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7 Implementing Public Policy

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1 INTRODUCTION

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, 235). In the broadest sense, they can be characterized as studies of policy change (Jenkins 1978, 203).

Goggin and his colleagues (1990) identified three generations of implementation research. Implementation studies emerged in the 1970s within the United States, as a reaction to growing concerns over the effectiveness of wide-ranging reform programs. Until the end of the 1960s, it had been taken for granted that political mandates were clear, and administrators were thought to implement policies according to the intentions of decision makers (Hill and Hupe 2002, 42). The process of “translating policy into action” (Barrett 2004, 251) attracted more attention, as policies seemed to lag behind policy expectations. The first generation of implementation studies, which dominated much of the 1970s, was characterized by a pessimistic undertone. This pessimism was fuelled by a number of case studies that represented shining examples of implementation failure. The studies of Derthick (1972), Pressman and Wildavsky (1973), and Bardach (1977) are the most popular. Pressman and Wildavsky’s work (1973) had a decisive impact on the development of implementation research, as it helped to stimulate a growing body of literature. This does not mean, however, that no implementation studies were carried out before, as Hargrove (1975) suggested when writing about the discovery of a “missing link” in studying the policy process. Hill and Hupe (2002, 18–28) point out that implementation research was conducted under different headings before the 1970s. Nevertheless, the most noteworthy achievement of the first generation of implementation researchers was to raise awareness of the issue in the wider scholarly community and in the general public.

While theory building was not at the heart of the first generation of implementation studies, the second generation began to put forward a whole range of theoretical frameworks and hypotheses. This period was marked by debates between what was later dubbed the top-down and bottom-up approaches to implementation research. The top-down school, represented for example by scholars like Van Meter and Van Horn (1975), Nakamura and Smallwood (1980) or Mazmanian and Sabatier (1983), conceived of implementation as the hierarchical execution of centrally-defined policy intentions. Scholars belonging to the bottom-up camp, such as Lipsky (1971, 1980), Ingram (1977), Elmore (1980), or Hjern and Hull (1982) instead emphasized that implementation consisted of the everyday problem-solving strategies of “street-level bureaucrats” (Lipsky 1980).

The third generation of implementation research tried to bridge the gap between top-down and bottom-up approaches by incorporating the insights of both camps into their theoretical models. At the same time, the self-proclaimed goal of third-generation research was “to be more *scientific* than the previous two in its approach to the study of implementation” (Goggin et al. 1990, 18, emphasis in original). Third-generation scholars thus lay much emphasis on specifying clear hypotheses,

finding proper operationalizations and producing adequate empirical observations to test these hypotheses. However, as observers like deLeon (1999, 318) and O'Toole (2000, 268) note, only a few studies have so far followed this path.

While the largest part of implementation research stemmed from the United States, the second generation was also especially marked by important theoretical contributions from European authors like Barrett, Hanf, Windhoff-Héritier, Hjern, Mayntz, or Scharpf. Europe was also the origin of a new strand of literature that focused on the issue of implementation in the context of European integration studies.

It is the aim of this chapter to summarize the theoretical lessons to be drawn from the wealth of literature produced by more than thirty years of implementation research. The chapter is structured as follows: Section 2 discusses three different analytical approaches in traditional implementation theory in more detail: top-down models, bottom-up critiques, and hybrid theories that try to combine elements of the two other strands of literature. We explicate the theoretical underpinnings and discuss the pros and cons of the respective approaches. Section 3 then provides an overview of more recent theoretical approaches to implementation, all of which depart from central underpinnings of traditional implementation studies. In particular, we address insights gained from the study of implementation processes in the context of the European Union and we discuss the interpretative approach to implementation, which follows an alternative ontological path. Section 4 focuses on the main insights gained from more than thirty years of implementation research for a proper understanding of implementation processes. Moreover, it discusses the contributions of implementation analysis to the wider field of policy analysis and political science. Finally, Section 5 identifies a number of persistent weaknesses of implementation analysis and concludes by suggesting possible directions of future research to overcome these weaknesses in the years to come.

2 TOP-DOWN, BOTTOM-UP, AND HYBRID THEORIES OF IMPLEMENTATION

The three generations of implementation research presented earlier can be subdivided into three distinct theoretical approaches to the study of implementation:

1. Top-down models put their main emphasis on the ability of decision makers' to produce unequivocal policy objectives and on controlling the implementation stage.
2. Bottom-up critiques view local bureaucrats as the main actors in policy delivery and conceive of implementation as negotiation processes within networks of implementers.
3. Hybrid theories try to overcome the divide between the other two approaches by incorporating elements of top-down, bottom-up and other theoretical models.

The following discussion will briefly outline the theoretical underpinnings of these approaches. It is only possible to present some of the key contributions within the confines of this chapter (see Figure 7.1).

The selection of presented contributions is based on the suggestions of leading scholars (Hill and Hupe 2002; deLeon 1999, 2001; Parsons 1995; Sabatier 1986a) as well as on our own views on the relative importance of the studies discussed.

