IMPLEMENTING PUBLIC POLICY

AN INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY OF OPERATIONAL GOVERNANCE

THIRD EDITION

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THE FUTURE OF IMPLEMENTATION STUDIES

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Introduction

In this final chapter we need to provide our key conclusions. We do this by addressing the question: what future for implementation studies can be justified from our observed state of the art? Has, indeed, the subject become 'yesterday's issue', as one of us rhetorically asked a number of years ago (Hill, 1997)? The answer given in the introductory chapter of this book remains the answer in this last chapter: 'No'. We think the study of implementation has a future – although perhaps a different one than it seemed to have back in the 1970s.

In this chapter we come back again to the objectives of studying implementation (second section). What was it all about? Next, by way of a substantive rather than systematic summary of the argument of the book, we highlight some of our findings from the preceding chapters (third section). We continue by sketching some developments that can be judged as enhancing the study of implementation of public policies – under whatever contemporary heading (fourth section). The chapter ends with a concluding fifth section.

The objectives of studying implementation

In an academic discipline several questions may lead the quest for truth. After all, in the division of labour between 'science' and 'society' both parties have

legitimate expectations from each other. Programmatic and methodological considerations may embody the lines of distinction between science and other trades in society. Fundamentally, this is not different for a *social* science. In the study of politics and public administration, too, it ultimately is the combination of an orientation towards the accumulation of knowledge, on one hand, and the ways in which this knowledge is being gained, on the other, that make practising that study not identical to writing a novel or giving a yoga workshop.

Of course, from there the debate starts about the implications of the nature of the object of those disciplines in social science for the ways in which that object should be approached. In this book we have addressed implementation theory and research as a subdiscipline of political science and public administration. As we have suggested throughout this book, much theorizing about implementation since the late 1990s has been within a variant of the study of public administration described as public management.

In our view this means that all of the preceding statements made in this section go for implementation studies as well. As a consequence we see the following sorts of concerns in this subdiscipline: descriptive ones (the most realistic way to describe implementation processes); theoretical and methodological concerns (how to research implementation); and normative concerns (raising issues about whose will should prevail in the implementation of policy). Through the history of the subdiscipline – let us say since the publication of Pressman and Wildavsky's book in 1973 – these concerns have remained important. It means that when we identify the objectives of studying implementation, we should differentiate between teaching, research and consultancy.

It is clear that scholars, engaged as they are in exercises in scientific enquiry, in principle are driven by the same search for the truth, despite the question about whether these exercises take the form of teaching, doing research or giving advice. Yet the fact, for example, that policy analysis is a mixture of 'analysis of' policy and 'analysis for' policy (Gordon et al., 1977) indicates that the core preoccupations of those offering theoretical propositions will differ. Our assumption is that the stances taken by authors on implementation may, to a certain extent, be influenced by the kinds of concerns they are led by. What we described as descriptive, theoretical and methodological, and normative concerns may imply, quite pragmatically, different objectives associated with, respectively, teaching, research and consultancy. In fact, at a meta-level different kinds of questions are leading. In teaching, the objective is transferring knowledge: what knowledge and insights are available? Theory and research aim at contributing to the accumulation of that knowledge and insights: given what we know, what can we explain? In consultancy the objective is giving advice to practitioners: how can knowledge be used to act?

Teaching about implementation

As far as teaching is concerned there is a need to be as comprehensive as possible, identifying the multitude of factors that influence implementation and the range

of interpretations of their impact. Therefore there will tend to be a bias away from simplification. Analysis will be essentially 'of policy', and there is likely to be some attention to the difficulties of explaining action. Obviously, therefore, within accounts of implementation offered by some teachers will be interpretative perspectives influenced by postmodern challenges to generalization and the accumulation of hypotheses (see pp. 40–2). The word 'some' is important in that last sentence; we certainly do not generalize here about all teachers. The important point is that while, in our view, such perspectives place serious constraints upon research activities they do not necessarily inhibit teaching about implementation. Hence we find Fox (1990) supporting arguments for a wide view of the policy arena and a broad timespan, and also arguing for the consideration of 'multiple standpoints'. Fox rejects a total shift away from positivism, but argues 'to the positive benefits of modern social science must be added respect for the disciplined employment of sound intuition itself born of experience not reducible to models, hypotheses, quantification, "hard" data, or little pieces of incorrigible fixity' (1990: 211).

