

Implementation and Ambiguity*

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Studies of implementation have established two conspicuous things: First, policies can make a difference. Bureaucracies often respond to policy changes by changing administrative actions. Second, policy as implemented often seems different from policy as adopted. Organizational actions are not completely predictable from policy directives. Efforts to tighten the connection between policy and administration have, for the most part, emphasized ways of augmenting the competence and reliability of bureaucracies, of making them more faithful executors of policy directives. Alternatively, they look for ways of making policy makers more sophisticated about bureaucratic limitations. Such recommendations, however, assume that policies either are clear or can be made so arbitrarily. By describing discrepancies between adopted policies and implemented policies as problems of implementation, students of policy making obscure the extent to which ambiguity is important to policy making and encourage misunderstanding of the processes of policy formation and administration.

The "Implementation Problem"

One of the oldest topics in the study of organizations is the relation between policy and practice, the way general directives and programs adopted by legislatures, boards of directors, or top managements are executed, modified, and elaborated by administrative organizations. Contemporary forms of this interest are found in studies of program evaluation and policy implementation. Although there is no question that central policies affect organizational behavior (Attewell & Gerstein, 1979; Randall, 1979), students of implementation frequently report complications in moving from adoption of a policy to its final execution (Marshall, 1974). They often describe a scenario in which the wishes of central offices and policy making bodies are frustrated by the realities of a decentralized administrative organization (Levine, 1972; Pressman & Wildavsky, 1973; Edwards & Sharkansky, 1978; Hanf & Scharpf, 1978).

Two interpretations of implementation problems are common. The first interpretation attributes difficulties in implementation to bureaucratic incompetence. Sometimes bureaucracies are unable to accomplish the tasks

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they are assigned. The technical difficulties of organizing for major programs are often substantial; the technical skills needed for a specific job may be unavailable (Allison & Halperin, 1971; Pressman & Wildavsky, 1973; Bardach, 1977). The second interpretation attributes difficulties in implementation to conflict of interest between policy makers and bureaucratic agents, and thus to deficiencies in organizational control. A bureaucracy responds to objectives and pressures from many persons within and outside the organization; bureaucrats are self-interested actors; they evade control (Tullock, 1965; Niskanen, 1971; Davis, 1972; Halperin, 1974).

The two interpretations are not mutually exclusive, and they are sensible. In the present article, however, we wish to suggest some limitations to such analyses and the importance of including an appreciation of the policy making process in a discussion of implementation. At the limit, it has been observed that the details of a policy's execution can be systematically less important to policy makers than its proclamation (Christensen, 1976; Kreiner, 1976; Rein & White, 1977). Analyses of the United States Congress, for example, suggest that the act of voting for legislation with appropriate symbolic meaning can be more important to legislators than either its enactment or its implementation (Mayhew, 1974). This is not because legislators are unusually hypocritical. It comes from practical concerns with maintaining electoral support and the substantial symbolic significance of political actions. Voters seek symbolic affirmations as well as mundane personal or group advantage. An interest in the support of constituents, whether voters or stockholders or clients, leads policy makers to be vigorous in enacting policies and lax in enforcing them.

A desire to maintain the values, ideals, and commitments of an organization or society can easily lead to a similar course (March & Olsen, 1976). Political actors, citizens as well as legislators, workers as well as managers, symbolize their virtues and proclaim their values by seeking and securing policy changes. Policies are not simply guidelines for action. Often they are more significantly expressions of faith, acknowledgements of virtue, and instruments of education (Olsen, 1970; Christensen, 1976; Feldman & March, 1981; March & Sevon, 1984). Individuals and groups support (often with extraordinary vigor and at considerable cost) the adoption of policies that symbolize important affirmations, even where they are relatively unconcerned with the ultimate implementation of the policies. As Arnold (1935, p. 34) observed:

“It is part of the function of Law to give recognition to ideals representing the exact opposite of established conduct. Most of the complications arise from the necessity of pretending to do one thing, while actually doing another.”