2.1 TOP-DOWN THEORIES

Top-down theories started from the assumption that policy implementation starts with a decision made by central government. Parsons (1995, 463) points out that these studies were based on a

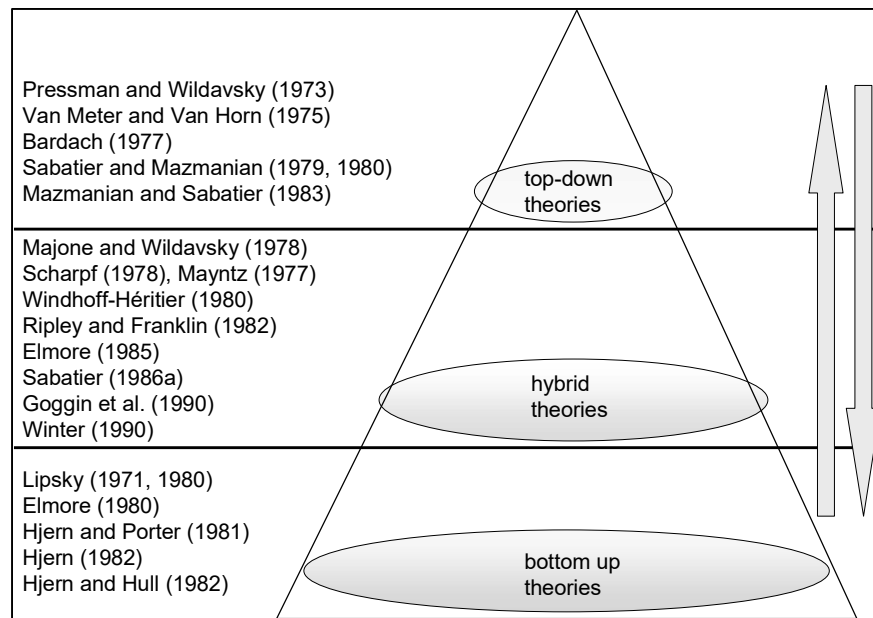


FIGURE 7.1 Top-down, bottom-up, and hybrid theories: key contributions.

“blackbox model” of the policy process inspired by systems analysis. They assumed a direct causal link between policies and observed outcomes and tended to disregard the impact of implementers on policy delivery. Top downers essentially followed a prescriptive approach that interpreted policy as input and implementation as output factors. Due to their emphasis on decisions of central policy makers, deLeon (2001, 2) describes top-down approaches as a “governing elite phenomenon”. The following authors are classical top-down scholars: Pressman and Wildavsky (1973), Van Meter and Van Horn (1975), Bardach (1977), as well as Sabatier and Mazmanian (1979, 1980, see also Mazmanian and Sabatier 1983).

Pressman and Wildavsky’s original work followed a rational model approach. They started from the assumption that policy objectives are set out by central policy makers. In this view, implementation research was left with the task of analyzing the difficulties in achieving these objectives. Hence, they saw implementation as an “interaction between the setting of goals and actions geared to achieve them” (Pressman and Wildavsky 1973, xv). The authors underlined the linear relationship between agreed policy goals and their implementation. Implementation therefore implied the establishment of adequate bureaucratic procedures to ensure that policies are executed as accurately as possible. To this end, implementing agencies should have sufficient resources at their disposal, and there needs to be a system of clear responsibilities and hierarchical control to supervise the actions of implementers. Pressman and Wildavsky’s book, a study of the implementation of a federal program of economic development in Oakland, California, highlighted the importance of the number of agencies involved in policy delivery. They argued that effective implementation becomes increasingly difficult, if a program has to pass through a multitude of “clearance points.” As most implementation settings, especially in the United States, are of a multi-actor type, the thrust of their analysis was rather skeptical as to whether implementation could work at all.

American scholars Van Meter and Van Horn (1975) offered a more elaborate theoretical model. Their starting point, however, was very similar to the one of Pressman and Wildavsky. They were concerned with the study of whether implementation outcomes corresponded to the objectives set

out in initial policy decisions. Their model included six variables that shape the relationship between policy and performance. While many of these factors had to do with organizational capacities and hierarchical control, the authors also highlighted two variables that slightly departed from the top-down “mainstream”: They argued that the extent of policy change had a crucial impact on the likelihood of effective implementation and that the degree of consensus on goals was important. Hence, significant policy change was only possible if goal consensus among actors was high. Unlike other representatives of the top-down school, the model of Van Meter and Van Horn was less concerned with advising policy makers on successful implementation but with providing a sound basis for scholarly analysis.

Bardach’s book *The Implementation Game*, published in 1977, provided a classical metaphor for the implementation process. He acknowledged the political character of the implementation process and therefore promoted the idea of using game theoretic tools for explaining implementation. Bardach thus provided ideas that also influenced bottom-up scholars (see below). However, his preoccupation with advising policy makers on how to improve implementation makes him a clear member of the top-down camp. His core recommendation was to give attention to the “scenario writing” process, which meant that successful implementation was possible if policy makers succeeded in structuring the implementation games thoughtfully.

Sabatier and Mazmanian (1979, 1980, see also Mazmanian and Sabatier 1983) are among the core authors of the top-down approach. Like Van Meter and Van Horn (1975), Sabatier and Mazmanian started their analysis with a policy decision that was made by governmental representatives. Therefore, they assumed a clear separation of policy formation from policy implementation. Their model lists six criteria for effective implementation: (1) policy objectives are clear and consistent, (2) the program is based on a valid causal theory, (3) the implementation process is structured adequately, (4) implementing officials are committed to the program’s goals, (5) interest groups and (executive and legislative) sovereigns are supportive, and (6) there are no detrimental changes in the socioeconomic framework conditions. Although Sabatier and Mazmanian (1979, 489–92, 503–4) acknowledged that perfect hierarchical control over the implementation process was hard to achieve in practice and that unfavorable conditions could cause implementation failure, they argued that policy makers could ensure effective implementation through adequate program design and a clever structuration of the implementation process.

2.2 BOTTOM-UP THEORIES

In the late 1970s and early 1980s, bottom-up theories emerged as a critical response to the top-down school. Several studies showed that political outcomes did not always sufficiently relate to original policy objectives and that the assumed causal link was thus questionable. Theorists suggested studying what was actually happening on the recipient level and analyzing the real causes that influence action on the ground. Studies belonging to this strand of research typically started from the “bottom” by identifying the networks of actors involved in actual policy delivery. They rejected the idea that policies are defined at the central level and that implementers need to stick to these objectives as neatly as possible. Instead, the availability of discretion at the stage of policy delivery appeared as a beneficial factor as local bureaucrats were seen to be much nearer to the real problems than central policy makers. The classical bottom-up researchers are: the American researchers Lipsky (1971, 1980) and Elmore (1980) as well as the Swedish scholar Hjern (1982), also in collaboration with other authors such as Porter and Hull.