Yanow develops a related argument for an 'interpretive' approach, with an emphasis on 'interpretations of policy language, legislative intent or implementing actions' (Yanow, 1993) to the study of implementation, questioning the quest for one best way of studying the subject.

We have sympathy with this perspective but do not think that it necessarily leads to a position in which all that teachers can do is 'tell stories'. There are regularities to be observed and scope for cautious generalization. We explore this point further with reference to research.

Researching implementation

As the teaching perspective is likely to embrace all philosophical and methodological standpoints, and to be able to tolerate complex and possibly conflicting explanations, we have started with that. By contrast the research perspective tends to involve efforts to restrict the span of attention, recognize the specificity of policy and operational contexts and confine the number of variables to be examined to a relatively small number. The formulation of hypotheses will generally be required in which identification of dependent and independent variables will be attempted, and *ceteris paribus* clauses are likely to be used. Quantification and comparison will be seen as important. While we do not want to suggest that all who engage in implementation research are positivists in any strict sense, those concerns of traditional positivist research are likely to be in evidence. Hence it is from the particularly research-orientated implementation theorists like May and Winter, and public management researchers like Meier and O'Toole, that we see strong efforts to limit the span of theoretical attention, at least in respect of any particular research project.

There is also inevitably an issue in respect of the research concern about funding and other support for work on implementation. It is not surprising to find a top-down orientation, or at least a seeking for 'what works', in the writings of

those whose approach to implementation analysis is particularly linked with research concerns. For many of the people who fund research work want to see efforts to answer specific questions about differences in implementation, and often about the reasons for what is called implementation 'success' and 'failure'.

Advising about implementation

These practical concerns also apply to the consultancy orientation in implementation theory, with the difference that there will often not be the same pressure towards the systematic testing of hypotheses in this case. We find thus the impact of consultancy in the domination, particularly in the early implementation work, of the search for a series of concrete propositions ('rules for successful implementation'). It would be unfair, however, to suggest that the consultancy approach is always orientated towards simplification. There is an interesting tradition of stressing complexity, in which the consultant role is to help clients to cope with this. We see this most saliently in the long career of Eugene Bardach (1977, 1998) with his emphasis upon 'fixing games' and identifying key roles in those games. Similarities exist in work in the UK in which inter-organizational complexity is stressed, with an early but influential publication on the roles of 'reticulists' (Friend et al., 1974). The latter term refers to actors working across organizational boundaries and contemporary work on how best successful partnerships can be formed (see particularly Hudson and Hardy, 2002). A related development in the Netherlands is the elaboration of propositions about network management (Koppenjan and Klijn, 2004).

While consultants in the strict sense need clients who pay for their advice, there is nevertheless in implementation studies work in which normative concerns are central. In many cases these concerns include challenges to the normative simplicity of the top-down perspective, which takes it for granted that successful implementation means compliance with the wishes of dominant actors. We speak here of what is implicitly consultancy, but without specific clients, although perhaps 'advocacy' is a better word. In this sense we see authors, such as Rothstein, whose particular concerns are with highlighting the normative questions embedded in implementation studies. Also work can be observed from authors who specifically identify themselves with concerns other than of those 'at the top'. A grass-roots view of democracy is explicitly embodied in some of Hjern and Hull's work (1982). Contrary to many of the simplifications of his view which stress the power to 'subvert' policy, Michael Lipsky's original analysis of street-level bureaucracy is concerned to recognize the validity of the perspectives of low-level officials *and* of the public to whom they relate. At the time of writing there is a strong interest in this work, with many writers now demonstrating the complex relationship between street-level behaviour and policy (Hupe et al., forthcoming 2015).

As indicated above, we do not suggest that those who have theorized about implementation belong explicitly and strictly to one of the three categories of

teachers, researchers or consultants (in an explicit or wider sense). After all, many individual implementation scholars fulfil two or all these three roles – although perhaps not always at the same time. We do suggest, however, that participation in one or more of these activities may have had some influence on approaches to theory, in terms of stances on the divergences identified in the subsequent chapters of this book. These divergences particularly regard:

- approaches to the top-down/bottom-up synthesis, and especially the normative issues that are embedded in it;
- treatment of the policy formation/implementation boundaries;
- the attention given to complexity, and particularly to networks; and
- simplification and the specification of policy and contextual differences.

