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IMPLEMENTATION STUDIES: TIME FOR A REVIVAL?

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Impetus and motivation for implementation studies

THE LATE 1960s AND early 1970s could be described as a period of growing concern about the effectiveness of public policy and governance. This concern was addressed by a range of initiatives to enhance the policy content of government decision making, to improve public decision-making processes and the co-ordination of policy (joined-up thinking) and to streamline management structures and service delivery. These days, the 1970s tend to have a bad press, but it was a period of important innovation in the field of policy studies. For example the mid-1960s saw a shift from two-dimensional land use plans to the concept of a strategic plan as a statement of reasoned policy, and similar policy plans were subsequently promulgated for social services., housing and transport (DHSS 1972). Policy capacity was enhanced in local government by the employment of research staff to review and evaluate policy effectiveness and to formulate alternative courses of action, and in central government by the creation of departmental Policy Units, the Central Policy Review Staff (CPRS)

within the Cabinet Office, and the development of Programme Analysis Review (PAR) in the early 1970s. Ideas and techniques for linking policy objectives and resource allocation derived from the American Planning Programming and Budgeting System (PPBS) spawned the development of corporate planning philosophy, aimed at improving the connectedness of government policy and co-ordination of service delivery.

Similar concerns were reflected in the concurrent development of academic policy studies as a multi-disciplinary and applied subject of research (Heclo 1972) focused around three main areas:

1   Policy analysis: concerned with understanding and explaining the substance of policy content and processes of decision making;
2   Evaluative studies: concerned with understanding and assessing policy outcomes as a basis for evaluating effectiveness;
3   Organizational studies: concerned with understanding the operation of political and administrative organizations as behavioural systems, and prescriptions for improving performance

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It was also the time of the introduction of the new concept of strategic policy plans, influenced by systems thinking to emphasize planning and policy development as a process of response to changes in the environment characterized by ongoing monitoring and review of policy performance. [...] The emphasis on monitoring policy effectiveness spawned a wide range of evaluative studies here and in the US. Such studies tended to show that in spite of the plethora of policies and plans, 'performance' more often than not still seemed to fall short of policy expectations. Concern shifted from the 'what' of policy outcomes to the 'why' of perceived policy failure, and to focus on the actual process of translating policy into action — the process of implementation — as exemplified by Pressman and Wildavsky's classic implementation study subtitled 'How Great Expectations in Washington are Dashed in Oakland; or Why it's Amazing that Federal Programs Work at All. . . . '(1984).

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Approach to understanding the policy–action relationship

Much of the existing policy studies literature at the time tended to focus on the politics of policy making, assuming implementation as an essentially topdown administrative and hierarchical follow on process. Policy, once formulated and legitimated at the 'top' or centre, is handed in to the administrative system for execution, and successively refined and translated into operating instructions as it moves down the hierarchy to operatives at the 'bottom' of the pyramid. With increasing attention paid to policy *effectiveness*, evaluative studies were starting to

highlight the problematic of implementation, and identify key factors deemed to contribute to what was perceived as 'implementation failure' .These [. ..] include:

1   Lack of clear policy objectives; leaving room for differential interpretation and discretion in action;
2   Multiplicity of actors and agencies involved in implementation; problems of communication and co-ordination between the 'links in the chain';
3   Inter- and intra-organizational value and interest differences between actors and agencies; problems of differing perspectives and priorities affecting policy interpretations and motivation for implementation;
4   Relative autonomies among implementing agencies; limits of administrative control,

The core argument of Policy and Action [Barrett and Fudge 1981] was to challenge the trachtional policy-centred view of the implementation process, and a *priori* assumptions about the existence of hierarchical relations between policy making and implementation. It was suggested that implementation should be regarded as an integral and continuing part of the political policy process rather than an administrative follow-on, and seen as a policy-action dialectic involving negotiation and bargaining between those seeking to put policy into effect and those upon whom action depends. The political processes by which policy is mechated, negotiated and modified during its formulation continue in the behaviour of those involved in its implementation acting to protect or pursue their own values and interests, Policy may thus be regarded as both a statement of intent by those seeking to change or control behaviour, and a negotiated output emerging from the implementation process.

This negotiative perspective shifts analytical attention away from a focus on formal organizational hierarchies, communication and control mechanisms, to give more emphasis to the power-interest structures and relationships between participating actors and agencies, and the nature of interactions taking place in the process, as key factors shaping the policy/implementation outcomes.

