

Policy implementation—a review of literature

Introduction:

Implementation has been defined as “the carrying out of a basic policy decision , usually incorporated in a statute but can be in form of important executive orders or court decisions”(mazmanian and sabatier 1983). It has also been defined as those actions by people that are directed at achievement of objectives set forth in the policy decision (van meter and van Horne 1974).

Thus Policy implementation is what develops between an intention of the government to do something and its ultimate impact following action (o toole 2000). Implementation is said to commence once goals and objectives have been established by policy decisions and funds committed (van horn and van meter 1974). Implementation involves both organisational systems and processes and actions of members of the organisation.

Implementation studies are to be found at the intersection of public administration, organizational theory, public management research and political science studies (Schofield and Sausman 2004)

Evolution of the field

The policy implementation research literature has grown over the last thirty five years. Significantly the publication of this growing literature is seen in journals outside the core field, suggesting that implementation research has become multidisciplinary and dispersed. The most important fields studied as part of this research stream are education, health, social, economics and environment (Saetren 2005). Although the most preferred topic is education especially for dissertations; the interest in health and environment has grown in the last fifteen years. The emphasis has been on study of domestic issues in these fields with a predominant bias towards United States and to a lesser degree to Europe. Global or international issues have received less focus (Saetren 2005).

The study of policy implementation among researchers has oscillated in and out of interest during the last thirty five years. Policy implementation prior to 1970s was not considered an issue important for research. Its importance, there after, has oscillated from overarching importance to neglect. During periods of overarching importance, there has been proliferation of topics for debate such as top down versus bottom up approaches; emphasis on policy content versus implementation of policy; and role of qualitative methods versus quantitative methods for research (o toole 2000). Despite these swings, the pace of research has been slow and even today there is a felt need for large empirical investigations, both longitudinal and cross sectional studies. Policy failures continue to be prominent thus indicating that the implementation puzzle is still unsolved

Numerous authors in their reviews of literature (o toole 2000, 2004; Schofield 2001; Deleon 1999) have contended that interest in implementation studies by policy researchers has decreased. The reasons for such a decrease in interest could have been the continuing protracted but futile debate in policy literature on approaches to study of implementation(top down versus bottom up); changing society-government relations which have become more reciprocal and less hierarchic leading to a shift to research in other topics such as governance and networks; pronounced bias towards study of failure of policy leading to decreased interest of researchers; oversimplification of the implementation process with emphasis on a linear rational stage model leading to a

disconnect between research findings and practice; and a shift to more newer streams of research such as networks, which facilitated publication.

There has been a call for increased research effort in this field (Lester and Goggin 1998) with particular emphasis on the integration of policy design and implementation aspects. Implementation studies are still relevant as the translation of government policies into practice is still a concern. Although recent research on policy implementation has shown less bias towards study of failures, still the lack of a well developed theory of implementation (O'Toole 2000) makes this research still relevant.

Review of literature:

Implementation consists of action on part of actors involved in it and the results of these actions. Some authors would like to combine both these aspects in research studies while others would like to make a distinction between actions and their outcomes.

The understanding of implementation requires the recognition that it is (O'toole 2000):

1. a process involving multiple actors
2. in many cases involves multiple organisations
3. the important role of clients or recipients

These characteristics necessitate the need to look at issues of coordination across institutions in the absence of operational authority. Research is still plagued by lack of consensus and parsimonious explanations (O'toole 2000).

Research literature in policy implementation can be categorized as:

1. conceptual papers (van horn and van meter 1974; sorg 1983; o toole 2004; Matland 1995; Rainey and Stein Bauer 1999; cline 2000)
2. review papers (o toole 2000; Saetren 2005; Sinclair 2001; schofield 2001; Lester et al 1987)
3. Empirical papers qualitative: those using a single case study (Grantham 2001; stoker 1989; zahardias and Morgan 2005) and those using multiple case studies (dyer 1999; Brinkerhoff 1999; john 1999; Pearson–nelson 2005; Ben zadok 2006)
4. empirical using quantitative methods(Maier and o toole 2001)

Evolution of the literature can also be categorized based on the approaches taken to study implementation. The evolution of implementation research saw the development of two main approaches based on assumptions – the top down and the bottom up approaches (Matland 1995).