In the following section we highlight some of our findings from the previous chapters, by way of summarizing the argument unfolded in this book.
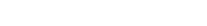
The study of governance in operation

We started from the position, set out in Chapter 1, that within political science and public administration a subdiscipline concerned with policy implementation seems to have been established. The introductory remarks included explanations about the terminology we have used in the book. In Chapter 2 we gave attention to the subject of implementation in general, looking at its societal embedding and at theoretical elements that are relevant to the subject, although coming from a different background. Next we reviewed the literature about implementation, in Chapters 3 and 4. There we observed that it was a development from a long-standing concern to explain, and probably try to reduce, the gap between the initial formulation of the goals of a public policy and the actual results of that policy. In fact attention to the relation between intentions and achievements dates far back; otherwise the pyramids in Egypt could not have been built.

The history of 'public policy' as the descriptor for the strivings connecting inten-tions and achievements of government actors, however, is relatively young. It is seen little before the rise of the modern state. Furthermore, the period in which public policy implementation as a modern phenomenon under corresponding labels has been studied, is even shorter. It seems defendable to mark the beginning of that period with the publication of Pressman and Wildavsky's influential book *Implementation* in 1973. We showed that the mainstream implementation litera-ture, broadly speaking originating from that book, to some extent supplemented, and to some extent bypassed, other relevant literature on politics, public law and public organizations. Within the specific implementation literature a lively debate developed, dominated by arguments about whether top-down or bottom-up views of implementation were more appropriate. While that argument was partly about methodology, it was perhaps primarily driven by concerns about accountability.

The top-down preoccupation with the elimination of the gap between formulation and output contrasted with the bottom-up view that this phenomenon was a product of the inevitable, and perhaps desirable, participation of other actors in later stages of the policy process.

Then, as is the way with debates of this kind, gradually the literature moved away from a simple confrontation between the top-down and bottom-up perspectives on studying implementation. Authors became critical of the 'misery' kind of approach that led top-downers to be preoccupied with a process of policy modification. From a methodological point of view it became recognized that it is much more fruitful to seek to explain and understand the implementation (sub-)process as such, than to be preoccupied by a need to explain an inevitable gap. From a normative point of view it became recognized (a) that there are alternative views about the accountability of public policy that cannot be resolved by an academic literature, and (b) that in many situations the exploration of the way alternative 'accountabilities' can fuse together is a more fruitful way forward for those anxious to control implementation than a preoccupation with domination by any single party.

Chapter 5 then added to that review the perspective that the evolution of the debate needs to be seen not simply in terms of a developing academic argument, but also in its relationship to a changing perspective on the role of government in society. The latter has involved what we, alongside many other contemporary writers, see as an evolution from *government* to *governance*. As the essence of that phrase we see the decoupling of actor and activities, of locus and focus. Governance, of course, remains practised by government, but this may take various forms. The need to specify actor/activities combinations may lead to distinctions between sorts of governance, like corporate governance, government governance or public governance. In fact, however, paraphrasing Bozeman's (1987) motto one could state: *All* governance is public.

We then asked what the implications would be of what we labelled as *the governance paradigm* for the old issues about implementing public policy. It was noted that there are authors who see in these new developments the 'death' of the study of implementation. We agree that governance makes the top-down/bottom-up debate seem rather dated, and the top-down control emphasis in the work of some of the top-down writers particularly irrelevant. Implementation theory has evolved away from that debate to take on board complexity in respect both of the process and of the related issues of control. Nevertheless, it seems wrong to see the implementation perspective as no longer appropriate. On the contrary, in our view it is the very complexity of the issues facing modern governance that makes it important to continue giving attention to implementation: in practice as well as in studying it. One of the virtues of the work of the early top-down theorists was that they emphasized issues about purposive action and control over policy processes. Those issues remain important regardless of the stance one takes on who should be in control. While we recognize that there has been a tendency in some postmodernist writing on public administration to see the policy process as having a shapeless, 'garbage can', character, we share the

more widespread concern about the need to raise questions on how policy processes may be influenced.

Having identified the prevalence of what we described as a governance paradigm, in Chapter 6 we explored the theoretical consequences of looking at implementation from a governance perspective. We reviewed the functionality of the stages model and explored the pros and cons of alternative general frameworks. It was in that chapter, too, that we gave an elaboration of the multiple governance framework that we developed as a way to reframe the policy process.

