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# 4

## Policy Implementation: Implications for Evaluation

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### Abstract

*Policy implementation reflects a complex change process where government decisions are transformed into programs, procedures, regulations, or practices aimed at social betterment. Three factors affecting contemporary implementation processes are explored: networked governance, sociopolitical context and the democratic turn, and new public management. This frame of reference invites evaluators to consider challenges present when evaluating macrolevel change processes, such as the inherent complexity of health and social problems, multiple actors with variable degrees of power and influence, and a political environment that emphasizes accountability. The evaluator requires a deep and cogent understanding of the health or social issues involved; strong analysis and facilitation skills to deal with a multiplicity of values, interests, and agendas; and a comprehensive toolbox of evaluation approaches and methods, including network analysis to assess and track the interconnectedness of key champions (and saboteurs) who might affect intervention effects and sustainability.* © Wiley Periodicals, Inc., and the American Evaluation Association.

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Implementation has long been recognized as a distinct stage in the policy process, unique for representing the transformation of a policy idea or expectation to action aimed at remedying social problems (Lester & Goggin, 1998). Reflecting a process involving change over time, implementation is characterized by the actions of multiple levels of agencies, institutions, organizations, and their actors and is influenced by context throughout. As Parsons (1995) suggests, “A study of implementation is a study of change: how change occurs, possibly how it may be induced” (p. 461).

It is important for evaluators to understand the policy implementation process in part because many social programs are publicly funded, and they are initiated and influenced by public policy. In addition, evaluators frequently assess policy or program implementation to inform ongoing programmatic decision making and to explore how and why outcomes were or were not achieved. Consequently, the policy sciences and, in particular, literature pertaining to policy implementation provide an important lens to inform our understanding of implementation as a change process.

Based on a review of the literature, this chapter presents a brief history of the related theory building and then introduces three factors affecting the contemporary implementation processes and discusses their implications for its evaluation: networked governance, the sociopolitical context and the democratic turn, and new public management. In closing, we apply the policy implementation lens to the Gatehouse Project case study.

A broad view of federal-level policy implementation is adopted—one that recognizes the macropolicy process and implementation chain within which programs implemented in community or organizational settings are embedded. This is distinct from an equally significant literature on program implementation, which focuses on microlevel implementation processes occurring within organizations and is influenced by factors such as organizational culture, capacity, and internal champions (Scheirer, 1981).

### **Literature Search: Situating Implementation in the Policy Process**

A literature review led to the identification of classic works in the field of policy implementation and other contemporary articles related to theory development. JSTOR, PAIS, MEDLINE, PROQUEST, and EBSCO Academic Premier indexes were searched using the key words *implementation theory*, *implementation research*, and *policy implementation*. Articles were searched for the time period 1990 forward; references for important works, including textbooks, conducted before 1990 were also identified.

The study of policy implementation is grounded in the disciplines of public administration and the policy sciences. The policy process represents a heuristic for policy studies and has generally been conceptualized as including the following steps: (1) agenda setting, (2) issue definition, (3) policy formulation, (4) policy decision, (5) policy implementation, (6) evaluation, and

(7) maintenance, succession, or termination (Brewer, 1974; Jenkins, 1978; Laswell, 1956). Implementation and evaluation, characterized as two separate stages in this process, have been called two sides of the same coin with “implementation providing the experience that evaluation interrogates and evaluation providing the intelligence to make sense out of what is happening” (Pressman & Wildavsky, 1984, p. xv).

**What Is Policy Implementation?** In general, policy implementation can be considered the process of carrying out a government decision (Berman, 1978). In defining policy implementation, it is useful to make the conceptual distinction between the policy implementation process and policy outcomes, even though these are interactive in practice (O’Toole, 2000). The process involves action on the behalf of the policy, whereas policy outcomes refer to the ultimate effect on the policy problem. Ottoson and Green (1987) suggest that “implementation is an iterative process in which ideas, expressed as policy, are transformed into behavior, expressed as social action” (p. 362). The social action transformed from the policy is typically aimed at social betterment and most frequently manifests as programs, procedures, regulations, or practices.

**Theory Development: A Brief History.** Parsimonious theoretical frameworks describing the process of public policy implementation continue to evade policy theorists (Salamon, 2002). Although generations of implementation theory have been described (Goggin, Bowman, Lester, & O’Toole, 1990), theoretical consensus remains elusive, and none of these frameworks offers the predictive capacity characteristic of formal theory.

The history of theory development begins with the landmark case studies of the early 1970s (Derthick, 1972; Pressman & Wildavsky, 1973), which documented the challenges and complexities of bringing a policy to fruition in real-world circumstances. Pressman and Wildavsky’s (1973) classic case study of the implementation of an economic development agency policy in Oakland, California, illustrated the extensive interagency interactions and political bargaining involved in that process.