This conceptualization of implementation as 'negotiated order', involving bargaining and negotiation between semi-autonomous actors pursuing or protecting their interests, was further developed [. .] by a number of key ideas emerging in the organizational field. These included, notably, resource-dependency/ exchange theory models of inter-organizational power relations [..] Perhaps of key significance was Strauss's work [1978] conceptualizing all social order — including organizations — as the product of negotiation rather than coercion; his research in psychiatric units pointed to the existence of discretionary power to bargain even in the most rule-bound of environments. This, together with the growing literature on so-called 'street-level bureaucrats' (see, for example, Lipsky 1980; Prottas 1979), explored the existence and nature of discretionary power — or scope for action — in organizational settings. Also explored were the ways that such discretion was being used by front-line operatives either to develop 'coping mechanisms' in the absence of clear policy rules or to negotiate policy modification in action

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Implementation agencies are likely at any point in time to be respondmg to a wide variety of policy initiatives or environmental pressures from a range of sources Rather than asking whether and how a particular policy has been implemented, or. comparing outcomes against original policy objectives, which assumes a priori a causal link between the policy and outcomes observed, implementation studies needed to start with what was actually happening at delivery/ recipient level (the 'bottom') and explore why from the 'bottom up' In order to identify the factors influencing action and behaviour — including the role (if any) played by policy in shaping behaviour and outcomes — Elmore (1980) coined the term 'backward mapping' He regarded this as an analytical approach for improving the 'implementability' of policy design He also saw it as a methodology for conducting implementation and evaluation studies. [   ] Hjern and Porter (1981) talked similarly about building, bottom-up, a picture of the particular 'implementation structure', the network structure of actors and parts of organizations as well as their relationships and interactions in influencing outcomes

Issues in theory development

In the early 1980s academic debate was polarized around the apparently competing claims of so-called 'top-down' and 'bottom-up' approaches to conceptualization of the implementation process. In some respects the polarization of debate was associated with differing value and disciplinary perspectives on the role of policy in governance The top-down model was reflected in traditional structures of governance and public sector organization, emphasizing the separation of politics and administration, and co-ordination and control through authority and hierarchy Those espousing or defending the top-down model saw it as a normative ideal for putting policy into effect. Policy should be made 'at the top', and executed by 'agents' in compliance with policy objectives. The role of implementation studies was to identify the causes of implementation problems or failure, and suggest ways of enhancing the likelihood of obtaining compliance with policy objectives, generally focused on strategies for improved communication of intentions, co-ordination of the 'links in the chain[7], management of resources and control of implementing agents

The 'bottom-up' categorization was a somewhat misleading label, including both alternative approaches which regarded implementation as part of a policy-making continuum in which policy evolved or was modified in the process of translating intentions into action, and new methodologies for implementation/ evaluation studies The bottom-up 'camp' (Berman 1978; Hjern, Hanf and Porter 1978) was associated with those espousing a micropolitical view of intra- and inter-organizational behaviour, and included a range of models, some emphasizing consensus building, influence and exchange processes (persuasion, positive-sum negotiation and learning), and others emphasizing conflict and the exercise of power (zero-sum negotiations and power bargaining) in the policy-action relationship

Although somewhat protracted and confusing, the top-down/bottom-up debate did raise a number of important questions and issues concerning the

purpose of implementation analysis, and indeed the meaning of implementation. First was the question of what implementation studies are trying to do. Are they about prescription or description? Is the purpose to design better policy, achieve greater control over policy outcomes, and/or to seek understanding and explanations of what happens in practice? Top-down approaches could be regarded as essentially prescriptive – what ought to happen, but were seen by critics as failing to provide adequate description or understanding of the complexity of interactions taking place in implementation processes Bottom-up approaches tended to focus on understanding and explanation on the basis that it is not possible to prescribe without understanding. From a top-down perspective, bottom-up approaches to conceptualization were criticized for failing to offer any prescriptions for practice, or for offering prescriptions tantamount to accepting that policy as executed would be subverted or modified to reflect the interests of the most powerful upon whom action depended, and could potentially be seen as subverting the proper role of governance.

Linked to the debate on prescription versus description is the question of what is meant by implementation. Is implementation about achieving conformance or performance (Barrett 1981)? Policy-centred approaches to analysis of necessity involve comparing outcomes against a *priori* statements of intent or targets. Performance is thus judged in terms of achieving conformance with policy targets and standards. In practice, so-called performance criteria tend to operate more as conformance criteria; often the minimum level or standard deemed to constitute satisfactory performance.

For some types of regulatory policy (for example, health **and** safety), conformance or compliance may be an essential objective. But much public policy is couched in more permissive and discretionary terms; the objective being to permit and encourage innovative courses of action within a framework of procedural rules. Here, output targets or performance criteria are harder to specify in advance, and, as pointed out by Williams (1971), the demands of public accountability are likely to mean that *performance* in the sense of potentially risky innovation, will be tempered by tight administrative and procedural controls, that is, conformance which becomes an end in itself for judging performance..