We have elaborated through Chapters 6 to 8 what it means to do research on implementation and to try to make recommendations based on that, given the prevalence of the governance paradigm, on one hand, and the state of knowledge about implementation, on the other. For that purpose we addressed the agenda of issues that we identified in Chapter 4 as characteristic of the present state of implementation theory. The search for a synthesis noted in that chapter, invites implementation researchers to explain explicitly and as specifically as possible what it is that needs explanation. If 'implementation' is an object of research at all, the question where in a policy process policy formation ends and implementation begins has to be handled methodologically. Next to that it is important to consider how to deal theoretically and methodologically with the fact that many policy processes involve a multiplicity of administrative layers. While network analysis has broadened the horizontal dimension in implementation research, specifying inter-organizational relationships is needed. As far as the vertical dimension is concerned, the fact should be acknowledged that differences in managerial action refer to an important, but only one, set of factors causing varying agency responses. On the borders of those agencies citizens as clients, and other actors affected by the policy involved, function as stakeholders whose actions may influence the implementation of that policy as well. And then there are macro-environmental factors that may be hard to control, but nevertheless may have a pertinent influence, too. Measuring the impact of all these factors may be difficult, certainly in their relationships. This is why we think it is important not to champion either quantitative or qualitative research methods exclusively. We note however, in this latest edition of our work, welcome efforts to develop methodologies that can bridge the gap between the two.

While researching in this field is one thing, practitioners, working under an action imperative, may welcome advice on how to implement public policies. The search for truth in academia is paralleled by the quest for appropriate action in the practice of public administration. In Chapter 8 we explored the various dimensions of the situations in which governance is being practised. There we also tried to elaborate conceptually the kind of general insights about the ways actors can 'steer' the behaviour of other actors, as developed by authors like Etzioni and Lindblom. Although reality almost always is ambiguous – or rather, because of that – it remains relevant to specify contexts for action. After all, it is in implementation as the operational part of governance that 'good intentions' get materialized.

Promising developments

As indicated, we do not see studying implementation as an obsolete matter; that study will continue, under whatever heading. Preferring to give this book 'an open end', rather than to aim at closing an ongoing discussion, it seems relevant to identify some lines that may gain momentum in the future. Overviewing the field we see three sorts of such developments**.**

First, there are the implementation studies called simply that. It can be stated as a fact that the multidisciplinary attention to the subject of implementation continues as before. Just as there was practice and study of implementation before it became something that could be called a paradigm, this will be the case after that paradigm has been succeeded by newer ones. As Sætren (2005) has shown on the basis of a comprehensive bibliometrical study, many implementation studies are still being done. They may often be single case studies and policy field-related – which may make them less visible – but there still is a critical mass of *mainstream implementation studies*, in the literal sense.

As a second development a renewed attention to issues of implementation can be observed in the literature on what is called 'multilevel governance'. Looking at governing across more than one administrative layer – as we would formulate the subject matter – researchers, for instance, are interested in the 'implementation' of directives of the European Union by the various member states. In that context the traditional questions about the relationship between policy implementation and policy formation are posed anew (but see pp. 146–7). Elsewhere we have pointed at some methodological traps associated with such research (Hill and Hupe, 2003). In particular there is the possibility that implementation is presupposed where, in fact, legitimate policy co-formation is occurring. Because of the contemporary preoccupation with traditional issues, perhaps the label *neo-implementation studies* is appropriate here.

Third, there are studies of 'implementation' performed under different headings. The kind of research recognized by Kettl (2000) and O'Toole (2000a) as promising and, actually, advancing implementation studies can be valued as broadening perspectives and enhancing chances for the development of new insights and the use of new sources of knowledge. The systematic research that some scholars do, particularly American ones, makes a substantial theoretical–empirical contribution to the accumulation of knowledge. If this knowledge concerns what still can be called the subdiscipline of public policy implementation studies, or something else, this in our view is of secondary importance. One of the characteristics of these studies is that, instead of theorizing about what should be the elements of a comprehensive, overarching *grand theory* (constantly adding new variables), they focus on confronting existing knowledge about a relatively narrowly defined subject, in a systematic way, with relevant sets of data. Next to this kind of study, it can be expected that, if certain requirements are met (see Chapter 7), the linking of large quantities of data with parsimoniously formulated formal models (Meier

and O'Toole, 2001; see also Torenvlied, 2000) may advance the field – either in the narrow or in a broader sense.

