ABSTRACT

One of the earliest topics addressed by policy analysts was public policy implementation. Starting with the seminal work of Jeffrey Pressman and Aaron Wildavsky, policy implementation has burgeoned from a largely overlooked interest to perhaps the policy analysis growth industry over the last thirty years. However, even though an enormous set of books and articles deals with implementation, it has been described by some as leading to an intellectual dead end because of its problematic relationship to a generalized theory of policy implementation. In this article we examine three generations of policy implementation theory research, emphasizing its basic reliance on a command (i.e., top-down) orientation, and we argue that an alternative framework, one stressing a more democratic (i.e., bottom-up) approach, would be a more fruitful line of inquiry.

Almost fifty years ago, Harold Lasswell (1956) broached the concept of the policy sciences and its usage of the policy process approach. He suggested that policy implementation was one of a number of necessary steps or stages in the policy process. While he was not the first to highlight the importance of policy implementation—and to emphasize, as had public administration, its frequent reliance on intergovernmental relations (Wright 1998)—he did enter the term into public policy lexicon. Since then, it seems, policy implementation as a field of scholarly inquiry and practical recognition has come and gone like an elusive spirit. Sometimes when it has seemed virtually to disappear, it has merely been subsumed or coopted into an adjacent field, such as public management (Lynn 1996) or it has transmogrified into studies of specific functional areas (e.g., welfare policy studies). In any event, it has
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been around long enough to have produced several generations of implementation studies—Malcolm Goggin and his colleagues (1990) count three such periods—all within a time span of less than twenty years.

Recently there has been a bit of a renaissance in policy implementation studies, as new venues and interests appear. Lester and Goggin (1998) have specifically suggested that, rather than focusing on developing general theoretical insights, the generic study of policy implementation has been transformed into the study of specific governmental programs. Ann Chih Lin’s (2000) splendid study of how five different prisons implement penal policies (e.g., rehabilitation) is but one example. On the other hand, O’Toole (2000) has argued that there is a world of viable theoretic constructs (e.g., principal-agent, rational choice, and game theories) upon which implementation can draw.

In this article we will move forward from this rediscovery period. We will attempt, first, to recount briefly the development of policy implementation. After a short interlude for a discussion of definitions and assumptions, we will examine the parallels between key concerns in implementation theory and some enduring questions drawn from public administration. Finally we will make two suggestions regarding policy implementation’s continued study and practice.

In particular, we will argue that policy implementation has too often been practiced as a top-down or governing-elite phenomenon and that its study and practice would be much better served were its practitioners to adopt a more participatory, more directly democratic orientation. We will suggest that implementation theory should address more carefully the kinds of democratic processes that are called forth by varying specific conditions. Although implementation may be among the most devilish of wicked problems, it remains a critical part of public policy studies. As Lester and Goggin (1981, 1) remind us, “[P]ublic policy implementation continues to hold much practical interest for policymakers [both] because it is a major stumbling block in the policy process [and] . . . one of the most heavily utilized areas of policy analysis.”

THREE GENERATIONS OF POLICY IMPLEMENTATION RESEARCH

Policy implementation, as a field of study, lay relatively dormant from the time of Lasswell’s first suggestion in the 1950s until the early 1970s. Brewer and P. deLeon (1983) speculated that earlier attention to implementation, while surely considered critical,
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was stymied by the perception that it was either too difficult to study (administrators characteristically acted under their own authority, at times not even informing the policy maker) or, conversely, too simple (under the assumption that administrators automatically carried out whatever policies they were charged with). Harvard researchers, wondering about the difficulties (well, failures) of President Johnson’s War on Poverty, hit upon the realization of a shortcoming in policy implementation; they concluded that, for some, “One clear source of failure emerged: political and bureaucratic aspects of the implementation process were . . . left outside both the considerations of participants of government and the calculations of formal policy analysts. . . .” (quoted in Brewer and P. deLeon 1983, 249). Erwin Hargrove (1975) recognized a similar problem and, in a defining metaphor, referred to implementation studies as the missing link, that is, the elusive policy catalyst that somehow transformed good intentions into good policy. Jeffrey Pressman and Aaron Wildavsky largely defined the field of policy implementation in their Implementation (1973 edit.) volume, with others (e.g., Martha Derthick [1972] and Eugene Bardach [1977]), comprising what was later to be called the first generation of implementation studies.

The first generation of implementation studies usually consisted of case study analyses that considered the immense vale of troubles that lay between the definition of a policy and its execution. These observations of New Towns, In-Town, the twin travails of the Economic Development Administration (EDA) and the city of Oakland, and the deinstitutionalization of mental health facilities in California did much more than examine their respective implementation case studies; in many ways, they forcefully brought the complexities of policy implementation front and center for public administrators and policy analysts. In many instances, policy implementation was seen as two (and often more) parties acting in opposition to one another, not so much because one was correct but because both thought they were doing the right thing (e.g., Allison 1971). Barbara Ferman (1990, 39-40) put this situation in a Madisonian perspective, viewing implementation “as another check in the American system of government. Like the entire system . . . , it can be a source of delay and diversion of objectives, but it can also protect against the concentration and abuse of power.” The end product of the first generation was a cornucopia of fascinating idiosyncratic case studies, each with its own prescribed lessons, but little in terms of a generic implementation theory.

The second generation was much more sophisticated and consciously theoretic, as authors such as Daniel Mazmanian and Paul Sabatier (1983), Robert Nakamura and Frank Smallwood
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(1980), and the largely overlooked Paul Berman (1980) brought their empirical lenses to bear, proposing a series of institutional and commitment-oriented hypotheses that assumed (more or less) a command and control orientation, or what came to be known as a top-down perspective. In this manner, they brought an empiricist perspective to policy implementation, dedicated to finding the best way to move a policy proposal to its successful fruition. Their proposed models often neglected parsimony (principally as a result of admitted complexity); however, as Peter deLeon subsequently observed, “they posed a relatively rigorous, empirically based model, although even they admitted that many of their measures were subjective and ordinal, maybe suffering from the analytic tendency of well-meaning but misplaced precision” (P. deLeon, 1999a, 316; also see Meier and McFarlane 1995; Matland 1995).

