these are relevant from the perspective of public institutions.

These aforementioned meta-governance variants do 'fit' with public institutions from the perspective of governing, managing and leading and what is perhaps even interesting, they also go together with the various governing layers of public institutions (transnational, national, regional and local). These four types of meta-governance are briefly discussed below (based on the theoretical and conceptual typology put forward by Gjaltema et al. 2019: 12-14; Jessop 2011):

I) First order meta-governance models (which refers to governance within the public sphere):

- TYPE 1: *Network of meta-governance* (governance network that comprises actors from multiple domains)
    - Example from the transnational level meta-governance of public institutions: United Nations´ donors working with regional and local authorities and communities to provide wellbeing and the conditions for reasonable living.
    - Example from the local level meta-governance of public institutions: local-level programmes/projects/communities providing service delivery, aiming at contributing to enhanced wellbeing for local level communities.
- TYPE 2: *Multi-level meta-governance* (includes multiple active meta-governors from different levels of governance)
    - Example from the transnational level meta-governance of public institutions: the European Union (EU) and North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO).

- o Example from the national level meta-governance of public institutions: national level state administration authorities (e.g. ministries) deploying performance management and fiscal control for local communities and municipalities.

- o Example from the local level meta-governance of public institutions: local-level authorities and decision-makers organising public service delivery for service users.

- TYPE 3: *Meta-governance of multiplicity* (meta-governance aims to control and manage the networks of networks)

  - o Example from the national/regional/local level meta-governance of public institutions: national state administration organisations (e.g. line-ministries at the level of central administration) mobilising, co-ordinating and controlling different actors at lower levels of governance in – for instance - implementing social policy programmes.

II Second order meta-governance models (which refers to governing actors from all possible societal sectors, based on multiple interactions and market building):

- TYPE 4: *Meta-governance of modes (by the public meta-governor seeking to balance hierarchical, market and network governance)*.

  - o Example from the transitional level meta-governance of public institutions: the European Union (EU) and its key stakeholders (members of trade unions, lobby organisations) as the harmoniser of EU Member States prosperous development in balancing social and economic development dimensions for collective good).

  - o Example from the national/regional/local level meta-governance of public institutions: State administration organisations affecting market building in putting together through policy instruments (juridical, information-based and resource-based) policy ecosystems of various kinds for regional and local level development purposes.

Moreover, the aforementioned definition by Gjaltema et al. (*ibid.*) is important in the sense that it makes visible the distinctions between public institutions and institutions that are self-assembled or as networks outside the domain of the public sector. Also noteworthy here is the fact that the meta-governance dimension introduces human agency to institutions as well as the aspect of cooperation and collective sensemaking – i.e. how institutions evolve through leadership and management, concepts that are embedded in the governing structures of institutions (see e.g. Jessop 2002; Roe 2020).

Finally, there are. nevertheless, some important limitations in terms of the meta-governance concept when leadership skills in institutions and leadership development tools are considered as the key mechanisms to maintain and further develop the capabilities of human agency in institutions. The usefulness of the concept of meta-governance in making explicit the evolution of institutions and especially, generic leadership skills (meta-skills) comes close to Jessop (2000), who approaches the idea of governance structures and asks whether governance can provide a compelling theoretical entry-point for analysing

contemporary social transformation and leadership in institutions (see also Tammeaid et al. 2020).

4. Dynamic meta-governance mechanisms contribute to institutional change

Meta-governance is a relevant approach from the perspective of public institutions because public institutions evolve over time. Meta-governance is a dynamic mechanism that contributes to institutional change.

Douglass C North, co-recipient of the 1993 Nobel memorial Prize in Economic Sciences, has also addressed this dynamic mechanism issue on the changing role of institutions. North (1991, p. 97) writes: "Throughout history, institutions have been devised by human beings to create order and reduce uncertainty in exchange (…) [The Institutions] evolve incrementally, connecting the past with the present and the future; history in consequence is largely a story of institutional evolution in which the historical performance of economies can only be understood as a part of a sequential story" (see also North 1993; North 2005). According to Bush (1987, p. 1075), institutional economics is evolutionary by nature because it has the capacity to explain the phenomenon of institutional change and because it incorporates the principles of that explanation in both theoretical and practical inquiry.

