

Implementation Analysis: The Contours of Emerging Debate

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Effective Policy Implementation – Daniel A. Mazmanian and Paul A. Sabatier, eds. Lexington Books, Lexington, MA, 1981

Implementing Public Policy – Dennis J. Pulumbo and Marvin A. Harder, eds. Lexington Books, Lexington, MA, 1981

Policy and Action: Essays on the Implementation of Public Policy – Susan Barrett and Colin Fudge, eds. Methuen, New York, 1981

The burgeoning literature on implementation no longer requires that usual promotional introduction. If we regard Pressman and Wildavsky's influential 1973 book *Implementation* (Berkeley, University of California Press) as a landmark for the new genre of concern with implementation, we should today be celebrating the field's decennial anniversary. However, as the three-volume sample of the literature reviewed here indicates, although the state of the art is well beyond the embryonic level, it is still undergoing childhood development pains. In the books reviewed one can detect the contours of a major crystallizing debate on the desirable direction of development.

The more self-assured side in this emerging debate, which may be termed "implementability assessment" or "implementation feasibility analysis," is articulately represented by Mazmanian and Sabatier's *Effective Policy Implementation*. The editors structure this anthology around their conceptual framework which sets out 17 factors assumed to affect the prospects of successful implementation and a complementary set of questions. These are organized into three sets: (1) factors related to the "tractability" of the problem, such as the availability of appropriate theory behind the policy; (2) factors related to the ability of the statute (*sic*) to structure implementation, such as clear and consistent objectives and adequate resources; and (3) nonstatutory variables affecting implementation, such as public and media support. The authors are quite optimistic about the prospects that "a substantial portion of the outcomes (degree of effectiveness) of any major implementation effort can be explained by a finite number of variables" (p. xi). In this anthology they bravely set out to prove this.

The rest of the book contains six more chapters, each presenting an attempted application of the framework to the analysis of some policy area. The cases are generally sound and fully developed, focusing on a variety of policy areas. Of special interest to urban and regional planners are Nelson Rosenbaum's methodologically sophisticated study of the links between the variables characterizing a number of statutes on wetlands regulation

and their implementation, and Paul Sabatier and Barbara Klosterman's study of implementation of the San Francisco Bay Conservation and Development Commission.

Mazmanian and Sabatier's conceptual framework is by far the best among its several competitors, including Donald S. Van Meter and Carl E. van Horn's pioneering framework (*Administration and Society* 1975, pp. 445-488), George C. Edwards's *Public Policy* (Congressional Quarterly Press 1980), and James S. Larson's *Why Government Policies Fail: Improving Policy Implementation* (Praeger 1980). Being more comprehensive and less trivially common-sense than some of the others, it is not surprising that in the short time since its first publication (initially in 1980 in *Policy Studies Journal*), the Mazmanian and Sabatier conceptual framework has made its way into course reading lists in public policy and planning schools and has been applied in research and likely in practice as well. Planners will find this framework more relevant than some of the others since it does devote some (although not enough) attention to an aspect of implementation of which planners have traditionally been keenly aware: the relationship between the structure of the plan or policy itself and the implementation process. Yet other concepts to which planners are sensitized, such as the variety of roles and strategies available to the planner, are absent from this (and other) framework.

After such general praise, any criticism may seem petty. Still, the book has its shortcomings. The tight structure around the conceptual framework is somewhat of an overkill. All but one of the six other papers in the book accept the framework's underlying assumptions unquestioningly, leading to intellectual closure in an area thirsty for fresh insight. The only paper adopting a somewhat critical point of view (by Browning, Marshall and Tabb) is not very forceful and presents some fuzzy conceptual distinctions.

The other side in the emerging debate is still more hesitant but is quickly gaining momentum. Less optimistic in its belief that the variables effecting a generalized implementation process can be neatly boxed in nice matrices and flowcharts, the competing approach challenges the very underlying assumptions of implementability assessment. It questions the view of policymaking as a sequential, hierarchical process where policies are determined "at the top," are separable from the implementation process, and are expected to be applied "below" exactly as handed down. This view has recently added several contributions to its growing ranks, including Robert T. Nakamura and Frank Smallwood's *The Politics of Policy Implementation* (St. Martin's Press 1980), as well as the two other volumes being reviewed here, one of which is still somewhat sitting on the fence (Palumbo and Harder) and the other having clearly crossed the line to the "opposition" (Barrett and Fudge).

In their introduction to *Implementing Public Policy*, Palumbo and Harder present the view that policies will, and should, change during the implementation process. They propose to show how implementation analysis and evaluation research should take this fact into account. This theme is undoubtedly an appetizing one. The problem is that not all the courses of the meal promised are equally as tasty.