In the context of this third category two contemporary trends in the study of public administration seem worth noting. One is that one can observe a rise of studies in which performance is explicitly being analysed. Since the 1980s the measuring of the results of government action, in all kinds of variants, has got attention (Pollitt and Bouckaert, 2004; Bouckaert and Halligan, 2007; Ferlie et al., 2005). This applies both to the practice and the study of public administration, and is often addressed as public management. It is this trend, an ideological movement with real consequences, which made us speak in Chapter 5 about the New Public Management paradigm. Recently, in a limited number of empirical studies making connections between various sorts of 'public service performance' as dependent variables and specific other variables on the explanatory side, gets explicit attention (Boyne et al., 2006).

The other trend is that the degree of rigour seems to be increasing in policy studies. Although the volume *Theories of the Policy Process* hardly contains 'theories' in the meaning given by Ostrom and adopted by us in Chapter 6, it does give an informative overview of what Sabatier (2007a), the editor, calls 'more promising' theoretical approaches. If one takes a closer look at the eight approaches, one can identify a variety of ways to conceptualize what, in fact, can be called 'performance'. All of the approaches aim at explaining variation; although the social constructivist one, as presented by Ingram et al. (2007) is perhaps not exactly *oriented to* causal explanation. Some of the approaches want to explain policy change or policy adoption, but the Advocacy Coalition Framework (Sabatier and Weible, 2007) and the Multiple Streams Framework (Zahariadis, 2007) explicitly focus on explaining policy outputs and outcomes. What is relevant here is not the question whether these approaches justifiably are labelled as 'frameworks'. Rather, the fact is remarkable that certainly the latter two are interested in explaining variation in what can be, but is not, called *performance*: not from a public management but *from a policy studies perspective.*

And then, in a way, we seem to be back with what implementation studies were all about. After all, the subject matter of these studies, as formulated by O'Toole (2000a: 273), still concerns 'what happens between the establishment of policy and its impact in the world of action'.

Conclusion

In Chapter 4 we reported on the state of the art of implementation studies at the beginning of the twenty-first century. We started accumulating the material for that chapter in the first edition of this book while believing that we could assemble a comprehensive database of implementation studies carried out during the 1990s. This belief proved to be mistaken; given the diversity of the subject we soon discovered that it was an impossible task. Studies claiming to be about

implementation had been carried out without reference to the mainstream theo-retical literature, while excellent insights relevant to the theoretical debate had been provided by studies apparently indifferent to that mainstream.

Actually this is the situation right now, as well. On one hand, the days of the policy-implementation paradigm are over, as we argued in Chapter 5. At the same time, however, the implementation, as legitimately as possible, of decisions agreed upon in the face of collective ambitions goes on, while remaining to be deemed necessary – to say the least. The labels and concepts may change, that fact fundamentally does not. As long as collective ambitions are strived at, governance (or whatever it may be called in the future) will be practised. And as long as that will be the case, it will be perceived worthwhile to study the operational part of that governance.

This situation justifies sustained academic attention to what in this book has been addressed as implementing public policy. Such attention may keep the threefold form we distinguished in the second section of this chapter. One may see a certain analogy here with the *trias gubernandi* presented in Chapter 6. In theory and research the leading meta-question directs the quest for truth (cf. the directional level). In consultancy the leading meta-question is about putting knowledge into practice (cf. the operational level). The meta-question leading in teaching and the objective of documenting and transferring knowledge relate to maintaining the state of the (sub-) discipline as institution. Then we are talking about the constitutive level.

Thus specifying academic attention implies – here as well – distinguishing between actor and activities. As indicated, many scholars are engaged both in research and teaching, and often also in consultancy. When writing this book, however, it was particularly concerns related to teaching that we had in mind. Eventually, presenting once in a while what knowledge and insights are available may contribute to estab-lishing the conditions necessary for the academic work of the future. In this book, therefore, we have brought together many insights relevant for all who teach about implementation. We did so, recognizing throughout that a scholarly activity in an applied discipline should make positive contributions both to the accumulation of new evidence from research and to the passing on of ideas for action.