At the same time as the top downers were making their case, an alternative second generation approach was forwarding what it claimed was a bottom-up orientation. Scholars like Michael Lipsky (1971 and 1980) and Benny Hjern (1982; Hjern and Hull 1983) proposed that street level bureaucrats were the key to successful implementation and that the top downers ignored them at their peril. From their vantage point, implementation occurred only when those who were primarily affected were actively involved in the planning and execution of these programs. Bottom-up proponents argued that they were better able to capture the full range of implementation’s intricacies. In consequence, they began to argue that implementation needed to be part and parcel of the policy formulation calculations. In this sense, they were in agreement with Brinton Milward (1980, 247) when he argued, “If policy researchers wish to improve the prospects for policy success, they would do well to focus their research on the relationship between agenda-setting and implementation.”

Sooner or later, the bottom-uppers claimed, implementation costs (in terms of programmatic compliance or at least acquiescence) associated with any new program had to be realized, and better they be taken into account earlier than later in the process, that is, before the political (or bureaucratic) sunk costs incurred by the program were added into the policy calculus. The problem, of course, is that the bottom-up model undermined any idea of a relatively expeditious implementation process; moreover, there were occasions when a top-down perspective or command orientation seemed more in order than a bottom-up approach (e.g., national security, many legal judgments, or technically driven decisions).¹ Some (e.g., Sabatier 1986) have attempted to synthesize the two approaches while others (i.e., O’Toole 2000, 267) have observed that the bottom-up/top-down controversy is little more than a

¹Partially in reaction to problems with implementation difficulties, authors began to propose policy design frameworks, in which policy formulation exercises explicitly considered issues relating to implementation (see, for instance, Bobrow and Drzek 1987; Ingraham 1987; and Schneider and Ingram 1988 and 1990).
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different way of looking at the same phenomenon and that the field has “moved past the rather sterile top-down, bottom-up dispute.”

As we noted earlier, Malcolm L. Goggin and his colleagues (1990) proposed a third generation of policy implementation studies in their Implementation Theory and Practice. They sought to explain “why behavior varies across time, across policies, and across units of government and by predicting the type of implementation behavior that is likely to occur in the future. In a word, the objective of third-generation research is to be more scientific . . .” (p. 171; emphasis in original). Completely cognizant of the complexity of implementation among agencies, the authors proposed a number of hypotheses ripe for testing (often utilizing concepts of game theory or principal-agent theory), but hopelessly awash in ambiguities. For example: hypothesis 12 states, “the greater the agent’s legitimacy, credibility, and capability of advancing the interests of the principal, the more responsive is the principal” (p. 186), with little attention to defining terms and calibrating measurements.

In much the same time frame, implementation scholars were beginning to propose contingency theories as a way of adapting to the obvious complexity of implementation studies. That is, rather than make one shoe fit all, people such as Richard Matland (1995), Helen Ingram (1990), and Denise Scheberle (1997) offered 2x2 matrices, which suggested that different conditions might require different implementation strategies. The most important observation to be gleaned from Matland and other contingency theorists is that there is no single best implementation strategy, that the appropriate strategy is very much contextual in terms of what are the contingencies surrounding the policy issues and how they can best be addressed in terms of implementation. To second Garrett’s (1993, 1249) words, “[T]here is . . . much skepticism among students in this field about the claims of rational management concerning a ‘holy grail’ that defines the implementation process.” Rather, a number of variables can rise (or diminish) in importance as a function of other defining parameters. There is, under a contingency theory model, little reason to require one shoe to fit all situations.

Peter deLeon delivered a paper at the 1997 annual meeting of the American Political Science Association (APSA), which was entitled “The Missing Link Revisited: Contemporary Implementation Research” (deLeon 1999a). In this paper, he recounted much of the policy literature devoted to the role and effects of policy implementation since the early 1970s and concluded that all this work had developed little in the way of an operational theory of implementation. He claimed that “the study of policy implementation has reached an intellectual dead end” (p. 313). DeLeon’s

2James Thompson (1967; and with Arthur Tuden 1959) used a similar matrix as a diagnostic methodology; also see L. deLeon (1993).
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observation was hardly a blinding or even a particularly original insight; Helen Ingram (1990, 462) had reached much the same conclusion in the early 1990s when she wrote: “Even though the bibliographic population explosion of implementation studies has done a great deal to heighten appreciation for the policy implementation of administration, the field of implementation has yet to reach conceptual clarity” (see also Garrett 1993; Matland 1995).

Nevertheless, a veritable academic firestorm erupted. The following February, James Lester chaired a panel of noted policy implementation scholars at the Western Political Science Association that was (at least in some ways) designed to counter the thesis of deLeon’s earlier APSA paper. However, no consensus could be reached on which of these paths showed the most promise. In September 1998, Lester and Goggin presented a paper at the APSA meeting that stood in direct opposition to the earlier characterizations of policy implementation (P. deLeon 1999a; and others, e.g., Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith 1993), pointedly deriding what they referred to as this “array of rather fustian dismissals” (Lester and Goggin 1998, 1). In it, they indicated that a profusion of implementation studies went by a different set of names (e.g., environmental policy studies) and a wealth of potentially viable approaches.3

Laurence O’Toole (2000) recently has written on implementation at some length in this journal, again effectively countering (or at least seriously questioning) the intellectual poverty of the field, but even he (whom we might admiringly cast in the role of an avatar of implementation theory) admits that an implementation “consensus is not close at hand, and there has been relatively little emphasis on parsimonious explanation” (O’Toole 2000, 267). With Lester and Goggin (1998), O’Toole (p 284) argues that a great deal of scholarly work has been “sorta” done on policy implementation—“sorta” in that its linkages are not always obvious, its promise not always lambent, nor the necessary applications articulated—but, nevertheless, he concludes, the study of “implementation . . . is alive and lively.” Still, one is forced to question the proposed target, for as Lester and Goggin (p. 6) concluded (largely singularly, we might add, if we read the Policy Currents papers accurately): “By incorporating the insights of communications theory, regime theory, rational choice theory (especially game theory), and contingency theories, a ‘meta-theory’ may perhaps be developed.”