Lipsky (1971, 1980) analyzed the behavior of public service workers (e.g., teachers, social workers, police officers, doctors), which he called “street-level bureaucrats.” In his seminal article, published in 1971, Lipsky argued that policy analysts needed to consider the direct interactions

between social workers and citizens. Hudson (1989) argues that the power held by street-level bureaucrats stretches beyond the control of citizens' behavior. Street-level bureaucrats are also considered to have considerable autonomy from their employing organizations. The main source of their autonomous power thus stems from the considerable amount of discretion at their disposal.

According to Hill and Hupe (2002, 52–53), Lipsky's work has been widely misinterpreted as he did not only underline the difficulties in controlling street-level bureaucrats' behavior. Still more important, Lipsky showed that street-level policy making created practices that enable public workers to cope with problems encountered in their everyday work. The importance of Lipsky's work lies in the fact that his approach was, on the one hand, used as justification for methodological strategies that focus on street-level actors. On the other hand, it showed that top-down approaches failed to take into account that a hierarchical chain of command and well-defined policy objectives are not enough to guarantee successful implementation.

The main concern of Elmore (1980) was the question of how to study implementation. Instead of assuming that policy makers effectively control implementation, his concept of "backward mapping" suggested that analysis should start with a specific policy problem and then examine the actions of local agencies to solve this problem.

The Swedish scholar Hjern, in close cooperation with colleagues like Porter and Hull, developed an empirical network methodology to the study of the implementation process (Hjern 1982; Hjern and Porter 1981; Hjern and Hull 1982). In their view, it was essential for researchers to acknowledge the multi-actor and inter-organizational character of policy delivery. Therefore, they suggested that implementation analysis should start with the identification of networks of actors from all relevant agencies collaborating in implementation and then examine the way they try to solve their problems. According to Sabatier (1986a), this approach offers a useful tool to describe the "implementation structures" (Hjern and Porter 1981) within which policy execution takes place. However, he also criticizes the lack of causal hypotheses on the relationship between legal and economic factors and individual behavior.

2.3 COMPARATIVE DISCUSSION

There are several characteristics of top-down and bottom-up theories that account for the wide gulf that separates these two schools of thought in implementation theory: They are marked by competing research strategies, contrasting goals of analysis, opposing models of the policy process, inconsistent understandings of the implementation process, and conflicting models of democracy (see Table 7.1).

It was due to their contrasting research strategies that the two camps came to be known as "top-down" and "bottom-up" approaches. Top-downers typically start from a policy decision reached at the "top" of the political system and work their way "down" to the implementers. Bottom-uppers, in contrast, start out with the identification of actors involved in concrete policy delivery at the "bottom" of the politico-administrative system. Analysis then moves "upwards" and "sideways" in order to identify the networks of implementing actors and their problem-solving strategies.

The goal of analysis of top-down scholars is to reach a general theory of implementation. This theory should be parsimonious enough to allow for predictions as to whether an individual piece of legislation is likely to be implemented effectively.¹ Moreover, the theory should enable scholars to derive recommendations for policy makers with a view to improving implementation. The aim

1. It has to be noted, however, that the models proposed by top-down scholars do not always meet the standard of theoretical parsimony. For example, the model proposed by Sabatier and Mazmanian (1981, 7) lists no less than seventeen independent variables.

TABLE 7.1
Top-down and Bottom-up Theories Compared

	Top-down theories	Bottom-up theories
Research strategy	Top-down: from political decisions to administrative execution	Bottom-up: from individual bureaucrats to administrative networks
Goal of analysis	Prediction/policy recommendation	Description/explanation
Model of policy process	Stagist	Fusionist
Character of implementation process	Hierarchical guidance	Decentralized problem-solving
Underlying model of democracy	Elitist	Participatory

of bottom-up studies, in contrast, is rather to give an accurate empirical description and explanation of the interactions and problem-solving strategies of actors involved in policy delivery. As Sabatier (1986b, 315) critically notes, many of the bottom-up studies do not go beyond providing descriptive accounts of the large amount of discretion available to implementers. However, some of them actually tried to transcend the sphere of description. This resulted in rather complex heuristic models of the network structures or “implementation structures” (Hjern and Porter 1981) within which implementation takes place.

Both schools of thought rest upon contrasting models of the policy process. Top-downers are heavily influenced by what has been called the “textbook conception of the policy process” (Nakamura 1987, 142). This “stagist” model assumes that the policy cycle may be divided into several clearly distinguishable phases. Top-down analyses thus do not focus on the whole policy process, but merely on “what happens after a bill becomes a law” (Bardach 1977). In contrast, bottom-up approaches argue that policy implementation cannot be separated from policy formulation. According to this “fusionist” model, policy making continues throughout the whole policy process. Hence, bottom-up scholars do not just pay attention to one particular stage of the policy cycle. Instead, they are interested in the whole process of how policies are defined, shaped, implemented and probably redefined.

Both approaches contain widely differing views on the character of the implementation process. Top-downers understand implementation as “the carrying out of a basic policy decision” (Mazmanian and Sabatier 1983, 20). In this view, implementation is an apolitical, administrative process. Power ultimately rests with central decision-makers, who define clear policy objectives and are capable of hierarchically guiding the process of putting these objectives into practice. Bottom-up scholars reject the idea of hierarchical guidance. In their view, it is impossible to formulate statutes with unequivocal policy goals and to control the implementation process from top to bottom. Instead, the model suggests that implementers always have a large amount of discretion. Rather than considering implementation an apolitical process of following orders “from above,” bottom-uppers hold that the implementation process is eminently political and that policies are even shaped to a decisive extent at this level. Hence, policies are not so much determined by the statutes emanating from governments and parliaments but by the largely autonomous political decisions of the actors directly involved in policy delivery. The focus thus lies on the decentral-problem-solving of local actors rather than on hierarchical guidance.