The top down approach assumed that implementation begins with policy objectives and implementation will follow in a linear fashion—a product of a rational public administration model and which assumes distinct policy formulation and implementation. The top down approach lays emphasis on the actors who design the policy and the factors which can be manipulated from the centre. The emphasis in such a case is more on the rational design of the policy (Schofield 2001)

The top down models ((Van Meter and Van Horn 1974; Mazmanian and Sabatier 1983; 1989) see the starting point of implementation as this decision and identifies the central actors as most influential in producing the desired effects of the decision. Implementation is influenced by three sets of variables namely- tractability of the problem; ability to

structure the implementation and non statutory variables. This approach has a prescriptive bent as it attempts to develop generalisable policy advice across different policy areas. General prescription given by top down researchers is

1. to have clear and consistent policy goals(mazmanian and sabatier 1983)
2. minimize the number of actors involved(pressman and wildavasky 1973)
3. limit the extent of change in content (mazmanian and sabatier 1983)
4. Have implementation done through agency which is sympathetic to policy goals (Sabatier 1989).

The criticism of top down approach has been that it fails to consider the significance of past actions in the same policy area; treats implementation as an administrative process and ignores the expertise of local implementers but sees them as impediments to implementation (Schofield 2001)

Bottom up models developed from the main criticism of top down models which ignored the behavioral aspect of implementation and the key role of local implementers (Schofield 2001).Their main focus was on the motives and actions of actors involved in implementation and assume that formulation and implementation are an integrated process and are descriptive in nature as emphasis is on explaining the role of factors causing difficulty in implementation (Matland 1995)

The bottom up approach (Hjern and Porter (1981); Hull and Hjern (1982) lay emphasis on the target groups and service deliverers and state that policy is made at this level. Bottom up models are more descriptive in nature and state that implementation can be better understood by looking at the policy from the viewpoint of target groups and service deliverers. Policy implementation is assumed to occur at two levels (Matland 1995):

1. macro implementation where the centrally located actors devise a government program
2. Micro implementation where local level actors react to these plans and develop their own plans and implement them.

Implementation problems arise out of the interaction between policy and micro level institutions. Central actors can only indirectly influence micro level factors and autonomy at the local level is necessary to allow adaptation of policy to suit contextual factors. Policy effect is a function of its effect on the street level bureaucrats and their ability to policy to suit local conditions. Studies under this approach attempted to identify and describe the goals, activities, problems and contacts of the local level implementers and are predominantly case studies (Deleon 1999).

The criticism of the bottom up models is that it lays too much emphasis on the autonomy of local implementers where as policy control needs to be done by actors whose power to formulate policies is derived by virtue of them being elected representatives. Further it is possible to influence the goals and strategies of the local actors by determining their institutional structure, resources made available to them and their access to the actual implementation arena (Schofield 2001).

The two distinct approaches to the implementation problem led to a series of protracted and futile debates resulting in waning of interest of researchers (o toole 2000; Deleon 1999). Attempts at reconciliation of approaches have been limited and have been based

on attempting to find a combination of two approaches(Matland 1995) or identify conditions appropriate for each approach(berman 1978).

Reconciliation of the two approaches has been attempted by either specifying in advance the policy objectives, detailed means-ends, and outcome criteria(forward mapping) or specifying the behavior needed to be changed at the lowest level (backward mapping(Matland 1995). This allowed the consideration of the views of the target groups and local implementers.