A few observations, then, can safely be made. First, a great deal of recent literature has addressed policy implementation, sometimes so labeled and sometimes not, such that the boundaries of the study of implementation have become less clear. For instance, Anne Schneider (1999, 2; emphasis added), in responding to Lester and

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3The discussion continued in Policy Currents, the newsletter of the APSA Public Policy Section, which published Lester and Goggin’s paper and subsequently printed six additional papers commenting on it (Winter 1999; P. deLeon 1999b; Schneider 1999; Meier 1999; Kettunen 2000; and Potoski 2001).
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Goggin (1998), noted, “Implementation needs to be studied both as a dependant variable and as an independent variable.” Similarly, Ken Meier (1999, 6) has commented that with the current plethora of theories and variables, “[a]ny new policy implementation scholar who adds a new variable or a new interaction should be required to eliminate two existing variables. Second, given the complexity that every implementation author has accepted as an inherent part of the process, contingency theories (e.g., Matland 1995; Ingram 1990) might be posed as one possible clarifying device. And third, deLeon’s (1999a) main theme—a lack of anything resembling a consensual theory of implementation—has apparently been vindicated (or, more accurately, has not been rejected), for in spite of his seeming act of intellectual auto-da-fé, few alternatives or propositions (as opposed to promises or opportunities) have been advanced. While one can legitimately subscribe to multiple approaches, especially when a field is as conceptually daunting as policy implementation has proven to be, even after thirty years of careful study, one would have to hope for more theory than is currently on the policy implementation plate. Even a latter-day Candide would have to admit that the best one can say about implementation theory is “lots of leads, little results.”

A FEW DETAILS OF DEFINITION AND ASSUMPTION

We need to hesitate here and address a few necessities of exposition, particularly what it is that we mean by policy implementation, and what the relationship of implementation is to the other stages of the policy process, especially policy formulation and program evaluation. Lastly, we should examine the basic assumptions that underlie the different modes of implementation analysis.

Addressing the problem of definition is hardly straightforward: Remembering Browne and Wildavsky’s (1984, 234) caution that “[i]mplementation is no longer solely about getting what you once wanted but, instead, it is about what you have since learned to prefer until, of course, you change your mind again,” the definition clearly becomes murky, and too often has been as complex and extended as implementation itself. Perhaps the most detailed (and, by natural extension, the most cumbersome) definition has been offered by Mazmanian and Sabatier (1983, 20-21):

Implementation is the carrying out of a basic policy decision, usually incorporated in a statute but which can also take the form of important executive orders or court decisions. Ideally, that decision identifies the problem(s) to be addressed, stipulates the objective(s) to be pursued, and, in a variety of ways, “structures” the implementation process. The process normally runs through a number of stages beginning with passage of the basic statute, followed by the policy outputs (decisions) of the implementing agencies, the compliance of

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target groups with those decisions, the actual impacts of agency decisions, and, finally, important revisions (or attempted revisions) in the basic statute.

Such definitions (also see Bardach 1977 and 1980) attempt to capture the full range of implementation activities and, in that sense, might attempt to cover too much, even if one somehow overlooks the posed definitional problems, which may be debilitating. For instance, Meier and McFarlane (1995) tested the Mazmanian and Sabatier model through a series of ingenious measures and found that many of the posited relationships were statistically significant. However, they were forced to conclude that the “operationalization of several of the independent variables was problematic. Admittedly, some of our own measures are crude, and there is a reasonable distance between the measures selected and the broad concepts embodied in the statutory variables” (p. 294).

A more satisfying definition would work to simplify the underlying concepts of implementation. Take, for instance, Ferman’s (1990) definition of implementation as what happens between policy expectations and (perceived) policy results. O’Toole (2000, 266) takes a similar tack when he writes that “[p]olicy implementation is what develops between the establishment of an apparent intention on the part of government to do something, or to stop doing something, and the ultimate impact in the world of action.” Schneider and Ingram (1993) talk about affecting changes in behavioral patterns (i.e., getting constituents to cease doing one activity [say, speeding] in place of another). The problem here, of course, is the issue of expectations and their subsequent evaluation (and reformulation). As many implementation scholars (e.g., Ingram 1990; Rein and Rabinovitz 1975; Matland 1995) indicate, legislative decision makers are notably reluctant to provide exact maps that outline their expectations of policy results. The courts are similarly reluctant in this regard, and all of this might easily be rendered moot when programs change midstream to consider new contextual factors. Indeed, excessive precision in defining goals may be counterproductive and deprive implementors of a valued flexibility. This stream of thought runs directly counter to that of others (e.g., Goggin et al. 1990) who suggest that the clearer the initial policy directive, the clearer the policy mandate and the more valuable the direction that is provided for the implementors to follow. This discussion does not even begin to take into account the expectations of the intended clientele, assuming they are of one mind or even that they can be identified.

The pivotal assumption in implementation is that policy makers can be of one mind when it comes to operationalizing a policy, for, at base, when multiple players are involved (and they almost always are—see Hall and O’Toole [2000]), implementation

\[\text{As Matland (1995, 158) notes, “One of the ways to limit conflict is through ambiguity. The clearer goals are, the more likely they are to lead to conflict.” Lipsky (1980, 14) seems to concur: “Rules may actually be an impediment to supervision. They may be so voluminous and contradictory that they can only be enforced or invoked selectively.”}\]
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becomes a battle to determine a correct reading of the mandate and its accurate execution. Failing this test, implementation is certain to become a welter of confusion. In the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis, when President John Kennedy and Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara ordered the navy to quarantine Cuba at the specified distance from the island, the navy command unilaterally (and without informing the president) extended that distance, recognizing that the closer distance would have exposed navy vessels to Cuban air strikes (see Allison 1971). In short, both sides agreed on the quarantine (what Mazmanian and Sabatier [1983] would term the policy mandate) but they had very different motivations as they carried out the implementation of the order and, hence, its ultimate effectiveness.