Finally, the two approaches are based on fundamentally different models of democracy. Top-down approaches are rooted in traditional, elitist conceptions of representative democracy. In this view, elected representatives are the only actors within a society who are legitimized to take collectively binding decisions on behalf of the whole citizenry. It is thus a matter of proper democratic governance to ensure that these decisions are carried out as accurately as possible. In other words,

any deviation from the centrally defined policy objectives is seen as a violation of democratic standards. Bottom-up approaches contest this model of democracy. They stress that local bureaucrats, affected target groups and private actors have legitimate concerns to be taken into account as well. In their view, the elitist model disregards these concerns and thus leads to illegitimate decisions. Deviating from the centrally defined policy objectives thus does not contravene democratic principles. Seen from this angle, legitimate democratic governance is only possible in a participatory model of democracy which includes those who are affected by a particular decision (lower-level administrative actors, interest groups, private actors etc.) in policy formation.

The comparison between both approaches shows that the debate between top-down and bottom-up scholars focused on more than the proper empirical description of the driving forces behind implementation. It is true that this is one important dimension of the dispute. But if this aspect had been the only bone of contention, the debate indeed would have been as sterile as some observers seem to have perceived it (O'Toole 2000, 267). It is certainly true that both sides exaggerated their respective positions and thereby oversimplified the complex implementation process (Parsons 1995, 471). As Sabatier (1986a) rightly notes, top-downers overemphasized the ability of central policy makers to issue unequivocal policy objectives and to meticulously control the process of implementation. In criticizing this "law-makers' perspective," bottom-uppers at the same time overestimated the amount of discretion of local bureaucrats and thus overemphasized the autonomy of the "bottom" vis-à-vis the "top." As scholars gathered more and more empirical evidence that demonstrated the relevance of both approaches, it would have been easy to agree on mutually acceptable theoretical models of implementation that pay attention to both central steering and local autonomy (see e.g., O'Toole 2000, 268). This is the path followed by some of the "hybrid theories" discussed in the next section.

2.4 HYBRID THEORIES

As a reaction to growing uneasiness with the heated debate between top-downers and bottom-uppers, researchers such as Elmore (1985), Sabatier (1986a), and Goggin et al. (1990) tried to synthesize both approaches. The new models presented by these scholars combined elements of both sides in order to avoid the conceptual weaknesses of top-down and bottom-up approaches. Other key contributions were made by scholars like Scharpf (1978), Windhoff-Héritier (1980), Ripley and Franklin (1982), and Winter (1990). Taking the top-downers' concern with effective policy execution as their starting point, they blended several elements of the bottom-up perspective and of other theories into their models. This is why we discuss this group of scholars under the heading of "hybrid theories."

Elmore, previously discussed as a member of the bottom-up camp, combined in his later work (1985) the concept of "backward mapping" with the idea of "forward mapping." He argued that program success is contingent upon both elements, as they are intertwined (Sabatier 1986a). Policy makers should therefore start with the consideration of policy instruments and available resources for policy change (forward mapping). In addition, they should identify the incentive structure of implementers and target groups (backward mapping).

Backing away from his earlier theoretical contributions together with Mazmanian, Sabatier (1986a) gave an account of a different theoretical approach to policy implementation. In his seminal article on implementation research, he argued that not distinguishing between policy formation and implementation would disqualify the study of policy change and evaluation research. He put forward an "advocacy coalition framework" which he developed further in his later work together with Jenkins-Smith (1993). The advocacy coalition framework rejected the "stage heuristic" of the policy process and aimed at empirically explaining policy change as a whole. This conception has some resemblance with the bottom-up approach as the analysis starts from a policy problem and proceeds in reconstructing the strategies of relevant actors to solve this problem. In addition, it

emphasizes the role of policy learning and recognizes the importance of extraneous social and economic conditions that may impact on the policy making. However, the advocacy coalition approach seems to neglect the social and historical context in which change occurs. This problem is addressed by discourse analysts, who argue that discourses shape actors' perceptions and may thus influence political elites' interpretation of social events (for further discussion, see Fischer 2003, 99).

Wildavsky, another prominent representative of the top-down school, also turned his back on the linear approach that had marked his earlier contributions. Together with Majone (Majone and Wildavsky 1978), he presented a model that pointed in a similar direction as the advocacy coalition framework. The core argument was that implementation is an evolutionary process in which programs are constantly reshaped and redefined. The conception thus started from policy inputs defined by central policy makers. At the same time, it also embraced the idea that these inputs will almost inevitably be changed in the course of their execution. Thus incremental learning processes were at the heart of this approach.

Winter (1990) contributed to overcoming the separation of policy formation and implementation. Still embracing the "stagist" model of the policy process, he points to the effect of the policy formulation process on implementation. Unlike top-downers, however, he is not interested in the design of the policy itself but looks at how characteristics of the policy formulation process (like the level of conflict or the level of attention of proponents) impacts on implementation.

Goggin, Bowman, Lester, and O'Toole (1990), the self-proclaimed founders of the "third generation" of implementation research, tried to bridge the gap between top-down and bottom-up approaches. Like top-downers, they continued to accept the perspective of a centrally defined policy decision to be implemented by lower-level actors. Their goal of developing a general theory of implementation on the basis of rigorous methods also owes much to the top-down perspective. However, their conception of the implementation process embraced the fact that implementers are political actors in their own right and that the outcome of this endeavor entailed complicated negotiation processes between implementers and central authorities. Drawing on empirical case studies that involved the implementation of federal programs by state authorities in the United States, they developed a communicative model of intergovernmental implementation. As Hill and Hupe (2002, 66–68) point out, the specific focus on the interactions between federal and state layers of government in American federalism raises doubts about the general applicability of the model.