A combination of the two approaches was also seen when interest groups (advocacy coalitions) were made the unit of analysis. Advocacy coalitions are groups of policy advocates who share the same set of beliefs and goals (Sabatier 1986). To achieve a meaningful study it is appropriate that a specific policy is used as the unit of analysis instead of a broad policy area and that the same is studied over a period.

The approach to identify appropriate conditions for use of either of the approaches was based upon the parameters describing the policy context. A top down or bottom up approach can be used to prepare the implementation plan as indicated below (Berman 1980).

Factors deciding which approach to use:

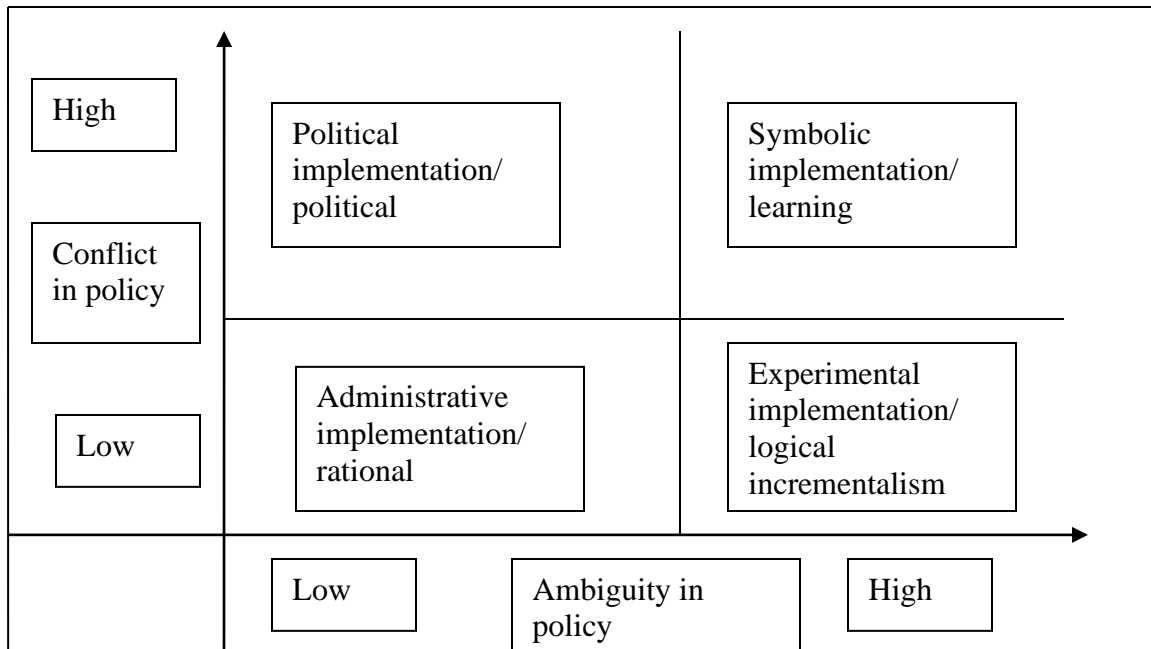
FACTORS/APPROACH	TOP DOWN	BOTTOM UP
Scope of change	incremental	Radical, large
Validity of technology	certain	uncertain
Goal conflict	low	high
Institutional setting	Tightly coupled	Loosely coupled
Environment stability	stable	Unstable , dynamic

In this approach, feasibility of the implementation plan was the overriding criteria on which implementation plans are evaluated. However; in certain conditions such as the necessity to enforce decisions taken at the centre on policy which is essential but faces opposition at the local level or calls for uniform implementation; centrally directed policy may be more appropriate (Linda and peters 1987).

The dangers associated with the top down approach are resistance, disregard or proforma compliance while the bottom up approach can lead to cooptation and pursuit of individual goals which are contrary to policy objectives (Matland 1995).

At a conceptual level, there have been attempts at theory building such as Matland's (1995) attempt to create a typology of implementation approaches.