Cases of such clear intentionality are, however, only a minor part of the story. They dramatize the limitations of talking about “implementation problems”, but they do not define those limitations. We will argue the more general point that an understanding of implementation cannot be divorced from an understanding of the processes that generate policies, and that some conspicuous features of policy making contribute directly to the phenomena we have come to label as problems of implementation.

Bureaucracies as Instruments of Policy

Despite the pervasiveness and effectiveness of bureaucratic organization, there are ample ground for doubting that a modern administrative agency will fulfill any policy directive that it might be assigned. For example, bureaucratic inability to cope with the size or scope of new responsibilities has been used to explain difficulties of some business organizations implementing policies that lead them into foreign markets and of military organizations implementing policies that ask them to fight limited wars. One typical situation in the public sector involves the implementation of new national programs through local departments or bureaus seemingly ill-equipped to administer them.

Consider, for example, Sutherland’s (1975, pp. 74—76) portrayal of problems in implementing the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 in the United States:

“Although some state agencies in 1965 were considered to be well managed, most were thought to lack sufficient personnel to supervise existing state programs or the capability to assume new responsibilities needed to meet future educational needs. Although all state departments of education had professionals capable of providing consultative and technical service to local educational agencies, the number of staff members available on a full-time basis was limited. Only one-fifth of the states had two or more supervisors of teacher education and 15 did not have a part-time employee for this activity. One-third of the states provided no services or supervision of school libraries. Twenty-nine did not provide for the supervision of industrial arts programs and the remaining states had only a supervisor of vocational education. Four state agencies had no full-time staff members to consult with local school systems for special education and only 13 had one

or more fulltime consultants for the development of programs for the gifted... Persons in possession of skills and the training to conduct research, evaluate findings and test and implement new instructional programs were also needed by state educational agencies. Although more than two-thirds of the state agencies had departments that included the word 'research' as a part of the title, only 108 persons were employed for research purposes, and nine state departments of education listed no research personnel."

Sutherland's description is specific to a particular mismatch between an educational policy and an educational bureaucracy, but it echoes a common concern in the implementation literature (Bardach, 1977). The idea that implementation is made difficult by the possibly unavoidable, and certainly ubiquitous, problems of bureaucratic and individual incompetence is found in many analyses of modern administrative agencies. Logistic complications are not solved in time. Coordination among agencies is not accomplished, even when there is no significant conflict among them (Pressman & Wildavsky, 1973). Materials, plans, and people are not available when needed (Bardach, 1977); personnel are not trained properly or are given inadequate instructions or supervision (Allison & Halperin, 1971).

Agencies are sometimes sloppy, disorganized, inadequately trained, poorly staffed and badly managed; but gross incompetence is not required to produce significant bureaucratic inadequacy. Some tasks are not feasible; some policies are ill-suited to administrative agencies. Moreover, it is possible to recognize the considerable individual and organizational skills represented in a bureaucracy and still observe a mismatch between a particular organization and a particular task. For example, the United States Forest Service has had difficulty playing the role of a narcotics police force in national forests.

These difficulties are frequently further complicated by a need to coordinate several different organizations in order to implement a single general policy (Elmore, 1975; Hanf & Scharf, 1978). Central policy may require coordination among organizations with sharply contrasting objectives, styles, or normal activities. Managing several relatively autonomous groups often demands capacities beyond those of elaborate bureaucratic structures, not to mention the largely ad hoc structures that are sometimes used. Policy makers often ignore, or underestimate considerably, the administrative requirements of a policy, and thus make policies that assure administrative incapacity.