Scharpf (1978) was one of the earliest writers who tried to reconcile the idea of political steering by central governments with the argument of bottom-up scholars that the transformation of policy goals into action depends upon the interaction of a multitude of actors with separate interests and strategies. Introducing the concept of policy networks to implementation research, he suggested giving more weight to processes of coordination and collaboration among separate but mutually dependent actors. The concept of policy networks later became a major approach to the study of policy change as a whole (see e.g., Marin and Mayntz 1991).

A further line of argument places emphasis on a factor that was almost completely neglected by both top-down and bottom-up scholars: the type of policy to be implemented. Building on the seminal article by Lowi (1972), Ripley and Franklin (1982) distinguish between distributive, regulatory, and redistributive policies, arguing that each of these policy types involves different groups of stakeholders as well as different types and levels of conflict in implementation. Windhoff-Héritier (1980) makes a similar argument. She distinguishes between distributive and redistributive policies. This distinction includes regulatory policy, which can fall into either of the two categories depending on whether or not a regulatory program involves clearly identifiable winners and losers.² Her book reveals that distributive policies may be implemented in any implementation structure,

2. Mayntz (1977), another German scholar, followed a similar line of reasoning with regard to policy types. She distinguishes between different types of policy instruments (imperatives and restraints, positive and negative incentives, procedural regulations, public provision of services) and discusses the different implementation problems typically associated with these policy instruments.

while redistributive policies need a hierarchical implementation structure to be executed effectively (Windhoff-Héritier 1980, 90).

In sum, the approaches we summarized under the heading of “hybrid theories” brought two important innovations to implementation theory. First, they tried to overcome the conceptual weaknesses of the polarized debate between bottom-up and top-down scholars. Leaving aside the normative aspects of the controversy, they focused instead on empirical arguments about the proper conceptualization of the implementation processes and pragmatically blended the extreme arguments of both sides into models that embraced both central steering and local autonomy. Second, some of the hybrid theorists pointed to important factors that had hitherto received little attention.

Scholars like Sabatier or Winter raised the awareness that implementation cannot be analyzed without looking at the policy formulation process. Sabatier stressed the need to view implementation processes (or processes of policy change in general) not in isolation. Instead, his advocacy coalition framework recognizes that extraneous factors such as external economic developments or influences from other policy fields have to be taken into account as well. Finally, Ripley and Franklin, Windhoff-Héritier and others hinted at the impact of different policy types on the way policies are executed.

What is overlooked by advocates of a synthesis of top-down and bottom-up approaches are the fundamentally different views of both sides on the proper conceptualization of the policy process and the legitimate allocation of power over the determination of policy outcomes in the light of democratic theory. Hence, while it seems possible to combine some of the insights of both models, Parsons is also right in pointing out that some of the differences are so fundamental that the effort to seek a comprehensive synthesis of both approaches is like trying to combine “incommensurate paradigms” (Parsons 1995, 487, see also deLeon 1999, 322–23).

The theoretical approaches discussed so far, despite differing in important respects from each other, have two things in common: They all study implementation processes within nation states rather than at the international level, and they share a common positivist worldview in terms of ontology and epistemology. In what follows, we will discuss a number of recent contributions that take the study of implementation beyond these traditional paths.

3 NEW DEVELOPMENTS IN IMPLEMENTATION ANALYSIS

While the origins of implementation research lay in the study of policy change within nation states, the growing importance of policy making at the international level has given rise to a substantial body of literature that addresses the implementation of these “international” policies at the domestic level. There has been some interest in the effectiveness of implementing international agreements (Brown-Weiss and Jacobson 1998; Victor et al. 1998). Even more scholars have addressed issues of implementation within the European Union.

3.1 IMPLEMENTATION IN AN INTERNATIONAL CONTEXT: NEWS FROM EUROPEAN INTEGRATION STUDIES

The first wave of studies addressing implementation issues in the context of European integration started out with largely descriptive accounts of implementation failures. To the extent that theoretical conclusions were drawn at all, these primarily mirrored the insights of the top-down school in implementation theory. The domestic implementation of European legislation was portrayed as a rather apolitical process whose success primarily depended on clearly worded provisions, effective administrative organization and streamlined legislative procedures at the national level (Siedentopf and Ziller 1988; Schwarze et al. 1990; Schwarze et al. 1991, 1993). Problems in policy execution were not put down to political resistance by domestic implementation actors, but to “technical”

parameters such as insufficient administrative resources, inter-organizational co-ordination problems or cumbersome legislative or administrative procedures at the domestic level.

As far as the general analytical perspective is concerned, most of the research on the implementation of EU legislation continued to be characterized by a top-down view. Implementation processes are usually approached from a perspective that asks for the fulfillment of centrally defined policy goals. Any deviation from the original goals is seen as an implementation problem obstructing the even execution of European-level policies rather than the legitimate problem-solving strategy of “street-level bureaucrats.” What changed over time, however, was the increasing awareness among scholars that implementation is a political process and that the execution of policies is obstructed often enough by the political resistance of domestic actors. EU implementation research thus moved into the direction of what we dubbed “hybrid theories.”