North looks at institutional change from the perspective of institutional economics. Classical institutional economics (starting from the first part of the 20th century, understands the economy as a result of the complex interaction of various institutions, e.g. individuals, companies, civil society, state authorities) and new institutionalism (during the latter half of 20th century stressing the role of behavioural science as a sensemaking kaleidoscope in understanding the logic of institutions) conceive of the evolution of institutions in a way that once created, they (public institutions) change over time.

According to institutional economics and its scientific variants, no institution can be untouched by change regardless of how we interpret the functional logic of institutions. Institutions can be operable as closed systems and if so, then change occurs because of indigenous factors and through the process of organisational learning. Understood from the perspective of open systems, institutions evolve through the process of adaptation to not only indigenous but also, to a great extent, to exogenous factors also which link institutions to a web of systems in which they function and constantly create and re-create their position towards other societal agencies. According to Kingston and Caballero (2009), different institutional change models conceive institutional evolution from different perspectives: Some of the theories emphasise the deliberate creation of institutions through the political process, while others emphasise the spontaneous emergence of institutions through evolutionary processes.

According to Streeck and Thelen (2005), there are four (ideal) types of institutional change (see also, Mahoney & Thelen 2010: 15-29):

- displacement (the removal of existing rules and codes of action and the introduction of new ones)

- layering (the introduction of new rules and codes of action on top of or alongside existing ones)
- drift (the changed impact of existing rules and codes of action due to shifts in the institutional environment), and
- conversion (the changed enactment of existing rules and codes of action to their strategic redeployment).

Public institutions and public administration promote societal stability which is an important factor in this age of turmoil and shocks. Sondermann (2016), for instance, found that there is evidence that sound labour and product markets, framework conditions and political institutions increase societal resilience in terms of adverse shocks and reduce the incidence of economic crisis more generally. In the presence of a common shock, a country with weaker economic structures can, on average, suffer up to twice the output loss in a given year compared to those countries with more stable and resilient institutions. A relevant issue here is in fact the framework for explaining why institutional changes occur: according to Mahoney and Thelen (2010: 14-15) these decisive factors include characteristics of political context (as exogenous drivers) and characteristics of institutions *per se* (as indigenous drivers) (see also Greif & Laitin 2004).

Regardless of the manifested institutional stability, change is, however, an immanent aspect in the life-courses of institutions. It is also important to understand that institutional change derives its origins from institutional analysis, since the leading approaches to institutional analysis – sociological institutionalism, rational-choice institutionalism and historical institutionalism – emphasise the role of different indigenous and exogenous factors in addressing the nature of institutional change.

Regardless of the approach to institutional analysis, the presence of change is however manifested in the evolution of institutions. Conceptually, changes can be incremental or radical. The difference between these types of change relates to the timespan of changes (slow vs. quick) and the level of pervasiveness (piecemeal vs. total) of the changes.

- *Incremental changes* are by nature slow and piecemeal and they can be equally consequential for patterning human behaviour and shaping substantive political outcomes. The theory of gradual institutional change aspires to develop causal propositions that pinpoint the sources and origins of institutional change and asks what properties of institutions permit change to take place and what kind of change strategies are deployed in implementing change activities (e.g. Mahoney & Thelen 2010: 2-4, 7-8). The value of gradual institutional change theory is that it conveys the idea that institutional change and the stability of institutions are inextricably linked. This is because there is seldomly anything automatic, self-perpetuating or self-reinforcing about institutional arrangements and processes. According to Mahoney and Thelen (*ibid.*), gradual institutional change theory addresses the fact that a dynamic component is always present in institutions. This is because institutional coalition dynamics are based on human behaviour, cognitive biases, institutional contradictions, human praxis and collective sensemaking, which bring about shifts and changes – i.e. instability (see also Seo & Douglas Creed 2002).