The problems of incompetence are paired with problems of control. Administrative organizations are neither

reliably neutral nor easily controlled. They seem persistently to modify policies in the course of implementing them. Descriptions of such local adaptations tend to overestimate the extent to which official policy, as interpreted by interested observers, can be equated either with the public interest or with the intentions of legislatures (Lynn, 1977). They are likely to picture national officials, top management, or major policy makers as defending general interests against the predations of local officials, subordinates, and special interest (Moynihan, 1969; Lowi, 1972; Murphy, 1974). The core idea, however, does not depend on that particular representation of a morality play. Whenever an agent is used to execute the policy of a principal, control problems arise. The problems are endemic to organization and have been extensively discussed in the literature on organizations (March & Simon, 1958; Crozier, 1964), as well as in treatises on optimal contracts, incentive schemes, and theories of agency (Hirschleifer & Riley, 1979).

Bureaucracies appear often to be thoroughly political, responding to claims made in the name of sub-units, clients, and individual organizational actors. Political processes continue as policies filter through a bureaucracy to first-level administrative officials. Agencies adopt projects and implement programs in response to political pressure or financial incentives; they exercise discretion in order to improve their local position or address specific problems of interest to them (Berman & McLaughlin, 1976; Mayntz, 1976); they interpret policy directives in ways that transform their prior desires into the wishes of policy makers. For example, the Fort Lincoln project, seen by political leaders as a way to help poor people escape city slums, was converted into a program to build model communities and to try out the newest ideas in community planning (Derthick, 1972).

In dealing with organizational actors, policy makers find it hard to assure that incentives for following official policy are adequate to overcome incentives to deviate from it (Christie, 1964). Organizations, their clients, and their subunits pursue political tactics seeking renegotiation of policies and practices (Mayntz, 1977). Since from the point of view of most other groups and institutions, any new policy announced by policy makers is primarily an opportunity to pursue their own agenda (Bardach, 1977), those responsible for implementing policy have constituents who seek deviations from policy (Derthick, 1972; Pressman & Wildavsky, 1973; Nelson & Yates, 1978; Weiss, 1979). Some parts of any administrative organiza-

tion will have incentives for pursuing objectives that deviate from any policy that might be adopted (Downs, 1967; Murphy, 1974).

The difficulties in coordinating the agendas of multiple actors are compounded by the way political and organizational actors move in and out of the arena in response to various claims on their attention (March & Olsen, 1976; Sproull, Weiner & Wolf, 1978). An organization is pressed to meet the inconsistent demands of a continually changing group of actors. Pressman and Wildavsky (1973) suggest some reasons for the inconstancy of attention: Actors may find their commitments to a policy incompatible with other important commitments; they may have preferences for other programs; they may be dependent on others who lack the same sense of urgency; they may have differences of opinion on leadership or proper organizational roles; they may be constrained by legal or procedural questions or demands. In general, a shifting pattern of demands for attention made on the individuals involved in and around an organization tends to make the climate of implementation unstable in many small ways that cumulatively affect the course of events (Kaufman, 1981).

Programs for Reform of the Policy Process

Because it is part of classical administrative dogma, and because bureaucratic organizations do, in fact, have a rather impressive record for successfully coordinating large numbers of people in service of policies imposed from outside, it is persistently tempting to picture administrative agents as natural implements of prior policy. They are made innocent by an act of will or good management. In this spirit, problems of implementation lead to proposals to increase competence and control by hiring new personnel, developing new training or procedures, improving accountability, and providing new incentives. For example, foreign service organizations may respond to diagnoses of incompetence by increasing the length of service at a particular station for individual officers; they may respond to diagnoses of lack of control by requiring more frequent rotation of officers through stations. Implementation failures may lead to new organizational forms, for example, divisional management; to new investments, for example, in management information systems; to new routines, for example, evaluation studies; or to new personnel, for example, new top executives.

Such changes are intended to make an organization in-

to a competent, reliable agent, executing a wide range of possible policies (Maass, 1951; Kaufman, 1960). They picture the problems of implementation as problems of securing neutral administrative compliance with prior, exogenous policies. This view of administration has, however, long been in disrepute among students of organizations (Herring, 1936; Leiserson, 1942; Truman, 1951). It suggests more clarity in the distinction between policy making and administration than can usually be sustained; and it leads to a mechanistic perspective on the management of organizations that seems likely to be misleading. Trying to keep administrators innocent may, of course, simply reflect an instinct to use unachievable aspirations as a means of achieving less heroic, but admirable outcomes (March, 1978; 1979); but it tends to delusion. Consequently, many sophisticated observers of organizations take a more strategic posture with respect to designing administrative organizations.