Most implementation scholars agree on the importance of program evaluation as a key to good implementation (Mazmanian and Sabatier 1983; Browne and Wildavsky 1984), viewing evaluation as a way assess the implemented program and make suggestions as to how it can be improved. As Browne and Wildavsky attest (p. 205), in many ways implementation and evaluation are completely interactive in practice, although necessarily remaining distinctive in concept. But to enlarge policy implementation to include program evaluation introduces yet another inherent problem: how does one assess policy implementation and, subsequently, policy evaluation in anything more tangible than expectations—an always dicey metric, especially when contexts and programs are constantly subject to change. Moreover, formative evaluation (particularly in real time) is a notably imprecise activity (Browne and Wildavsky 1984), one that makes judging the relative success or failure of implementation as an end product improbable at best, and illusionary at worst. In a complex policy environment, it is rare that one set of variables can be identified as decisive (Rossi and Freeman 1985), let alone dictate new policy implementation strategies.

Policy implementation is often extended backwards in the policy process framework, as scholars have tended to include policy formulation in its purview (see Milward quotation, above) as they remedy the implementation problems by addressing their origins in policy initiation. These views typically are attributed to those who preach policy implementation as a function of varying contingencies, although not invariably (see Sabatier 1993). For instance, if a policy requires what Berman (1980) calls an adaptive (as opposed to a programmatic) strategy as a function of his five precursor variables, it would necessitate an examination of the context of the problem from which the policy ensued. Again, this moves the implementation analyst closer to what others have termed policy design (see note 1). The fundamental problem with policy design is
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that it presupposes a policy prescience—an ability to foresee future contingencies—that would be splendid if available but which all too often is not. This expansion does begin to indicate just how interactive the policy process stages appear to be, for to understand one, an analyst seemingly has to understand the mechanics of all (see P. deLeon 1999). Still, the accumulation of uncertainties within each stage and how they are to feed into policy implementation again suggests just how daunting a theory of implementation is for anybody but the tried and true incrementalist.

Finally, we need to appreciate two underlying assumptions behind policy implementation and its major schools of thought (i.e., top down and bottom up). The first assumption has been pointed out by Michael Lipsky (1975), who argued persuasively that top-down studies assumed the existence of an authoritative, hierarchical (i.e., Weberian) prime mover, and therefore one need only minimize the communication distortions between that person (the principal) and his/her subordinate agents in order to effect successful implementation. Therein, Lipsky observes, lies the root of the implementation problem:

By setting up the analysis using assumptions of hierarchy, they focus attention on the possibilities of constructing or reconstructing policy processes that would operate with less slippage between processes as they should work and processes as that actually do work (emphasis added).

A second assumption underlying implementation studies is that programs usually fail, despite the best intentions of the public administrators. Ann Chih Lin (1996, 3) has observed that “the implementation literature shows that faulty implementation is commonplace, non-random, and patterned.” Martha Derthick (1972, xiii), in her analysis of new federal housing construction under the New Towns, In-Towns program, draws this conclusion for the federal government:

If the federal government is unable to do in domestic affairs what its leaders say it will, this is not necessarily because the men who run it, either as elected officials, presidential appointees, or high-ranking civil servants, are lazy, incompetent, or deceitful. If they delude the public as to what to expect of government, it is because they delude themselves as well. They too are puzzled and disillusioned when things go wrong and government programs do not fulfill their promise.

Likewise, Stephen Bailey and Edith Mosher (1968), in their benchmark study of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, proposed that the central culprit is the sheer complexity of administrative responsibility (cf., Pressman and Wildavsky 1984). In light of these difficulties, perhaps implementation failures are really just overt failures of optimistic expectations. Lin (1996, 4) supports this
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when she observes that “successful implementation is often accidental, while failed implementation is the result of design.”

The analyst or administrator should therefore evince little surprise when the majority of implementation case studies describe various degrees of failure. For one thing, the attention of both scholars and practitioners is focused on problems, that is, situations in which reality diverges from expectations. Problems cry out for explanations in a way that successes ordinarily do not. Don Kettl (1993, 60-61) speaks to this specific condition:

Implementation research is largely a study of why things go wrong. The predominantly negative focus comes because implementation scholars have been drawn irresistibly to delicious tales of government program gone sour. Moreover, implementation research has largely (but not exclusively) been based in intergovernmental programs, where organizational interrelationships are even stickier than usual, where goals are always harder to define than usual, and where success therefore seems especially elusive.

But it is also unfortunate, for it is clear that a large majority of government programs—every day and on every level—work pretty much as they were designed. Even some very complex programs have been successful—Kettl nominates the air traffic control system—and operate without the debilities often ascribed to implementation. Yet the principal corpus of implementation studies has consistently been viewed from a hierarchical perspective that focuses on and draws its lessons from the exceptional failures. O’Toole (2000, 282-83) carefully demurs, noting that

the supposed bias of implementation research towards the cases of failure is an outdated generalization. Even decades ago, scholars took pains to avoid such bias toward failure in the selection of cases for investigation. Cross-state larger-n studies have substantially reinforced this effort . . . , and the third-generation work of Goggin et al. (1990) was explicitly designed to avoid any trace of preoccupation with the “exceptional failure.”

Still, the “less than success” tattoo is pervasive, underlining Lipsky’s (1975) contention. Even for those scholarly studies that purposely encompass a wide range of implementation activities, many of which were successful, the emphasis is generally on the less successful.