The first part of the book, "redefining policy during implementation," reflects the introductory theme most closely and is presumably intended to offer some good descriptions and insights into policy change. The three case studies do contain

some interesting concepts. One is the notion of "policy drift" developed by Kross, Koehler and Springer, which refers to the cumulative change produced by specific decisions unintentionally (is the term intended to convey helplessness in the face of some "law of nature"?). Another is the point that, contrary to the assumptions in many of the conventional frameworks, specificity of objectives may not always be a blessing for implementation. However, although generally well written, the papers are too short and not well enough fleshed out either theoretically or empirically to offer a convincing explanation of policy change. They compare poorly with the explanatory power and elegance of Eugene Bardach's *The Implementation Game* (M.I.T. Press 1977) which, although preceding the debate, may be classified as a classic on the "revisionist" side (to borrow a term from one of the papers in Palumbo and Harder's book).

The book's middle part is also its weakest link, perhaps because its relationship with the theme regarding the inevitability of policy change during implementation seems contradictory. Called "implementation problems," it contains an assortment of factors assumed by the various authors to affect implementation. In effect, it is quite similar to the conventional approach, but unlike Mazmanian and Sabatier's contribution, the papers in this section do not present any overall framework and are of doubtful utility in implementability assessment.

But the verdict about this book is not yet cast. The reader is in store for a pleasant surprise in the book's two final parts which focus on the link between implementation and evaluation. It is a surprise because the editors' introduction barely refers to these parts. Here the absence of a tight theoretical framework becomes an asset. Set loose, most of the authors in these parts present fresh and well-argued insights into the still-neglected link between evaluation of outcomes and implementation analysis which, as shown by an excellent paper by Elaine B. Sharp, are slowly edging toward each other. If to judge on the basis of the six papers in this

section, evaluation researchers are quickly making good use of the new concepts about implementation in order to calm their growing concern with making evaluation more "utilization focused" (to borrow a term from Michael Patton's well cited book by that name). Several of the authors apply their newly-gained insights from implementation analysis for solving methodological problems such as determining realistic "intervention points," for undertaking the newer approach of "process evaluation," or for dealing with the problem of goals that change during evaluation. Unfortunately, one has yet to await the reciprocal incorporation of concepts and methods from evaluation research into implementation analysis. As soon as one enters this latter part of the book one is struck by the disparity in methodological sophistication — even in language and jargon — between the well-established field of evaluation research and the developing field of implementation analysis. For the increasing number of planners engaged in policy evaluation, the two final parts more than redeem this book's earlier shortcomings, making it a worthwhile investment.

Perhaps the most eloquent and convincing speakers to date on the revisionist side of the debate are the two British authors of the third anthology reviewed here. In *Policy and Action* Susan Barrett and Collin Fudge delve deep into the assumptions behind the approach advocated by Mazmanian and Sabatier and other American authors, which they call a "recipe book" approach. In their excellent opening and closing chapters the editors argue that the problem is that the conditions for effective implementation promulgated by Mazmanian and Sabatier are precisely those which are usually absent from public policies and implementation structures. Barrett and Fudge go so far as to take to

task all "policy centered" approaches, offering in their stead an "action-centered" approach which focuses on what actually happens, conceived either as a response to various stimuli or as a bargaining process. Their ultimate goal is to reach an understanding of why responses do in fact differ. In this book their intentions are more modest: to shed light on admittedly partial facets and actors in the implementation process. Possibly, the editors' tendency to shun ambitious theory and their action orientation are rooted in their background; Barrett and Fudge teach at the School for Advanced Urban Studies in Bristol (as do all the other contributors), which specializes in mid-career training for planners and policy-makers. Both editors have themselves had a view "from the trenches" in their past professional careers.

The ten case-studies and essays which make up the bulk of the book are generally of high quality. The intentional absence of a tight framework has enabled the fruitful development of theory in many of the case-studies. Although the cases are all British, many will be found to be quite relevant by planners in the U.S.A. and elsewhere. One example is Barrett's excellent analysis of the erosion of the Community Land Act through local decisions early on in its short-lived life, which could have constituted a prediction of its final demise under the Thatcher government. It is relevant for the frequent situations of "macro" policies and "micro" implementation. Another example is Jacky Under-

wood's insightful study of the manner and degree to which plan-located policies are related to ongoing decisions on development control in the British system where there is recognized discretion; the analysis should stimulate equivalent research in other systems of planning control.

Because the representatives of the "revisionist" approach in this review outnumber the spokespersons for the "conventional" approach, the former should not be allowed the last word. Mazmanian and Sabatier might well challenge Barrett and Fudge to explain the utility of the action-oriented approach. They might remind Barrett and Fudge that the utility in any model is in its capacity to simplify complex phenomena and mold them into an understandable form. By saying that implementation is a stimulation-response process, how have Barrett and Fudge helped us cope with the real need to improve the chances that public policies would achieve the desired outcomes? Still, the revisionist view poses some real theoretical and empirical challenges for the conventional approach.

In looking at the emerging debate about implementation, one gets a distinct feeling of *deja vu*. Are we destined to see the reincarnation of that old debate between the rational-comprehensive approach and the incremental approach to policy-making? Unless someone can show that the two approaches are complementary, it seems we must fasten our seat belts and get ready for "round two," this time transposed to the implementation arena. It is likely that two of the three pairs of authors in the books reviewed here will be regarded as leading spokespersons in the intensifying debate: Mazmanian and Sabatier on one side, and Barrett and Fudge on the other. For now, the score is even.