Based on the degree of ambiguity and conflict involved in the policy process, four types of approaches to implementation—namely political, symbolic, experimental and administrative—were identified. Political approach is used when conflict is high and ambiguity is low. Symbolic approach is used when both conflict and ambiguity are high. Administrative approach is used when both conflict and ambiguity are low while experimental approach is used when ambiguity is high and conflict is low. The crux of differentiation is that in administrative approach which is predominantly top down, outcomes are determined by resources, while in symbolic they are decided by the strength of the local coalition. In experimental approach , which can be a mix of both top down and bottom , outcomes are decide by the contextual condition and in case of political approach they are decided by power.



Adapted from Matland (1995)

Policy formation initiates activities that begin the implementation process. Policy formation variables are necessary for explaining implementation. Four constructs comprise the implementation theory—policy formation; Intraorganisational elements; inter-organisational elements and outcomes.(Sinclair 2001).

There have been attempts to identify variables influencing the implementation process both empirically (Sorg 1987; Brinkerhoff 1999; Pearson-Nelson 2005) and conceptually (van Horn and van Meter 1974; Rainey and Steinbur 1999).

Because of the multiple approaches to policy implementation research, literature is dispersed and fragmented and there is a lack of cumulation of research resulting in a large number of variables being identified (Lester et al 1987; Sinclair 2001; O'Toole 2004). This gets reflected in the list of variables as indicated in the table given below.

The variables identified are: (c – conceptual; e –empirical)

Name of the variable	Reference of study/ studies identifying it
Learning, Feed Back	Schofield(2004 E), Schofield (2001 C), Dyer (1999 E)
Motivation	Schofield(2004 E), Rainey And Steinbur(Psm) (1999 C),
Creation Of New Independent Structures	Schofield(2004 E)
Local Context / Environment	Sinclair (2001 E), Sorg (1983 E), Streb And Willoughby(2005 C), Van Meter And Van Horn (1974c)
Autonomy /Power	Sinclair (2001 E), Rainey And Steinbur (1999 C), Schofield (2001 C), Brinkerhoff (1999 E), Grantham(2001e), Zahardias And Morgan(2005 E), Lloyd Et Al (1999e), Terpstra And Havinga (2001e)
Incentives And Constraints	Sinclair (2001 E), Brinkerhoff (1999 E),

Name of the variable	Reference of study/ studies identifying it
Conflict/ Consensus	Matland (1995 C), Ryan (1996 E), Fenger And Klok (2001e)
Ambiguity	Matland (1995 C)
Governance	O Toole Jr (2004 C), Brinkerhoff (1999 E)
Culture Of Organisation	Rainey And Steinbeur (1999 C)
Leadership	Rainey And Steinbeur (1999 C), Streb And Willoughby(2005 C), Pearson-Nelson(2005 E), Lloyd Et Al (1999 E), O'toole Jr And Maier (1999 E), Vangen And Huxam (2003e)
External Partners	Rainey And Steinbeur (1999 C), Pearson-Nelson(2005e), Ryan (1996 E)
Coordination / Cooperation	Cline (2000 C), Brinkerhoff (1999 E), Stoker (1989e), Pearson-Nelson(2005 E), Ryan (1996 E), Butler (2003e), Vangen And Huxam (2003e), Fenger And Klok (2001e)
Communication	Schofield (2001 C), Streb And Willoughby(2005 C), Pearson-Nelson(2005 E), Terpstra And Havinga (2001e), Van Meter And Van Horn (1974c)
Participation	Dyer (1999 E), Brinkerhoff (1999 E), Stoker (1989e), De Leon And De Leon (2002 C),
Institutional Factors	Brinkerhoff (1999 E), John (1999e),
Net Works Management	Brinkerhoff (1999 E), Grantham(2001e), Maeier And O'toole Jr (2001 E), O'toole Jr And Maier (1999 C), Butler (2003e)
Street Level Bureaucrats	Sorg (1983 C), Ryan (1996 E), Van Meter And Van Horn (1974 C)
Characteristics Of Policy	Sorg (1983 C), Ben-Zadok (2006 E), Van Meter And Van Horn (1974 C)
Characteristics Of Implementing Agency	Sorg (1983 C), Butler (2003 E), Van Meter And Van Horn (1974c)
Staff Competency	Streb And Willoughby(2005 C)
Managerial Initiative	Pearson-Nelson(2005 E),
Resources	Pearson-Nelson(2005 E), Van Meter And Van Horn (1974c)
Processes	Mcnulty (2003 E), De Leon (1999c),
Organisational Structure	Mcnulty (2003 E), Terpstra And Havinga (2001e), Hjern And Porter (1981c), Van Meter And Van Horn (1974c)