The political character of implementation processes was embraced by the second wave of implementation studies, which evolved in the 1990s. Most of the studies of this second wave focused on European environmental policy, one of the policy areas where implementation gaps had become particularly visible. The theoretical innovation of this strand of literature was the incorporation of frameworks and arguments from comparative politics. One particularly prominent line of argument was based on historical institutionalist assumptions about the “stickiness” of deeply entrenched national policy traditions and administrative routines, which poses great obstacles to reforms aiming to alter these arrangements. Starting from the observation that many member state governments struggled to “upload” their own policy models to the European level (Héritier et al. 1996), it was only a short way to the argument that the “downloading” process becomes problematic if this strategy of policy export should fail (Börzel 2002).

The degree of “misfit,” that is the extent to which a particular supranational policy required member states to depart from their traditional ways of doing things in terms of policy legacies and organizational arrangements, thus moved to the forefront in explaining implementation outcomes. Seen from this angle, European policies face deeply rooted institutional and regulatory structures. If both fit together, implementation should be a smooth and unproblematic process. If European policies do not match existing traditions, however, implementation should be highly contested, leading to considerable delays, and involving a high risk of total failure (see in particular Duina 1997, 1999; Duina and Blithe 1999; Knill and Lenschow 1998, 2000; Börzel 2000, 2003).

It soon became clear that this theoretical argument was too parsimonious to hold in a broader set of empirical cases. Although acknowledging the political character of implementation, the “misfit” argument laid too much emphasis on structural parameters, assuming that domestic actors merely acted “as guardians of the status quo, as the shield protecting national legal-administrative traditions” (Duina 1997, 157). This one-dimensional view was challenged by scholars who argued that the implementation behavior of domestic government parties, interest groups and administrations was independent of the degree of fit or misfit (Haverland 2000; Treib 2004; Falkner et al. 2005).

Thus, researchers increasingly acknowledged that implementation analysis had to pay attention to a multiplicity of domestic actor networks including the variegated preferences and institutional properties of these networks. As suggested by some of the approaches we dubbed “hybrid theories” above, scholars now began to take into account the complexities of the “implementation games” played at the domestic level, and they fully embraced the political character of bringing EU legislation into practice. Again building on theories from the field of comparative politics, domestic implementation processes were seen to be shaped not only by the fit with existing policy legacies, but also by factors like the number of veto players, the presence or absence of a consensus-oriented decision-making culture, or the support or opposition of interest groups (Cowles et al. 2001; Héritier et al. 2001).

The problem with these broader approaches is well-known from “national” implementation research: the more factors we include in our theoretical models, the less are we able to decide which of these factors are the crucial ones and which circumstances determine whether they become rel-

evant (e.g., O'Toole 2000, 268). One tentative solution to this problem is offered by a recent study that analyzed the implementation of EU social policy in fifteen member states (Falkner et al. 2005). Starting from a broad theoretical perspective that incorporated a wide range of hypotheses suggested by previous research, the authors conclude that most of these hypotheses had some explanatory power, but none of them could explain the whole range of implementation patterns observed in the total of ninety case studies. As a solution to this puzzle, they then offer a typology of three "worlds of compliance," which result from the varying importance of a culture of law-abidingness in the political and administrative systems of the different member states. Hence, the analysis highlights the importance of country-specific cultural conditions. These cultural conditions then determine which sets of other factors are relevant in a particular country setting.

In sum, EU scholars enriched the study of implementation processes by two notable innovations. First, they adopted new methodological strategies. In contrast to "national" implementation research, where "solid cross-national investigations are still rare" (O'Toole 2000, 268), the specific setting of the European Union encouraged an approach that was much more comparative in nature. As a result, cross-country comparison has meanwhile become the standard methodological approach in this field of study. Unlike traditional implementation researchers, EU scholars thus increasingly became aware of systematic institutional and cultural differences in the typical implementation styles of different countries. Moreover, there is a growing number of statistical analyses using the official data on infringement procedures initiated by the European Commission against noncompliant member states (Mendrinou 1996; Lampinen and Uusikylä 1998; Börzel 2001; Mbaye 2001). Although these studies are struggling with all kinds of methodological problems,³ they could serve to counteract the case study bias that has marked large parts of implementation research so far.

The second innovation is that EU implementation research, instead of seeking to establish a specific "implementation theory," became more and more receptive to general theories, especially from the field of comparative politics. This is an important development because the incorporation of concepts from historical institutionalism, game theory or cultural approaches facilitates communication with other fields of study and might thus increase the visibility of implementation research in the wider scholarly community.

3.2 THE INTERPRETATIVE APPROACH TO POLICY IMPLEMENTATION

The interpretative approach to policy implementation departs from a different ontological stance than the theoretical contributions previously discussed. It considers the strict distinction between facts and values underlying the positivist philosophy of science as untenable, and it challenges the possibility of neutral and unbiased observations. In Yanow's (2000, ix) words, this means that "...interpretative policy [implementation] analysis shifts the discussion from values as a set of costs, benefits, and choice points to a focus on values, beliefs, and feelings as set of meanings, and from a view of human behavior as, ideally, instrumentally and technically rational to human action as expressive (of meaning)."

The interpretative approach does not take the factual essence of problems as its main point of reference, but shows that multiple and sometimes ambiguous and conflicting meanings, as well as a variety of interpretations, coexist in parallel. While traditional analysis concentrates on explaining the implementation gap between policy intention and outcome, interpretative analy-

3. Since this data only represents the cases of noncompliance that were actually detected and prosecuted by the Commission, there are serious doubts as to whether they can be taken as an indicator for the true level of noncompliance with EU law. In other words, they might represent no more than the tip of the iceberg, which does not necessarily say much about the size or the shape of those parts that remain below the waterline (Falkner et al. 2005, chap. 11).

sis focuses on the analysis of “how policy means” (Yanow 1996). It also rejects the assumption that policy implementation can be studied without looking at the process of policy formation. In contrast, it assumes that prior debates and policy meanings have an impact on policy execution as they influence implementers’ understanding of the policy problem. Implementing actors are also confronted with multiple policy meanings as policy formation frequently involves the accommodation of contradicting interests. Moreover, the written content of policies may only reflect goals that are publicly expressible, while implementing agencies are also confronted with the need of implementing so-called “verboden goals” (Yanow 1996, 205) that are only tacitly communicated. In this sense, interpretative analysis studies the very definition of the problem or, in other words, it examines the “struggle for the determination of meanings” (Yanow 1996, 19) and scrutinizes “how those meanings are communicated” (Yanow 1996, 222).