To summarize: top-down policy implementation is prone to hierarchical, unduly optimistic expectations, which in the face of complexity are more likely than not to be disappointed, thus visiting further ignominy on implementation studies. It is possible—some theorists of the virtues of participation would assert it as true—that this proclivity is less likely to be true in the case of bottom-up implementation. The reasoning is straightforward—bottom-up
implementation is a reflection of communal interest. Rather than having a policy imposed by a policy maker who is counseled by select (hardly representative) and narrowly focused interest groups, the potential clientele are proposing a policy that will directly affect them. In short, a bottom-up policy implementation will tend to be more realistic and practical, in that it suggests that the vox populi have a great deal of say about where they are going and how they choose to arrive. Moreover, a bottom-up orientation will be more conducive to a democratic approach to the policy implementation process than will the top-down (or a command) model. This requires a discussion of the second major tenet of our argument, conceiving the role of a discursive, more democratic orientation to implementation analysis.

**ISSUES OF PUBLIC PARTICIPATION**

Within the past decade, a number of policy scholars have made the brief for a more democratic approach to policy analysis, wherein constituents have a greater voice regarding the policies that will affect them. This brief has been stated in general terms (e.g., Drzek 1990; P. deLeon 1997; Schneider and Ingram 1997), with respect to specific policy stages (Fischer [1995] on policy evaluation; Fox [1990] on implementation), and in regard to substantive policy issues (Press [1994], and Fischer [2000] on environmental studies). Recent studies by Lin (2000) on implementing correctional reforms in prisons and Heather Hill (2000) on community policing and mathematical curricular reforms have stressed the contextual and networking elements of these activities, thereby emphasizing an environmental richness that would be all but impossible to capture in a statistical analysis. All of these (and, of course, others) indicate a trend toward a more discursive form of policy implementation, one that recognizes that there is somebody whose behavior needs to be modified in order that implementation will be considered successful, and that those somebodies might be more willing to conform to the new mandates if they were informed, and even more so if they consent, before the decision.

In this vein, Peter deLeon (1997) has suggested that the policy sciences have largely neglected their democratic roots, largely because of the discipline’s orientation toward efficiency as a value primus inter pares but also for reasons as workaday as simple convenience. Ingram and Schneider (1993, 71) likewise identify as their central focus “policies that foster democratic participation” (also see Ingram and Smith 1993).

Isolating this democratic approach to policy implementation, it is straightforward to deduce that the top-down orientation (which

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*For other illustrations of this perspective, see Drzek (1990); and Bobrow and Drzek (1987); more moderately, Lynn (1999).*
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we earlier described as hierarchical) is less democratic in its approach than is the bottom-up (or street-level) perspective. Matland (1995), however, wishes to differ, preferring to give the democratic edge to the top downers. He contends that elected representatives are likely to be more representative of the general populace than the (typically unelected) street-level bureaucrats who define and later execute the bottom-up approach.

However, Matland’s contention neglects a number of issues, the most central being whether by democracy we mean direct or indirect popular involvement (i.e., participation by individuals or by their representatives). Jane Mansbridge (1980) thoughtfully argues that direct and local—that is, participatory—democracy is imperative for popular support to ensue. Top downers indicate that implementation failures can occur the more distant one is from an authoritative policy maker (hence, the core of the policy devolution movement; see Osborne and Gaebler [1992]), but they seem staunchly opposed to a more participatory aspect of implementation (i.e., bottom up), arguing that it adds greater confusion to an already convoluted implementation process. Moreover, Schneider and Ingram (1997) stress that top downers are typically far removed from the target population’s perspective, basing their understanding of citizen needs and wishes on surveys and focus groups rather than on contacts with citizens themselves. The psychological distance between top-down policy makers and citizens is even greater for those groups who are considered to be dependent or deviant.

Matland’s (1995) normative arguments on democracy and bottom-up implementation—that street-level bureaucrats are not formally accountable or responsible to their constituents—remains. However, this seems to be a peculiar contention. Street-level bureaucrats might indeed be protected from their clients by civil service rules, unions, and limited liability, but citizens nevertheless have considerable influence over their actions, particularly when citizens and bureaucrats are engaged in coproduction—that is, the joint production of public services by the citizen and administration—of policy outcomes.\(^7\) Lipsky (1980, 57) addresses this codependence:

\[^7\]The concept of coproduction is articulated by, among others, Brudney (1989); Hupe (1993); Alford (2002). Maynard-Moody and Leland (1997) authored an excellent study along this line.

Furthermore, if local officials do not pay attention to the needs and opinions of target populations, they may soon find themselves out of touch and surrender their professional identity as street-level
bureaucrats. We need only to remember the administrative headaches described with great humor by Tom Wolfe (1970) in “mau-mauing the flak catchers” to understanding the fragile nature of the relationship between citizens and the street-level bureaucrats. Heather Hill (2000) reminds us that a major requirement of any police department is to gain and retain their particular public’s confidence. Indeed, Lin (2000) makes the case that even though they are incarcerated, inmates still have a powerful voice in the governing of a prison. So to say (as Matland does) that street-level bureaucrats are less responsive to local conditions and attitudes than are elected representatives is to misread seriously their professional responsibilities. Similarly, Matland cannot imply that street-level bureaucrats are further removed from their clientele than are administrators who are cloistered in state legislatures or federal bureaucracies. Berry, Portney, and Thompson’s (1993) thorough study of urban democracies in mid-sized American cities dispels that contention. This is not to declare that bottom up wins the normative democratic derby, just that the bottom uppers appear to be more in tune with a participatory democratic approach (cf., Barber 1984).

OLD WINE IN NEW BOTTLES:
THE PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION PERSPECTIVE

This extended debate in the policy implementation literature between bottom-up and top-down theorists resonates with remarkable familiarity with public administration scholars. The latter discipline has a well-established framework for considering the ways by which citizens participate in the development of public policy and the administration of public programs. The problem of administrative legitimacy, as it is called, is that statutory law cannot fully dictate administrative action, for every law or rule requires interpretation. These interpretive decisions of administrators, however, must have legitimacy, which in a democracy must derive in some way from the consent of the governed.