Suppose we accept the proposition that bureaucracies are limited instrumentalities, that there are constraints on our abilities to make them more competent or to avoid the demands of self-interest. Then implementation problems are attributed not to characteristics of organizations — which are taken as essentially intractable — but to the naïveté of policy makers. In this view, policy makers do not specify objectives clearly enough (Løchen & Martinsen, 1962; Jacobsen, 1966; Lowi, 1969; Sabatier & Mazmanian, 1980), provide inadequate resources (Allison & Halperin, 1971; Bardach, 1977), fail to build a proper administrative organization (Williams, 1971; Derthick, 1972), fail to consult with affected groups (Bunkers, 1972; Derthick, 1972), or have too high expectations (Elmore, 1975; Bardach, 1977; Timpane, 1978). Such a strategic vision leads to recommendations to improve the policies, make them clearer and more consistent with the attitudes of the groups involved, and strengthen the incentives and capabilities for bureaucratic conformity to policy directives.

An example of such advice is found in Bardach's (1977, p. 253) discussion of policy design:

"... a management game is played against the entropic forces of social nature, and there is no permanent solution. Once this fact is recognized, the implication for policy designers is clear; design simple, straight-forward programs that require as little management as possible. To put it another way, if the management game is a losing proposition, the best strategy is to avoid playing. Programs predicated on continuing high levels of competence, on expeditious interorganizational coordina-

tion, or on sophisticated methods for accommodating diversity and heterogeneity are very vulnerable. They are not necessarily doomed to failure, but they are asking for trouble. ... Other things equal, policy designers would prefer to operate through manipulating prices and markets rather than writing and enforcing regulations, through delivering cash rather than services, through communicating by means of smaller rather than larger units of social organizations, and through seeking clearances from fewer rather than more levels of consultation and review."

The advice seems well-taken. Many problems in implementation might be avoided if policy makers made less ambiguous policies and designed simple procedures that protected their intentions from the inadequacies and self-interest of administrative agencies. Rather than expecting to change the character of administrative organizations, we might design strategic policies, quasi-price systems, and incentive contracts that are likely to lead to desired ends even when executed by administrative organizations that are neither perfect nor neutral.

These efforts to increase the sophistication of policy makers in dealing with administrative agencies, like the earlier attempts to improve the competence and reliability of the agencies, are vital to good administration. Without a struggle to link policy and action, any social system suffers. However, we want to argue that the problems of implementation are obscured by the terminology of implementation, even in its more sophisticated forms, that discussions of implementation assume a coherence in policy objectives that rarely exists. Understanding administrative implementation cannot be separated from understanding the ways in which policies are made and the implications of the policy making process for administrative action.

Policy Making and Policy Ambiguity

Proposals for implementation reform treat policy — or policy objectives — as given. They assume that policy goals and directives are (or can be) clear, that policy makers know what they want, and that what they want is consistent, stable, and unambiguous. The assumptions are similar to assumptions about preferences made in standard decision theory, and they have some of the same advantages (Raiffa, 1968). They make administration, like decision making, a difficult technical job of optimization, subject to prior exogenous policies established by legitimate authority. They also have many of the same disadvantages (March, 1978; Elster, 1979; Cronbach, et al., 1980).

In particular, the assumptions are often not true. They are frequently false in a way that makes the concept of implementation not only inaccurate as a portrayal of organizational reality, but often an inappropriate base for organizational reform. For example, the frequent advice that policies should be clear seems to assume that policy makers can arbitrarily choose the level of clarity of a policy, that policies are ambiguous because of some form of inadequacy in policy making. Such a view ignores what we know about the making of policies. In fact, policies are negotiated in a way that makes the level of clarity no more accessible to arbitrary choice than other vital parts of the policy.