Rather than assuming that policy statements are purely rational and goal-oriented, Yanow suggests that statements also have an expressive character. Through them, a polity may reveal its distinct identity (Yanow 1996, 22). In her case study on the establishment of community centers in Israel, Yanow highlighted that the use of the metaphor “functional supermarket” had shaped the concept of community centers’ identity in terms of programs, administrative practices and staff roles. It thus had turned into an organizational metaphor (Yanow 1996, 129–53).

The focus of the interpretative approach therefore lies on the interpretation of meaning passed on by policy actors, implementation agencies and target populations (for a similar argument, see Pülzl 2001). Symbols, metaphors, and policy language, which embody multiple meanings, are embedded in what Yanow (1987, 108) calls policy “culture.” It is the analysts’ main task to examine how different actors interpret this policy culture and then track down the effect of these multiple understandings on the implementation process. Furthermore, the analysis focuses on the context in which policy is transformed into practice. In this sense, the examination of the context-specific meaning of policy reveals essential features of the implementation process, as Yanow’s (1996) empirical analysis has also demonstrated.

4 THIRTY YEARS OF IMPLEMENTATION RESEARCH: WHAT HAVE WE LEARNED?

More than thirty years after the publication of Pressman and Wildavsky’s pioneering study, the time seems right to take stock of the lessons we learned from implementation research. We will start by summarizing what seem to us the most relevant insights gained with regard to the area of implementation itself. Second, we will discuss a number of contributions of implementation research to the wider field of policy analysis and political science.

What has implementation research taught us about the driving forces behind implementation? The following five points seem to be worth highlighting:

1. After years of debate between top-down and bottom-up scholars, both sides seem to agree that implementation is a continuum located between central guidance and local autonomy. The preferences of street-level bureaucrats and the negotiations within implementation networks have to be taken into account to the same extent as centrally defined policy objectives and efforts at hierarchical control. The actual position of individual implementation processes on this continuum is an empirical rather than a theoretical question.
2. Bottom-uppers have successfully convinced the wider community of implementation scholars that implementation is more than the technical execution of political orders from above. It is itself a political process in the course of which policies are frequently reshaped, redefined or even completely overturned.

3. What bottom-up scholars already suggested a long time ago has become more and more accepted also among the proponents of “hybrid” or “synthesizing” theories: implementation and policy formulation are highly interdependent processes. If not abandoning the “stagist” model of the policy process altogether, it now seems to be widely accepted that it is at least necessary to take into consideration the impact of policy formulation on implementation.
4. Especially the work of Sabatier has alerted us to the fact that implementation processes (and processes of policy change more generally) should not be viewed in isolation. Instead, exogenous influences from other policy fields or external economic developments need to be taken into account.
5. Recent EU implementation analysis has highlighted that different countries seem to have different “implementation styles.” To learn more about the contrasting logics of implementation in different country settings, more research with an explicit focus on cross-country comparison (national, regional and local studies) is needed. Moreover, this strand of the literature demonstrated that rather than searching for a unique “implementation theory”, theoretical arguments from comparative politics, such as the veto player theorem or insights from historical institutionalisms, can shed new light on implementation processes.

Further to these insights on the forces that drive the process of putting policy into practice, implementation studies have also contributed to three wider debates in policy analysis and political science.

First, implementation research contributed decisively to the debates in public administration and organizational theory about the character of modern bureaucracies. As bottom-up scholars persistently argued that administrative actors are often not tightly enough controlled by politicians and have quite some autonomy in determining how policies are actually executed, they delivered a serious blow to the conviction that modern public administrations resembled the Weberian model of a hierarchically organized and technocratic bureaucracy that is subordinate to the authority of political leaders. What has come to the fore, instead, is the view that public administrations have much more complex organizational structures and are much less hierarchically ordered than assumed by the Weberian model. Above all, implementation analysis has shown that administrative actors have their own political goals and that they use the considerable discretion they often have to pursue these goals rather than the ones prescribed by the political echelons above them. In this sense, Palumbo and Calista (1990, 14) are right in concluding that “implementation research has finally laid to rest the politics–administration dichotomy”. Instead, implementation scholars paved the way for a more realistic conception of the institutional features and the role of modern public administration in politics.

Second, the wider debates on political steering and governance, which have been particularly lively in Europe, especially in Germany, owe much to the insights of implementation scholars (for an overview, see Mayntz 1996, 2004). In the 1960s and early 1970s, the dominant view in this debate was characterized by political planning approaches (Mayntz and Scharpf 1973). These approaches started from the assumption of a simple hierarchical relationship between an active state and a passive society. In this view, the ability of political leaders to shape society according to politically defined goals found its limits only in the availability of scientific knowledge about the most pressing problems to be solved and in the effectiveness of the state machinery to devise the proper political strategies to address them. Neither the actual execution of policies by administrations nor the reactions by target groups were seen as a major problem. The findings of implementation scholars about the complexities and problems of policy execution meant a serious setback to this model. The second attack came from interest group research, which discovered, especially in Europe, various forms of neocorporatist patterns where governments cooperated with strong interest associations in policy formation and implementation or even delegated certain public tasks to “private interest

governments” (Schmitter and Lehmbruch 1979; Streeck and Schmitter 1985). In theoretical terms, a fundamental critique of the paradigm of hierarchical steering was added by autopoietic systems theory, which argues that society is made up of a set of autonomous subsystems, each of them functioning according to a specific logic. The relative closure of each individual subsystem makes it hard for other subsystems (and therefore also for the political system) to influence them in a deliberate fashion (Luhmann 1985). All of these developments finally gave rise to a new, nonhierarchical model of political steering. The new keyword of this model is “governance” within policy networks or negotiation systems where public actors from different levels cooperate with private actors in the production and execution of policies (Rhodes 1997; Scharpf 1997; Pierre and Peters 2000, chaps. 6 and 9).