Early theories concerning the source of administrative legitimacy were, in the policy implementation cant, top-down theories. A well-known statement of this position is Emmette Redford’s (1969, 70) description of overhead democracy:

This “simple model” asserted that democratic control should run through a single line from the representatives of the people to all those who exercised power in the name of the government. The line ran from the people to their representatives in the Presidency and the Congress, and from there to the President as chief executive, then to departments, then to bureaus, then to lesser units, and so on to the fingertips of administration.
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Foreshadowing Matland’s line of argument (that top-down implementation is more democratic than bottom-up), Redford ends his book with a peroration on the prerequisites of “workable democracy” (1969, 196-204). He begins by insisting that elites (elected officials or administrators) must be “supersensitive” (p. 202) to the needs of all people. But then he emphasizes that his model of overhead or indirect democracy is not sufficient to produce a workable system. It is also necessary, he writes, that “all must be able to participate meaningfully in politics” (p. 201). Nor is it sufficient that hindrances to participation—barriers to free speech, peaceable assembly, and so on—be removed; there is also a need for positive measures to ensure that individuals have education, economic benefit, and status such that they feel empowered to assert their claims upon the political-administrative system.

Two decades before Redford, another giant in the field of public administration, Dwight Waldo, had forcefully urged the democratic case. In 1948, he published his landmark *The Administrative State*, criticizing what was then called *administrative management*, a perspective that advocated the separation of administration from politics, an emphasis on efficiency, and the importation of administrative techniques from private business. Waldo’s seminal idea was that a theory of administration is by necessity political theory as well, and uncritical acceptance of the assumptions of administrative management constituted a rejection of democratic values. As Denhardt (1984, 6) writes, Waldo saw “the authoritarian bias of organizational thought, with its emphasis on hierarchy, control and discipline” as restricting the development of a theory of democratic administration. However, Waldo did not so much advocate direct citizen involvement in program implementation as suggest that the professionalism of public administrators might be trusted to protect their interests (1980, 78).

Paul H. Appleby (1949; see also Martin 1965) differed with Waldo, but he also castigated those who would separate politics from administration. Appleby saw public administrators as inextricably involved in the political process, both at the policy level (advising legislators on policy options) and at the program level (using administrative discretion in the implementation process). Appleby’s contribution to the analysis of discretion was to view it as normal, natural, and desirable: The perspective of bureaucrats working at street level could act to check the arbitrary exercise of bureaucratic power.

In the 1970s, reliance on the professionalism of administrators and the supersensitivity of political leaders—in short, the whole apparatus of overhead democracy—was challenged by the new
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public administration (Marini 1971). Particularly in the essay by Michael Harmon (1971), the argument was advanced that authoritative decisions in a democracy should not be made by the legislature only in the policy selection phase of the process; rather they should be made by administrators as well. Harmon vigorously challenged the argument that administrators “will act selfishly and irresponsibly unless forced to act otherwise by vigilant guardians of the public trust” (p. 178). In George Frederickson’s words (1997, 210):

In this view, civil servants are sworn to uphold the same constitution as are other officers of government, and they may in fact be competent to define the public interest on their own authority. Administrators may be as close to citizens as elected representatives. In fact, legislators may be far removed and preoccupied with the legislative processes or captured by special interests.

The new public administration (NPA) gave a more proactive role (what Marini called “confrontational administration and client-focused bureaucracies” in his concluding note [p. 351]) to bureaucrats in advocating and shaping policy on behalf of society’s disadvantaged; moreover, it strongly supported “maximum feasible participation” of citizens in administrative activities. 9

For public policy scholars, a direct democratic approach subscribes to an interpretive or postpositivist approach (see Fox 1990; Yanow 1996), based on what Jürgen Habermas (e.g., 1987) has termed “communicative rationality.” Habermas has presented a discursive strategy that addresses such issues as how people arrive at social change and policy learning through social discourse, as opposed to the more representative channels through which policy makers exercise political power. In one of Habermas’s more celebrated phrases, the political and social worlds suffer from “systematically distorted communications,” in which (to oversimplify) one party or coalition (e.g., interest groups or governmental agencies) has a clear and persistent dominance in a policy arena over other relevant parties and consistently avails itself of that authority. 10 In Habermas’ terms, this distribution leads to a “one-sided rationalization,” a dysfunction that does not occur as a random act of political nature but as an overt and clear political mechanism, one that surely undermines “communicative rationality,” or the consensual basis of governance.

Habermas’s systematically distorted communication represents the age-old conflict between the government (with its representative members and bureaucratic administrators) and its citizens, and it would no doubt affect most policy implementation strategies, particularly those proposed by the top-down school. In short, a democratic orientation founded on citizen participation contributes more to the bottom-up approach than to its top-down sibling—if not

9Daniel Patrick Moynihan (1969) drew upon this usage to describe the War on Poverty, giving it a certain national cachet.

10Among those who have drawn a distinction between direct and indirect democracy are Barber (1984); Morone (1990); and P. deLeon (1997).

11Schneider and Ingram (1997), utilizing a social construction orientation, refer to such groups as “dependents” or “deviants.”
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perhaps in its present form, then surely in its promise. Whether this particular avenue has been examined is open to legitimate question. O’Toole (2000, 283) has observed that top-down and bottom-up “investigations” are predicated on “quite different notions of democracy.” He goes on to assert, however, that “[s]earching for an implementation approach built around a normative theory of discursive democracy would generate a fascinating scholarly agenda, but it is not the case that an interest in democratic theory has simply been ignored until now.” O’Toole does not offer supporting illustrations, although few implementation scholars are as thoroughly immersed in the literature as he is.

Most academics are intellectually well equipped to deal critically with concepts, so it is relatively easy to criticize existing approaches to policy implementation, either for what they lack substantively or for what they promise conceptually. Let us therefore turn to a more problematic task, one of proposing an alternative approach to policy implementation.