- *Radical changes* take place over a short period of time and, by definition, are pervasive in nature. Radical institutional change can take place due to indigenous or exogenous factors within the institution or within the system comprised of various institutions. Radical change theory in respect of institutions derives its origins to a great extent from models of business process re-engineering which became popular during the 1980s and 1990s (e.g. Hammer & Champy 1993).

The aforementioned approaches to understanding institutional change and theories about change are based on organisational theory – i.e. seeing institutions as organisations. A complementary approach is provided Roland (2004) who writes about culture as a ´slow-moving´ institution and political institutions as ´fast-moving´ institutions. Culture – manifested in values, beliefs, and social norms – changes reasonably slowly, whereas political institutions – and political systems (e.g. the decline of communism during late 1980s) – can change relatively quickly, sometimes almost overnight.

In an organisational context, institutional change does not take place by itself nor does it occur in a vacuum. Institutional change is implemented through change management methods and can be conceived of through change management theories. The main approaches to change management theory can be found in the seminal works of Kurt Lewin, Edgar Schein, Chris Argyris and Peter Senge (see e.g. Cooke 1999; Mento et al. 2002). In recent decades, the complex nature of society and operating environments as well as the existence of complex and so-called 'wicked' problems have brought about new approaches and conceptual tools highlighting the role of collective learning and sensemaking in tackling these problems thus contributing to more intense cooperation between institutions (e.g. Styhre 2002; Cilliers 1998; Virtanen & Tammeaid 2020).

5. Conclusions

Overall, meta-governance is not a panacea, nor it is a magical silver bullet that overcomes the problems of market and state failure as well as the dysfunctionalities of public institutions without creating its own problems. Instead, each form of coordination of complex reciprocal interdependence has a distinctive primary form of failure together with typical secondary forms of failure. Meta-governance can be seen as a reflexive and responsive process through which a range of legitimate and resourceful actors aim to combine, facilitate, shape and direct particular forms of governance in accordance with specific rules, procedures and standards (e.g. Sörensen & Torfing 2009). At its best, meta-governance helps public institutions discursively and politically frame their operations and agendas, to design and re-design public institutions to facilitate change and engage different stakeholders, to facilitate networks to take action at different levels of government (transnational, national. regional and local) and to take overall action in network constellations to influence goal attainment and coordinating actions.

Although meta-governance can be conceived as a response to governance failure and to alleviating the dysfunctionalities of public institutions, this notion has not gone unchallenged. Each mode of meta-governance, outlined above, displays both threats and weaknesses. To take an example, market reform might not be possible due to the scarcity of resources in developing countries or – alternatively – weakly regulated and poorly implemented taxation policy plus massive corruption may lead to market failure. Power sharing is also a big issue in semi-feudalistic societies or in

post-colonial countries and thus it is difficult to establish effective networks among the various stakeholders thus jeopardising the process of trust building. Compared to the traditional mode of administration and governance however, meta-governance has more scope (and scholarship backing) to make governance responsive, effective, accountable, transparent and trustworthy. Each of these factors in turn leads us towards the destination of sustainable development and good governance – even though that it is somewhat unclear still whether ´good governance´ is an empirical category or is it a political or politicised theory.

Finally, this entry sets out a number of possibilities for future research in understanding the coordination mechanisms of meta-governance in running and orchestrating public institutions. These include, first, the more detailed empirical scrutiny of the use and role of leadership incorporated into the dynamics of meta-governance. Secondly, reciprocal dialogue between various levels of meta-governance merits more empirical research. Third, the accountability aspects of meta-governance in understanding the levels and dimensions of accountability in a framework of multiple actors and polyphonic agency remain obscure (e.g. Koppell 2005).

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