Interactive and negotiative models of implementation tend to see performance as the achievement of what is possible within a particular policy implementation environment (that is, the array of actors and interests, their relative bargaining power; degree of change or value conflict involved, and so on). From this perspective, judging performance is a matter of more pluralistic and bottom-up evaluation to assess outcomes in terms of who has gained or lost what and how has this been affected or influenced by policy,

Crucial to this view of performance is a positive attitude to discretion. A key contemporaneous debate centred on attitudes to discretion (Bacharach and Lawlor 1980; Lipsky 1980; Prottas 1979). Social and welfare policy analysts, with a tradition of emphasis on issues of equity and common standards in service delivery, tended to view discretion as something to be limited as being potentially discriminatory. For example, research on street level bureaucrats raised questions about whose policy was actually being implemented. Thus, Lipsky's thesis gave rise to considerable debate regarding whether discretion was

desirable and necessary or whether it was anti-democratic and reflected inadequate top-down control and so acted to subvert policy (Linder and Peters 1987). On the other hand, those in disciplines or professions where negotiated and contractual relations with clients and consumers were the norm, tended to see discretion as both positive and necessary, as the space within which negotiation and bargaining of positive sum outcomes can take place

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During the 1980s a so-called third generation of implementation models emerged, which either focused on the refinement of negotiative and learning conceptualizations within different policy environments, or sought to synthesize elements of the top-down and bottom-up approaches or focus on the dialectics of the policy-action relationship (Sabatier 1988; Goggin et al. 1990; Palumbo and Calista 1990). [. .] This has offered a new way of looking at concepts of power and negotiation in implementation as the dialectic between structure and agency, which reinforces a view of performance, or what happens in practice, as a function of the scope or limitations of scope for action (rules and roles), and the use made of that scope (values and interests).

The 1990s: implementation studies out of fashion?

In parallel with this interest in implementation, during the late 1970s to the early 1980s, there was an additional agenda in the public policy literature concerning financial stringency and economic efficiency. Then, gradually, the political ana- lysts joined the economists in elucidating a thesis of the New Right during the late 1980s The beginning of the 1990s heralded the synthesis of previous work and gave attention to the managerial impact of the New Right in terms of the New Public Management and the operationalization of Williamson's transaction cost thesis into a more fully developed expression of quasi markets. The litera- ture at the end of the 1990s was influenced by a condition to the quasi market thesis, this condition being 'the new economic sociology' and the idea of relational markets. An interesting nomenclature had developed as a shorthand to describe the numerous changes which occurred in public sector welfare since 1979, namely, 'reformist', 'rolling back the state' and 'reinventing government'.

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In the world of policy studies, business management language and ideas replaced the discourse of public administration Planning and policy-making became imbued with concepts of strategic management, and concerns about the process of implementation were superseded by emphasis on change management and performance targets The shift in ideological priorities was reflected in the structure of public research funding and in research funding opportunities. To a certain extent it can be argued that the apparent demise of implementation studies represented no more than academic opportunism; using different language and labels for the same issues

At the same time, public service agencies and managers had little choice but to embrace the radical shifts that had occurred in policy direction. The shake up of public service organizations involving the introduction of quasi-market competition, contracting out of professional services and performance orientation in performance-related.pay and short term contracts generated the search for new models of public management seeking to reconcile concepts of public service with private business principles The combination of increased policy centralization and agency decentralization and contracting out reinforced the separation and distance-between politics and administration This in turn served to reassert the dominance of normative, top-down, coercive process models of policy implementation or performance, and of 'performance' as conformance with policy targets.

In this new policy construction there was perhaps less perceived need for studies of implementation since there was a belief that the 'reforms[7] in the public services associated with the New Public Management had addressed the key problems of 'implementation failure' which include a lack of clear unambiguous policy objectives, resource availability and control over implementing agencies.

For example, in respect of clear and unambiguous policy objectives, there was now an increased emphasis on specific performance targets and standards Formal contracts for service provision appeared to leave no doubt about what was expected to be achieved and what would be regarded as satisfactory performance. In respect of resource availability, privatization, marketization and public/private partnership initiatives were aimed at both reducing the public cost of service provision and injecting new resources from the private sector. Finally, as far as increased control over the discretionary power of implementing agencies was concerned, measures included: the curtailing of professional autonomies by bringing professionals into line-management accountability structures with managerial accountability for performance, replacing inter-agency power bargaining with market-based competition, and contracting out.

Managers were now responsible for putting policy into effect and also to blame if things went wrong Success or failure was judged on the basis of meeting pre-set targets for ensuring delivery on policy targets From this perspective there was little sympathy or concern for reaching agreements or making compromises between competing or autonomous interests, or indeed in research aimed at understanding what was going orr in the process.