A DEMOCRATIC APPROACH TO POLICY IMPLEMENTATION

The core of the proposed option is an explicit recognition that while conceptual clarity and empirical rigor are important goals of implementation theory, it is equally essential that such theory be based on democratic values. Conceptually, this would align policy implementation with a broader trend in the policy sciences toward a greater emphasis on the democratic ethos and citizen participation (Drzek and Torgerson 1993; Yanow 1996). We suggest that more democracy is better than less; that is, more direct forms should be preferred unless there are strong and articulated reasons to avoid them. Such a position does not necessarily require a nationwide return to New England-style town meetings or to ongoing universal referenda, but it does require that policy makers do more than listen to themselves, their in-house analysts, and extant interest groups. It requires that they make a participatory orientation more than a theoretic talisman (one honored more in the breach than in practice) and more realized in operations. A democratic approach to policy implementation would include reaching back in the policy process framework to include the policy formulation deliberations as a means to help define policy goals by talking with the affected parties well before the policy is adopted by the authorized policy maker.

Let us acknowledge (with O’Toole 2000) that the analytic data base supporting a democratic approach to policy implementation would indeed be fascinating, if for no other reason than, at the
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present time, its illustrations are sparse and indirect. Some valuable evidence can be gleaned from the participatory policy analysis literature, for example, in case studies depicting citizen juries, during which a public policy was defined in a participatory manner and then implemented (e.g., see Crosby, Kelley, and Shaefer 1986; Kathlene and Martin 1991). However, these focus more on policy formulation than implementation. Still, as we shall see, this linkage is to be fostered. There are some examples we can employ.

Amy Gutmann and Dennis Thompson (1996) have described how the town of Ruston (population 636, located outside Tacoma, Washington) was confronted by the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) with a wicked problem; the main source of employment and air pollution in Ruston was Asarco, “the only producer of industrial arsenic in this country” (p. 167). William Ruckleshaus, who was then administrator of the EPA, came to Ruston and urged the citizens to give him first-hand information about their personal preferences. As the local newspaper headlines reported the apparently irreconcilable issues, “Smelter Workers Have Choice: Keep Their Jobs or Their Health.” Gutmann and Thompson have characterized Ruckleshaus’s dilemma thus: The EPA administrator could have been “calculating costs and benefits with a method that citizens could not comprehend and assuming rational preferences that they might or might not hold.” Ruckleshaus saw the situation rather differently; he argued that the citizens “know that the right to be heard is not the same thing as the right to be heeded.” In his own words: “For me to sit here in Washington and tell the people of Tacoma what is an acceptable risk would be at best arrogant and at worst inexcusable” (all quotations from Gutmann and Thompson 1996, 170). The outcome was salutary (p. 197):

Ruckleshaus hoped that if he took the options to the people, providing not only information but also opportunities to discuss the options among themselves, one would come to be seen as more acceptable. Or perhaps an even better policy would emerge from the discussion. To some extent, that is just what happened.

In short, once a decision had been agreed upon, implementation became more a tactic than a strategy. While tactics can turn out to be problematic, achieving a consensus after the major disputes have been argued and resolved (nominally in the formulation stage) reduces the matter of implementation tactics to a second-order consideration.

As we have suggested, the application of democratic principles to implementation theory requires a sound understanding of the contingencies that govern a choice of strategy. Citizen involvement in the processes of government (including electoral politics, policy
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making, and administration) can take many forms, and even with the generic guideline that more democracy is better than less, the choices among them need to be strategic. Several contingency matrices have been proposed. To offer just one extended illustration, let us utilize Matland’s ambiguity/conflict matrix (exhibit 1):

Exhibit 1
Ambiguity-Conflict Matrix: Policy Implementation Processes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CONFLICT</th>
<th>AMBIGUITY</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Low</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Administrative Implementation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High</td>
<td>Experimental Implementation</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


As we noted earlier, there is a workaday world full of procedural or administrative policies and decisions whose implementations are basically designed and concluded without a hitch. The measures of ambiguity and conflict are both minimal. In short, these are, as Matland indicates, administrative implementations, and while they are important in the daily functions of government they are not contentious. Implementations in this cell are basic exercises in traditional public administrative practices, largely due to the low levels of conflict and ambiguity.

In the low ambiguity/high conflict cell—what Matland terms political implementation—there could be disagreement on the goals of the policy. Alternatively, if the players agree as to what ends to advance (say, public education), there could be great uncertainty (leading to conflict) as the best way to achieve those goals (busing, vouchers, charter schools, home schooling, privatization, etc.). In Matland’s words (1995, 163; emphasis in original): “The central principle in political implementation is that implementation outcomes are decided by power.” In such an arena, implementation is perilous unless and until a compromise can somehow be forged. A democratic orientation would want to avoid simple coercion whenever possible. In this cell, the most effective means to this end would be to negate or overcome what we earlier described as “systematically distorted communications,” in which group dominance is achieved (e.g., through a monopoly on technical information or authority). And this is best accomplished in a discursive

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environment. While discourse is typically a time-intensive approach, the total time and energy consumed might easily be reduced if it alleviates some of the friction that would otherwise occur later during implementation. Matland argues that a top-down orientation is best able to capture the power elements in this cell, but we would argue that democratic methods might well produce better, less contentious decisions. Matland’s chosen example for working in this cell is not completely supportive, as public education is still an rancorous an issue as ever.

In the high ambiguity/low conflict cell (experimental implementation), “outcomes will depend largely on which actors are active and most involved. The central principle driving this type of implementation is that contextual conditions dominate the process” (Matland 1995, 165-66; emphasis in original). The Clean Air Act of 1970 is a good example. There is general uncertainty (for instance, in goals, technology, and tactics), but the participants seem to agree among themselves as to the value of the policy. While this cell generally (sooner or later) reaches an implementation solution, part of the solution is a recognition that this cell represents an experimental implementation, with ongoing corrections realized from formative evaluations. In short, while the outcomes might be mixed, a consensus that activity is considered to be experimental permits time and (what Sabatier [1993] calls) policy learning. Matland (1995, 167) suggests that “[t]he bottom-up description of the policy implementation process is superior to the top-down in describing conditions in this category. . . . The top-down models emphasize command, control, and uniformity and fail to take into account the diversity inherent in much implementation that occurs.” It would thus seem as if a democratic approach—in which these issues over ambiguity could be hashed-out prior to adoption—would be the most appropriate strategy for policies that fall into this cell.