Policy implementation research has now transformed itself with broadening of the scope of questions being addressed thus complicating the agenda. A broader theme of governance which takes into account the design and operation of structures and processes of policy action. Programs are used as units of analysis. Governance is concerned with creating the conditions for ordered rules and collective action often including agents in the private and non profit sectors as well a within the public sector. The focus is on governance mechanism—grants, contracts and agreements. There is paucity of empirical literature on relationship between governance and outcomes (o toole jr 2000).

Empirical findings:

Understanding of how and why public policy is put into effect is implementation theory (Schofield and sausman 2004). Implementation models till date have not dealt with the ambiguity, messiness and complexity of implementation. Implementation implies processes and ability to convert policy into action by operationalising the strategy in form of programs. Operationalisation of policy is not addressed in implementation literature. Policy designers cannot anticipate the operational consequences of policy. (Schofield 2004).

The impact of how a program is intending to achieve its policy objectives depends upon the receptivity of the local environment to its means and its mix of incentives and constraints. Programs are applied unevenly across units because each local unit can react differently to the mix of constraints and incentives depending upon the munificence and management of the local context. (Sinclair 2001). The implementation of a policy through a series of programs is influenced by the role played by various stake holders and interest groups (Ryan 1996) and therefore management of these groups is one of the factors key to successful implementation (Pearson-nelson 2005). Apart from the interest groups, the characteristics of the program/ policy which involve the amount of change being introduced and the number and variety of components in the program influence the degree of complexity and dynamism to be managed in the local context. This can be managed by formal organisational mechanisms such as participation (stoker 1989), managing the role of local implementers (Ryan 1996); use of policy feed back loop and learning (schofield 2004) resulting in policy content being adapted to initiatives more suited to local context called backward mapping (dyer 1999); increased coordination and cooperation both within organisation and across independent units involved in the implementation process(Ryan 1996 ; Butler 2003; Vangen And Huxam 2003; Fenger And Klok 2001) facilitated by increased formal and informal communication(Terpstra and havinga 2001). All these mechanisms can be influenced by use of incentives (Brinkerhoff 1999) and power (Zahardias and Morgan2005).

It is recognised that implementing public policies involves a much larger number of agencies and actors, many of which would be outside the formal hierarchical control of the lead implementing unit and thus interorganisational coordination is a distinguishing feature (Brinkerhoff 1999). This involves both stake holders, interested parties and other units involved in the implementation process and the management of an order and coordination among these is called governance(Brinkerhoff 1999) and thus involves formal and informal networks(Grantham 2001; Maeier and O'toole jr 2001). Under such conditions, where interorganisational coordination predominates, by facilitating local autonomy (Lloyd et al 1999) managers may be thrust into leadership roles which are a key ingredient for successful implementation (Pearson-Nelson 2005; Lloyd Et Al 1999; O'toole Jr And Maier 1999, Vangen And Huxam 2003). Leadership roles promote managerial initiative taking (Pearson-nelson 2005) and facilitate management of networks. Policy implementation is a non linear process (O'toole jr and Maier 1999).