The all-pervasiveness and cultural hegemony attained by new managerialism has also resulted in the suppression of dissent and policy challenge It is difficult to challenge without appearing to be 'against' improving performance and effectiveness. More insidious than the explicit 'gagging' clauses introduced into contracts of employment have been the self-censorshp effects of this cultural hegemony: compliance, caution and risk avoidance in the interests of survival. [. .]

It could be argued that the ideological and service reforms that have occurred in the public services over the past three decades have taught those who study the public policy process a number of lessons that in turn can be both seen through the lens of implementation studies and at the same time cause that lens to refract in different ways. An important lesson has been the conceptualization of a new role for the state as a consequence of contemporary changes in the public sector.

These vary from the 'managerial' state, or 'neo-Tayloristic' state (Pollitt et al. 1990); the 'contract' state (Stewart 1993); and 'entrepreneurial' government (Osborne and Gaebler 1992), but perhaps the most graphic descriptions came from Hood (1995) and his 'Headless Chicken State' or 'Gridlocked Contract State'.

In short, it became possible to see the state as an enabler rather than a provider, government has been depoliticized and re-cast as business and neo-management, Equally importantly, was the lesson of public organizations becoming 'de-coupled from the relationship between service delivery and political control, well exemplified by the proliferation of 'agencies' as one of the structures through which to deliver public services

All of these descriptions of a new role for the state have considerable implications for the implementation of policy The 'Headless Chicken' state is one wherein there are 'no clear rules of the road' or demarcation of responsibilities (Hood 1995, p. 112) Similarly, a disaggregated or de-coupled state meant that the important collaborative and network links needed for implementation was threatened Agency proliferation without the cohesion and co-ordination of hierarchy resulted in fragmentation and the loss of important implementation feedback loops in both the vertical and horizontal (Holmes 1992).

The very processes of policy implementation are themselves deeply politically dependent, having both a macro and micro political context. Given the argument that there has been a changing role for the state, then the importance of context in policy implementation becomes even more important It is in this context that the globalization and potential transnational character of future public services could have a great impact upon implementation Hood (1995) points out that the global paradigm of the New Public Management ignored the very different and typically 'path dependent' local political agendas of public management (p. 106)

Time for a revival?

[.] Yet there are growing concerns, emerging from audit and evaluation processes, about the unintended consequences of the dirigiste model of policy implementation embedded within current practices Amongst these unintended consequences are a top-down coercive pressure to meet prescribed targets that has led to the skewing of service priorities, for example, hospital waiting lists, and even the manipulation of figures for fear of the consequences of failure (performance becomes conformance) There is then the lack of recognition of the complexity, time and resources involved in achieving the organizational capacity to achieve effective change (implementation as the enculturation of change) Finally, we are also able to identify, a continuing tension, between the normative expectations of managerial control of the policy implementation process and the experienced reality of inter- and intra-organizational micro-politics in the policy-action relationship (characterized by multiple negotiations between semi-autonomous agents with often-competing interests and divergent values).

There is a certain sense of *déjà vu* in these issues relating to the efficacy of the top-down managerial model for implementing policy innovation and organizational

change. Managerialism sought to address the perceived problems of administrative bureaucracy, but over-emphasis on coercion and conformance has resulted in a lack of attention to the dynamics of organizational process and the dialectic between structure and agency in the process of change

I would thus argue the *need* for a revival of interest in implementation studies..First, there is more than ever a need to invest in studies of implementation and change processes, both conceptual and empirical; studies aimed at both understanding and explaining the dynamics of the policy-action relationship, and seeking to develop more appropriate prescriptions than currently demonstrated by the experience of managerialism for the negotiation of change.There is still a lack of attention to process in governance theory and practice, in particular explicit attention to the appropriateness of differing conceptualizations of the policy-action relationship to desired outcomes (means and ends). What are the relative benefits and feasibility of negotiation/learning strategies versus more coercive strategies in differing policy environments? The understanding of process is also an essential part of capacity building, addressing questions such as: Is this doable? How might it work?What would it take?

Second, there is a need for renewed emphasis on multidisciplinary working in policy studies. No one discipline can claim to be the exclusive home for policy studies, and there are substantial benefits for theory development in synthesizing ideas from a plurality of disciplines addressing similar issues from different perspectives. [.]

Third is the renewed need to address the central paradox of control and autonomy in achieving desired performance/outcomes. How to balance the requirement for public accountability with consumer responsiveness, respect for difference and local autonomies, creativity, and so on? How to avoid performance becoming conformance with targets at the expense of broader goals?

Last but not least I would argue the need for a new emphasis in research and practice on the relationship between ethics, social responsibility, public accountability and control in implementation Increased attention to ethics and social responsibility in the policy process is overdue, and would bring into the implementation debate issues such as the value conflict between professional principles and codes of ethical practice versus the management performance imperatives. [.]

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