

1 Models of implementation

1.1 Policy delivery

This section introduces four different models of change and assesses their relevance to understanding the policy process. Note that such models are both explanatory (they help illuminate reality by highlighting particular features of the policy process and suggesting their benefits or flaws) and normative (they carry implicit assumptions and prescriptions about how the process *should* work). Disentangling these different ways of working with models is not always easy.

1.2 The machinery of government: policy as rational planning

Much of the policy literature is imbued with a rather mechanical conception of change: ideas about ‘pulling levers’ to make things happen, or about applying different ‘tools’ or ‘instruments’, all conceive the policy system as something like a machine itself. Component parts – the government departments, regulatory bodies, delivery organisations, and even the people who staff them – are viewed as connected though static and predictable mechanisms. The system is seen as non-adaptive and non-learning. That is, to make change happen it is always necessary to apply a new mechanism from above in order to pull the system ‘into line’ – or, in the case of previous failed attempts to do this, to redesign all or part of the system from scratch, based on a new blueprint. In this model, only policy makers are viewed as capable of learning; everyone else has to carry out the policy mechanically. All the government (the mechanic) needs to do is restructure the institutions (a merger here, a decentralisation there) or tinker with the incentive structure (altering the funding streams and/or introducing more competition between organisations) and, it is assumed, change will follow.

1.3 The perils of partnership: policy as an adaptive system

Here the focus is on an *organic* way of understanding the relationship between policy and action. From this perspective, government, public service organisations, contractors, staff and, more recently, the public themselves are viewed not as cogs in a machine but as mutually interacting elements of an adaptive policy system. As in other organic entities – populations, species, even the human body itself – change takes place around an equilibrium point at which the entity is in balance with its environment. This equilibrium is sustained by feedback loops: as the environment shifts, so the organism (or in this case the organisation) must adapt or perish. And few organisms can survive alone: collaboration is needed in order to better secure the survival of the whole species or population.

This ecological analogy helps in focusing on ways in which the policy system might better adapt to the complexity of many of the tasks or problems which the modern state has to address. Here the study of implementation is viewed, first, as an integral part of the policy process rather than as a final stage

subject to formal administrative processes. Second, the approach acknowledges the ambiguity of many areas of public policy: objectives may not be precise, and different objectives may be in conflict. Third, it focuses on policy as a multidimensional, multi-organisational field of interaction.

The next two models can help explain why systems may fail to adapt successfully.

1.4 The contribution of culture: policy as meaning making

The third model of the relationship between policy and action is based on the idea that human agency cannot be understood by simply regarding people either as cogs in a machine or as elements in an interactive system. Rather, human beings are meaning makers and act on the basis of their understandings and interpretations of events. In other words, they construct their own reality. Such constructions are not unique to them as individuals, but draw on a stock of socially circulating repertoires of meaning to which new ideas are sometimes added while old ideas fall away.

Repertoires are recurrently used systems of terms (e.g. metaphors, figures of speech) employed to characterise and evaluate actions and events. How does this help in understanding how change happens? These repertoires of socially circulating meanings form a kind of already existing structure of meanings that shape how individuals interpret situations or events, and thus guide the way they respond. In other words, the language of politicians and policy makers does not just reflect a pre-given reality – it actually helps to constitute that reality. The power of discourse can be discerned in the ways in which public service managers tend to adopt ‘new’ policy language in order to legitimate change to their staff, or in order to win credibility and/or funds from government. Governments may draw on new discourses emerging from the professions, from the business world or from other stakeholders, and adapt them to their own purposes. Policy is made, and enacted, in a myriad spaces: in schools, in hospitals, or in local government.

But any discussion of why change may or may not happen would be incomplete without addressing the issues of power and resistance.

1.5 The problem of power: policy as political

The plural polity that characterises contemporary policy making means that many stakeholders are involved in the policy-action dynamic, from commercial firms, public and non-profit organisations, the professions, central and local government, service delivery organisations, trade unions and the media, to organised groups of the public itself. Viewing policy as political, then, does not mean simply focusing on politicians. Rather, it signifies adopting a stakeholder perspective in which multiple groups, each with their own interests or preferences, seek to influence the outcomes of policy making and delivery. The focus on politics means analysing the kinds of power each stakeholder may seek to exercise and assessing the balance of power between them.

Where such a focus on power in implementation exists, it has tended to focus on assumptions about resistance. It is assumed that where policy is not delivered, this is because public service organisations or professions resist its implementation in order to defend their own interests. However, there are two

other perspectives on power that may be helpful in analysing the policy-action dynamic. The first is the idea of discretion. Front-line staff are agents in the policy-action dynamic and act within the structures of the bureaucracies where they work, but they can never anticipate every situation that arises in the course of their work. Thus, because public work is complex, front-line workers inevitably exercise some discretion. The second perspective on power is the increasing emphasis on empowering citizens or service users in the policy-action dynamic and the extent to which power is actually devolved to the public. While there has recently been an explosion of participation and empowerment initiatives, vary rarely, it seems, is power actually ceded by the organisations concerned in favour of citizens or service users.

2 The models in action: what counts is what works?

You can think of the models as different lenses in a pair of methodological spectacles: put on the 'rational planning' model and some things will be highlighted and others obscured; but if you then switch to an 'organic' or 'cultural' model other things will come to your attention. Each one offers different possible explanations of why things work or, quite often, don't work. Another way of saying this is that each offers different kinds of explanation for implementation failure, and that using multiple models in this way encourages a shift from 'either/or' thinking.

The mechanical model. For those who turn to the mechanical model the assumption regarding policy failure is likely to be that the plans were defective, the targets flawed or the contract badly specified. The danger here is that implementation failure is liable to lead those working with an implicit mechanical model to draw more power back to the centre – in other words, to strengthen the levers of control – rather than to view the model itself as potentially flawed.

The organic model. Looking at policy failure from this perspective leads to a focus on failures of communication, on barriers to relationships working effectively, or on other factors that prevent the system from responding or adapting to new policy needs or imperatives. Here policy failure might lead to calls for a shift from top-down to more bottom-up approaches, or for more enabling policies that allow for innovation and experimentation.

The cultural model. This draws attention to problems of vision and leadership, either on the part of government or on the part of senior managers charged with the task of implementation. That is, there may not be a clear enough policy steer from government or managers, the policy itself may be so amorphous that it gives confusing signals about its purpose and goals. Those drawing on this model might call for a more coherent policy process and a clear policy direction that focuses on the long-term outcomes to be delivered, rather than a rapid succession of new policy initiatives that are tightly monitored in terms of short-term outputs.

The political model. Finally, policy failure might be explained in terms of outright resistance, whether passive or active, on the part of public service professions or organisations seeking to defend their interests. This kind of explanation has underpinned a succession of government reforms, such as the introduction of competition, the restructuring of services that are deemed to be clinging to old ways of

working, and the shift to enhancing the power of consumers in order to break open entrenched professional and/or organisational power.