The construct "Structure of the implementation organisation" has been identified by researchers of policy implementation. An implementation structure is the entity used by implementers to achieve the program objectives. Using this as a unit of analysis

facilitates evaluation of programs (Hjern and Porter 1982). The identification of the implementation organisation is necessary to facilitate incorporation of all factors influencing policy implementation (Sinclair 2001).

The main drawback of the empirical research in policy implementation field has been that they have not concentrated on the processes involved in implementation (McNulty 2003; De Leon 1999), and have only attempted to either enumerate variables involved or indicate the significance of them.

Problems associated with the research in this field

Little is known about the policy implementation because (van Horn and van Meter 1974)

1. of a naïve assumption that once policy is made, implementation will occur because implementation is simple
2. growth of planning, programming budgeting systems led to neglect of implementation (look at growth of strategic planning in the sixties)
3. Difficulty of the task has discouraged study—because of serious boundary problems, variables are difficult to measure, and requires attention to multiple actions over an extended period of time.
4. Studies are hampered by lack of a theoretical perspective especially a theoretical framework within which policy implementation can be examined

Literature on implementation theory shows substantial pluralism but little accumulation of knowledge about the process and is fragmented and dispersed (Sinclair 2001; DeLeon 1999; Schofield and Sausman 2004). Plentiful theories, large number of variables, little consensus and accumulated theory, improper and imprecise definition of concepts and constructs and scarce validated findings reduce the utility of implementation research and its application to practice (O'Toole 2004; Lester et al 1986). There has been predominant concentration on policy formation variables (> 90% of articles focus on formation variables (Sinclair 2001).

The interest of researchers in policy implementation research has waxed and waned with time (O'Toole Jr 2000) and have been obsessed with study of failures (DeLeon 1999).

Methodological issues:

45 % of the articles do not discuss their theoretical assumptions and do not include outcomes in their studies. Only 30% of the articles show operationalisation of variables and 40% of the articles linked propositions to theory. Methodology used is qualitative and predominantly single case studies (Sinclair 2001). Of late there have been studies which have used multiple case studies and a small number have gone for quantitative studies. Use of processual studies is not in vogue although emphasis has been there (DeLeon 1999; McNulty 2003). There is also a paucity of validated findings (O'Toole 2004).

Gaps in literature:

- lack of a theoretical frame work
Implementation literature shows that failure of policy implementation is common, non random and patterned (de Leon and Deleon 2002). Studies are hampered by lack of a theoretical perspective especially a theoretical frame work within which policy implementation can be examined (van horn and van meter 1974; Schofield 2004)
- Paucity or total lack of processual studies (de Leon 1999) and a process oriented model to inform practice.
An understanding of implementation requires recognition of the importance of the role of clients; accepting the multi-actor characteristic of the process and the requirement of inter-organisational coordination. It also requires that we understand what the actors in implementation have about their context. In view of these characteristics, it is essential that a processual analysis is what is suited for a good study of implementation and the study have to be longitudinal in nature (o toole 2000). Most of the models or frame works developed either enumerate variables, or indicate the importance of variables but do not describe or explain the processes involved in implementation and the interactions of the variables in the processes.

Processes: Learning, Feed Back, Coordination / Cooperation,
Content variables: Motivation, Local Context / Environment, Autonomy,
Communication, Participation, Street Level Bureaucrats, Characteristics of Policy,
Characteristics Of Implementing Agency, Staff Competencies, Managerial Initiative,
Resources, Organisational Structure, interorganisational cooperation, planning,
receptivity to change,
Policy formation variables: , Leadership, Conflict/ Consensus, Ambiguity, Incentives
And Constraints, External Partners, Institutional Factors, Net Work Management,
Creation Of New Independent Structures, Political Power
Empirically tested- learning, competencies, autonomy, interorganisational cooperation,
planning, receptivity to change, Feed Back, Coordination / Cooperation