Third, implementation scholars, especially those from the bottom-up camp, were among those who voiced serious concerns as to whether classical liberal democratic theory was still appropriate for a world in which not only elected representatives but also administrative actors and interest groups have a decisive say in shaping and delivering policies. Hence, implementation analysis gave an important impulse for the development of alternatives to the model of representative democracy.

Admittedly, the efforts to develop such an alternative model of democracy have only produced some preliminary results. However, there are two strands of theorizing that should be noted here. The first one centers on the Habermasian notion of deliberative democracy, which is based on the idea that democratic decisions are the outcome of consensus-oriented, rational discourses among all affected actors (Habermas 1987; Miller 1993). In implementation research, scholars like deLeon (2001) have taken up the notion of deliberative democracy, and interpretative approaches to implementation (such as Yanow 1996) are also built upon this model of democracy. The other strand does not presuppose consensus-orientation and arguing, but tries to develop democratic standards for the interactions of public and private actors within negotiation systems or policy networks. One example is the model of “associative democracy” (Cohen and Rogers 1992; Hirst 1994), which is based on the assumption that in modern societies, many nonelected actors, especially interest associations, have a crucial say in policy making. Rather than seeing this as a danger for democracy, the authors suggest that these actors, to the extent that they are representatives of certain groups of citizens and their common interests, can also add to the legitimacy of political decisions.

5 CONCLUSIONS AND FURTHER OUTLOOK

We have demonstrated in this chapter that implementation research has produced a number of important insights with regard to both the field of implementation itself and the wider context of the social sciences. Nevertheless, it is not particularly prominent in the wider scientific community. For example, neither the *New Handbook of Political Science* (Goodin and Klingemann 1996) nor the volume on *Theories of the Policy Process* edited by Sabatier (1999) include more than a few scattered paragraphs on the issue of implementation. In our view, the visibility of implementation analysis was severely hampered by three persistent weaknesses.

First, implementation research has been characterized by a lack of cumulation. For a long time, constructive cumulative research was impeded by the fundamental clash between top-down and bottom-up scholars (Lester et al. 1987, 210). However, as the discussion above has shown, this problem also persists after synthesizing or hybrid theories had tried to bridge the gap between these approaches. For example, the findings of European integration scholars have thus far been largely neglected by “national” implementation research.⁴

⁴ Neither the recent summarizing articles by O’Toole (2000) or deLeon (2001) nor the latest handbook on implementation research by Hill and Hupe (2002) or the recent symposium on implementation analysis in *Public Administration* (Schofield and Sausman 2004) include any reference to this strand of research.

Second, the theoretical models presented by implementation scholars, no matter whether they emerged in the context of the first, second, or third generations of research, typically comprise a multitude of potential explanatory variables. Yet we know little about which of these factors are more or less important under what kind of background conditions.

Third, the largest part of implementation research has been characterized by a shared positivist ontology and epistemology that largely ignores the role of discourses, symbols, and cultural patterns.

However, these weaknesses do not suggest that implementation research should be abolished altogether, as has been argued by scholars like Ingram or Sabatier, who moved on to other subjects such as policy design or the study of policy change more generally. Unlike this group of scholars, who have recently been dubbed “terminators” (Lester and Goggin 1998, 3), we think that it is still very useful to invest time and money into the study of how policies are transformed into action. Unlike the advocacy coalition framework and many network approaches, we think a separate analysis of implementation is useful since the actors involved in policy formation and implementation, while partly overlapping, are certainly not always exactly the same. Hence, keeping the stages of the policy process separate and focusing on one of them in more detail still seems to be worthwhile, although the interdependencies between the stages have to be taken into account as well.

But in order to advance our understanding of implementation beyond the level that has already been achieved, implementation research needs to take new directions. In particular, implementation analysis should strive to avoid the weaknesses that have hitherto curtailed its impact on the study of policy change. In this sense, we belong to the group of what Lester and Goggin (1998, 2) have called “reformers.” First, more mutual awareness of the findings of other scholars in the field could certainly boost more cumulative research. Processes of cross-fertilization could thus improve our understanding of implementation processes.

Second, the problem of overcomplex theoretical models might be mitigated by moving toward what deLeon (1999: 318) has dubbed “contingency concepts,” which take institutional properties of implementation structures, policy types, or country-specific cultural variables as framework conditions that make certain types of implementation processes and certain clusters of explanatory variables more likely than others. There have been some initial attempts in this direction (e.g., Matland 1995; Windhoff-Héritier 1980), but the potential of this approach has certainly not been used to the fullest extent possible. Careful comparative investigations of cases that have been selected with a view to systematically varying different policy types, institutional settings, countries and (more or less) successful or failed instances of implementation, could complement these theoretical efforts.

While these two strategies point into a similar direction as the one suggested by third-generation scholars (see e.g., Lester and Goggin 1998), notably to continue implementation studies in a more sophisticated way, there is also another sphere which previous research has only touched upon rudimentarily. There is much to be learned from interpretative and constructivist approaches, which argue that policy contents and objectives as well as implementation problems often cannot be discerned on an objective basis. Instead, the nature of what is at stake in processes of policy execution may be subject to fundamentally different perspectives that are shaped by language, culture, and symbolic politics.

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