Forming a coalition in order to support a policy, whether in a legislature or a board room, involves standard techniques of horse-trading, persuasion, bribes, threats, and management of information. These are the conventional procedures of discussion, politics, and policy-formation. They are well-conceived to help participants form coalitions, explore support for alternative policies, and develop a viable policy. Much of the genius of modern organizational leadership lies in skills for producing policy from the conflicting and inchoate ideas, demands, preconceptions, and prejudices of the groups to which organizational leadership must attend. At the heart of several of these techniques for achieving policies, however, are features that make implementation problematic.

Adopted policies will, on average, be oversold. Even unbiased expectations about possible policies will lead to bias in the expectations with respect to those that are adopted. Since proposed programs for which expectations are erroneously pessimistic are rarely adopted, the sample of adopted programs is more likely to exhibit errors of over-optimism than of over-pessimism (Harrison & March, 1984). Inflated expectations about programs that are successful in gaining support from policy makers make subsequent disappointment likely. Thus, great hopes lead to action, but great hopes are invitations to disappointment. This, in turn, leads both to an erosion of support and to an awareness of "failures of implementation".

Such a structural consequence of intelligent decision making under conditions of uncertainty is accentuated in situations of collective choice. Competition for policy support pushes advocates to imagine favorable outcomes and to inflate estimates of the desirability of those outcomes. Developing and communicating such expectations are a major part of policy discussions. Expectations become

part of the official record, part of collective history, and part of individual beliefs. Other will, of course, try to deflate the estimates of advocates; but advocates usually write the stories for their preferred policies and often come either to believe them or to be committed publicly to them. Tactical supporters of policies (i.e., those who support policies for reasons extraneous to their content) do not resist being misled. Extravagant claims justify their support and provide a basis, if one is ever needed, for claims that they were duped.

In addition, the centripetal processes of policy making exaggerate the real level of support for policies that are adopted. Although commitment to a policy or program in its own right may be important for some coalition members, few major policies could be adopted without some supporters for whom the policy is relatively unimportant except as a political bargain. They may be persuaded to join a coalition by a belief the policy is sensible, by claims of loyalty or friendship, or by a logroll in which their support is offered in trade for needed support on other things in which they have a direct concern. There is no assurance that such groups and individuals will be equally supportive of its implementation. Except insofar as their continued active support is a part of the coalition agreement, and such extended coalition agreements are difficult to arrange and enforce, supporters will turn to other matters. Consequently, a winning coalition can easily be an illusion (Saetren, 1983).

Finally, one common method for securing policy support is to increase the ambiguity of a proposed policy (Page, 1976). It is a commonplace observation of the legislative process that difficult issues are often "settled" by leaving them unresolved or specifying them in a form requiring subsequent interpretation. A similar observation can be made about policies in armies, hospitals, universities, and business firms. Particularly where an issue is closely contested, success in securing support for a program or policy is likely to be associated with increasing, rather than decreasing ambiguity. Policy ambiguity allows different groups and individuals to support the same policy for different reasons and with different expectations, including different expectations about the administrative consequences of the policy.

Thus, official policy is likely to be vague, contradictory, or adopted without generally shared expectations about its meaning or implementation. Aubert, in his study of the enactment of a Housemaid Law in Norway (Aubert, 1969, p. 125), discusses the apparent anomaly of legisla-

tion that paired a policy proclaiming the protection of household workers with a set of procedures for redress that were effectively inaccessible to victims:

“What is pretended in the penal clause of the Housemaid Law is that effective enforcement of the law is envisaged. And what the legislature is actually doing is to see to it that the privacy of the home and the interest of housewives are not ignored. ... The ambivalence and the conflicting views of the legislators, as they can be gleaned from the penal clause, appear more clearly in the legislative debate. A curious dualism runs through the debates. It was claimed, on the one hand, that the law is essentially a codification of custom and established practice, rendering effective enforcement inessential. On the other hand, there was a tendency to claim that the Housemaid Law is an important new piece of labour legislation with a clearly reformatory purpose, attempting to change an unacceptable *status quo*. ... The crucial point here is the remarkable ease with which such apparently contradictory claims were suffused in one and the same legislative action, which in the end received unanimous support from all political groups.”