Of course, the final cell—mixing high ambiguity with high levels of conflict—is the most difficult for considering any implementation strategy. The current conflict in Congress over the advisability of faith-based partnerships is a good example, mixing elements of the Constitution (church-state involvements) with uncertainty among the various religious factions as to their participation. Similarly, one can imagine that the EDA’s attempts to foster employment in Oakland (Pressman and Wildavsky 1974) could be placed in this cell. It comprises such intractable cases that Matland (1995) can only refer to them as symbolic implementation, which appears to be code for “not much hope here.” The policy implementation landscape is littered with these casualties (for example, almost the entire War on Poverty, Model Cities, or Superfund-sponsored clean-ups).
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Linda deLeon (1993 and 1998) has used a framework similar to Matland's to describe different types of accountability under varying conditions of ambiguity and conflict. Labeling the high-conflict, high-ambiguity decision situation anarchic (cf., the garbage can model or organized anarchy described by Cohen, March, and Olson 1972), she argues, “The more anarchic a decision situation . . . the more it is true that participation is the most appropriate—indeed the only—means of linking organizational action to public preferences” (p. 552; emphasis in original). In very fluid, unstructured decision situations, conditions are changing and policy responses are experimental. The only way that affected parties can monitor these situations and exert any influence is to remain involved and to participate in the ongoing process. In this set of intractable domains, democracy must be more direct and pervasive than in any other.

A final and admittedly weak argument in favor of a democratic approach is that so many policies have fallen short—at least under a nominally acceptable time frame—under current implementation regimes. The abysmal failure of the Reagan administration (as well as the Congress, itself a central pillar to the construct of a representative democracy) to consult with the intended Medicare population led to Congress’s repeal of the 1988 Medicare Catastrophic Coverage Act legislation within a year of its passage, once the outcry from senior citizens had the chance to register (Himelfarb 1995). Again, while admitting that this third thread is not the strongest argument, something must have been wrong to rack up such a long list of implementation failures. Even Steve Kelman (1984), who during a stint in the federal bureaucracy tried to bring implementation scholarship to Washington, ended up questioning its practical or operational applications. Whatever else one can say about the study of implementation, in the public policy and administration disciplines that pride themselves on applications as well as theoretic insights, this is not a healthy situation in either scholarship or application.13

CONCLUSIONS

This article has been predicated on the rediscovery theme regarding policy implementation, offering an alternative mode for designing implementation studies and practice. There is, however, little doubt that there is much more to be done in terms of developing a well-articulated and internally consistent democratic approach. Moreover, as we have suggested, implementation research has reached a stage where it can and should specify the contingencies that govern a choice of implementation strategy. There may certainly be implementation conditions in which a

13Linda deLeon and Peter deLeon (2002) have suggested that many elements of public management have a distinctly democratic approach (e.g., 360-degree feedback and workplace democracy) but have yet failed to attract sufficient scholarly attention.
classic bottom-up or democratic approach would be ill advised. As Matland (1995, 150) has pointed out in his critique of bottom-up analysis, "The institutional structure, the available resources, and the access to an implementation arena may be determined centrally, and substantially can affect policy outcomes" (also, see Sabatier 1986). But we would suggest that the conventional identification of national security, crises, and political exigencies should not automatically be identified as conditions wherein democracy should be obviated; too often automatic is interpreted as convenient. Concomitantly, there also may be conditions under which a democratic approach would be the dominant strategy. On balance, we are prepared to pose the following premise: when a policy implementation strategy is designed, a democratic approach should be the preferred (i.e., default) option. Implementation should follow democratic procedures (and preferably in the most direct democracy practices) unless prior analysis demonstrates that another model (e.g., a top-down, or command, implementation) is superior. In a more balanced rhetoric, the burden of proof regarding both policy implementation theory and practice lies upon those scholars who would move away from, that is, recommend against, democratic processes.

There are, to be sure, important questions to be asked and answered before a democratic imperative is widely acknowledged; similar doubts are debated within the participatory policy analysis camp (cf., P. deLeon 1997; Lynn 1999; Weimer 1998). We have, for instance, not examined issues of resources, political commitment, level of government, bureaucratic incentives, or a host of other central implementation variables. What, one might ask, is the role of time (e.g., a crisis vs. a more leisurely situation)? Or the courts? What weights should be given to efficiency versus effectiveness measures, as might be posed by new public management proponents? More substantively, O'Toole and Montjoy (1984; also see Hall and O'Toole 2000) have observed that implementation is usually a multigroup activity, a condition not addressed here. Furthermore, it would be foolhardy to assume that simply bringing together people in a room (or a stadium!) to discuss policy formulation and subsequent implementation will find them of one mind, even if they somehow adhere to Habermas's injunctions. Directly put, people can and will disagree, with some justification. At the very least, institutions can be designed that will promote and protect social discussions (Ostrom 1998). Pivotal, in terms of workaday practice, how are preference aggregation problems resolved? In short, there should be no suspicion of implementation legerdemain. These and many other elements would benefit from greater explication. But it is equally our intention that a democratic approach to policy implementation should be a central focus of the implementation renaissance.
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This article has laid an initial chip on the policy implementation poker table, one supporting a democratic framework, with the understanding that others will see it as a viable consideration, perhaps even garnering some additional bets. It is demonstrably not meant to be an end-all or be-all, designed to resolve all implementation dilemmas. If we have learned little else from past decades of policy implementation studies, we should have learned that one size never fits all, that context matters, and that when we face an extremely complex condition, we are better off if we try to understand the particular issues than if we propose some form of generic metatheory. Still, we believe that a democratic approach to policy implementation warrants a place at the table.

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