Efforts to adopt an empirical approach followed, with a divide emerging between those viewing implementation as a top-down process and those advocating a bottom-up approach. A rational management perspective dominates the top-down model, where implementation is viewed as a product of strong bureaucratic management involving control, coercion, and compliance to ensure fidelity with the policy objectives (Mazmanian & Sabatier, 1989). In contrast, the bottom-up model suggests that successful implementation occurs only when those affected are involved earlier in the policy process—that is, in stages such as issue definition and policy formulation, as well as during the implementation stage (Berman, 1978).

In the 1990s, the debate between the top-downers and bottom-uppers was essentially put to rest, and integrated, contingency-based models (Goggin et al., 1990; Matland, 1995) were proposed that gave increased attention to the role that intergovernmental relationships, the political context, and

conflict play in shaping the implementation process. At the same time, some leaders in the policy field (deLeon, 1997; Dryzek, 2000; Fischer, 2003) began promoting more democratic approaches to public policy, including policy implementation and evaluation, recognizing the broader purposes of enlightenment, citizen participation, and social consensus.

### **Factors Affecting Contemporary Implementation Processes**

This theoretical account underscores policy implementation as a change process characterized by multiple organizations and shaped to some extent by administrative practice but also influenced by politics and value differences. Our review, particularly of more recent contributions to the literature, led us to examine three factors, consistent with these characteristics, that we propose play an important role in today's policy implementation process and its evaluation: networked governance, sociopolitical context and the democratic turn, and new public management. Although these factors clearly overlap, each is distinguished to facilitate our analysis and advance the related discourse.

**Networked Governance.** Policy theorists recognize that implementation involves coordinating action across multiple organizational actors and implementers (O'Toole, 2000). The relationships and interaction among agencies across the implementation chain are growing more complex as newer networked approaches to policy implementation are adopted. Of interest, then, are the networked organizational structures that allow policy ideas to take their shape as real-world actions. This aspect of policy implementation requires the evaluator to confront a "world of multiple institutional actors whose cooperation and perhaps coordination are needed for implementation success" (O'Toole, 2000, p. 266).

Emerging literatures in the policy sciences around networked governance offer insights into the organizational structures and relationships involved in contemporary policy implementation (O'Toole, 2000). Beginning in the 1990s, governance was proposed as a newer organizing concept for public administration and management. Within a governance framework, network structures, rather than the formal institutions of government, dominate public policy and are increasingly responsible for policy implementation (Peters & Pierre, 1998). Networks can vary in structure, size, and complexity and are referred to by various terms, including *partnerships*, *coalitions*, and *consortiums*, among others (Agranoff, 2003). In networked governance, horizontal relationships aimed at improving service integration, often with nongovernmental partners, are typically joined with vertical or hierarchical ones reflecting traditional, intergovernmental relationships (Heinrich, Hill, & Lynn, 2004). These networked organizational structures are presumed to offer a collaborative advantage with the potential to achieve what no single program or agency could accomplish on its own (Lasker,

Weiss, & Miller, 2002). At the same time, networks introduce new challenges to implementation as a greater number of agency representatives come to the table, each with multiple interests and unique constituencies.

*Implications for Evaluation.* Evaluating policy implementation in a networked governance context poses several challenges given that complex social problems are usually addressed, accountability becomes fragmented, and the performance of the network itself is important to implementation success.

The prominence of network approaches to policy implementation has emerged in part owing to the complexity of today's social problems that require transdisciplinary and intersectoral responses (Stokols, 2006). Through collaboration among networked agencies, multiple interventions and strategies can be coordinated to address the host of factors contributing to the problem. Although many early evaluation approaches were developed by psychologists and educational researchers who applied an individual unit of analysis, networked approaches require different methods and tools that consider the larger social system. Network analysis and case studies may help evaluators better understand who is involved in policy implementation, their incentives for participation, and the nature and strength of the relationships. Finally, that evaluators are confronting more complex social problems and different implementation structures suggests that they possess not only strong methodological competencies but a cogent understanding of the particular social problem as well.

Although networks increasingly represent more appropriate structures to effectively and synergistically implement public policy, the implementation process itself becomes more complicated given the interdependencies among organizations (Keast, Mandell, Brown, & Woolcock, 2004). In particular, accountability becomes a central challenge of networked governance as policy implementation is decentralized, traditional hierarchical authority is compromised, political resources are shared, and monitoring channels are diffused and made unreliable (Peters, 2001). Consequently, when policy implementation involves networks, issues of accountability are likely to emerge as a challenge to evaluation. In particular, when longer-term outcomes reflect the actions of several interventions or activities, it becomes difficult to tease apart the unique contribution of individual programs and make claims of attribution.