In this way, the ambiguity of a policy increases the chance of its adoption, but at the cost of creating administrative complications. For example, Øyen (1964) observed that the ambiguous text of a Norwegian welfare statute was simultaneously a necessary condition for the unanimity of its political support and a basis for considerable administrative discretion. As a policy unfolds into action, the different understandings of an ambiguous political agreement combine with the usual transformation of preferences over time to become bases for abandoning support, deploring administrative sabotage of the program, or embracing a special fantasy of what the policy means. As a result, many coalition members can easily feel betrayed; and observers can easily become confused.

In the long run, of course, political institutions learn from their experience. Administrative agencies seem likely to adapt to a history of ambiguous, contradictory, and grandiose policies by an administrative posture that tends to emphasize creative autonomy. They learn to establish independent political constituencies, to treat formal policies as problematic (or at least subject to interpretation), and to expect policy makers to be uncertain, or in conflict, about the expected consequences of a policy, or its importance. They come to realize that they cannot escape criticism by arguing that they were following policy but must develop an independent political basis for their actions.

Similarly, policy makers learn from their experiences with administrative agencies. As administrative practices become flexible, it becomes easier to use policy ambiguity

as a basis for forming coalitions. It becomes plausible to attribute failures in programs to failures in implementation and thus to avoid possible criticism for mistakes. Policy ambiguity encourages administrative autonomy, which in turn encourages more policy ambiguity. Thus, it is not hard to see why we might observe organizations functioning with only a loose coupling between policies and actions, between plans and behaviour, and between policy makers and administrators (March & Olsen, 1976; Weick, 1976).

The Concept of Implementation

The terminology of implementation conjures up a picture of clear, consistent, and stable policy directives waiting to be executed. It encourages us to think that a reasonable and responsible person can easily measure the discrepancy between policy and bureaucratic action, that the discrepancy can be attributed to some properties of the organization (e.g., its competence and reliability) or to some properties of the policy (e.g., its clarity and consistency), and that the properties of the organization and the properties of the policy can be chosen arbitrarily and independently in order to reduce the discrepancy.

As we have noted, studies of policy making cast doubt on such a characterization. The implementation of policies is frequently problematic; but the difficulties cannot be treated as independent of the confusions in the policy. Those confusions, in turn, cannot be treated as independent of the ways in which winning policy coalitions are built. Policies are frequently ambiguous; but their ambiguities are less a result of deficiencies in policy makers than a natural consequence of gaining necessary support for the policies, and of changing preferences over time. Conflict of interest is not just a property of the relations between policy makers on the one hand and administrators on the other; it is a general feature of policy negotiation and bureaucratic life. As a result, policies reflect contradictory intentions and expectations and considerable uncertainty.

It may be tempting to deplore a policy process that sometimes seems to restrict us to a choice between inaction and ambiguity, and to wish for some alternative system in which policy agreements would be clear and their execution unproblematic. But that concern should be paired with an awareness of the complications. The problems involved in establishing and maintaining an effective policy making and an administrative system that

provides responsiveness, coherence, and symbolic affirmation of social values have occupied philosophers and managers for long enough to suggest that they are not trivial. Certainly, contemporary theories of policy making and administration have not solved them. Nor have we. As a preface to such an effort, however, we have argued that the terms of discourse for discussing policy making and implementation are misleading. Any simple concept of implementation, with its implicit assumption of clear and stable policy intent, is likely to lead to a fundamental misunderstanding of the policy process and to disappointment with efforts to reform it.

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