For evaluators, elaborating program theory through the use of logic models or evaluability assessment may help clarify the causal relationships or mechanisms of change between specific activities and outcomes and may potentially delineate the unique, intended contributions of specific programs (Weiss, 1997; Wholey, 1987). But even with the use of theory-based approaches, when one is evaluating a multifaceted policy initiative, the ability to attribute specific long-term outcomes to individual programs may never be possible or may require evaluation designs that are cost prohibitive. Mayne (2001) describes contribution analysis as a means to build credible stories of attribution and reduce uncertainty about contributions that programs make. This analysis begins with developing a results chain delineating plausible associations

between program activities and outcomes and then identifying alternate explanations and external factors affecting outcomes, examining weaknesses in the proposed associations, and building evidence over time to strengthen claims of contribution.

Policy implementation and other change processes involving interorganizational structures raise questions regarding the evaluation of the network itself. In public health, for example, the implicit assumption is that collaborative planning and priority setting among partners lead to more appropriate and integrated service delivery and, ultimately, better health outcomes than would be produced independently. Evaluation can be used to examine these assumptions. Similarly, in conducting participatory forms of research or evaluation, the health of the coalition is itself perceived to be vital to the research or evaluation process (Minkler, 2005). Therefore, the effectiveness of the network would seem to be an important object for evaluation within these types of implementation settings.

Although there has been increasing attention to evaluating networks, assessing their effectiveness is complex. Partnership synergy (Weiss, Anderson, & Lasker, 2002) has been proposed as an outcome for effective partnership, as has increased organizational social capital (Cohen & Prusak, 2001). In public policy, Provan and Milward (2001) argue that networks must be evaluated at three distinct levels: the community, network, and participant. They have applied network analysis methods to evaluate collaborative performance. While challenges remain in assessing network outcomes, process evaluation that attends to network development and functioning is equally important and will help inform ongoing program management efforts (Butterfoss, 2006).

**The Sociopolitical Context and the Democratic Turn.** Sociopolitical factors play out at all levels of the policy implementation process. Implementers' decisions about whose needs will be served, how they will be served, and which outcomes will be valued are determined in part by social and political factors. The emphasis and understanding of the sociopolitical aspects set policy implementation analysis apart from other change processes discussed in this issue and provide evaluators with a valuable lens to view change processes more generally.

One consequence of networked implementation structures is the participation of a larger number of third-party organizational actors in the implementation process. Given that each actor comes to the table with her own values, interests, and goals and those of her organization, implementation is increasingly being defined through sociopolitical processes of negotiation, compromise, and bargaining (Frederickson & Smith, 2003). Power differentials are inevitable in these processes, and some actors will have greater influence than others owing to differences in status, resources, formal authority, access to information, and expertise (Wallerstein & Duran, 2006).

These power issues relate closely to the more recent democratic turn in the policy sciences. Leaders of this movement argue that the field of public policy

has largely adopted technocratic approaches perceived as overly responsive to the political demands of the elite who affect public policy (for example, interest groups and politicians) rather than to the popular needs of those affected by it (deLeon, 1997; Dryzek, 2000). These authors suggest that policy analysis increasingly is characterized by prevailing political ideology, which favors economic analysis and experimental design. Fischer (2003), Dryzek (2000), and deLeon (1997) all advocate a “democratization of the policy sciences” (deLeon, 1997, p. x), a practice that embraces more deliberative approaches aimed at collaborative consensus building that contribute toward a democracy characterized by broader and more meaningful public participation.

*Implications for Evaluation.* The realities of the sociopolitical context suggest that evaluators must attend to political factors affecting the policy implementation process by considering who has a stake in shaping implementation and which stakeholders have the power to define both program details and their outcomes. These power differentials have important implications for evaluating implementation and for evaluation practice more broadly.

Evaluators must consider the relationships and interactions among organizational actors where conflicts between government actors at different levels, private sector organizations, and the grassroots community can play out as a tug-of-war (Bardach, 1977; Chung & Lounsbury, 2006). The multiplicity of stakeholder views can challenge both evaluators’ and stakeholders’ abilities to reach consensus in determining program goals, defining the evaluand, and identifying priority outcomes. Inattention to conflicts and differences arising from competing agendas, mandates, reward structures, and constituencies can compromise the mutual respect and trust needed to reach agreeable solutions to pressing health and social problems while potentially discounting some actors’ values and priorities that are relevant to an evaluation.

The ability of the evaluator to facilitate effectively in this context, supporting meaningful dialogue and negotiation among diverse parties, is critical. In public health, for example, federal agencies in the United States and Canada frequently convene stakeholder groups to discuss program goals, identify priority outcomes, and discuss evaluation strategies for policy initiatives that are implemented nationally. In these situations, evaluators may temper power differentials through effective group facilitation and help identify evaluation priorities that are responsive to the varied needs of those involved. Values inquiry, an approach Henry (2002) described, may be a useful strategy to systematically extract relevant stakeholder values that inform the evaluation’s purpose, choice of evaluation questions, and criteria for success. Similarly, an inclusive approach to evaluability assessment (Wholey, 2004), a means to explore the feasibility of evaluation approaches, may also facilitate agreement on program goals, outcomes, and the evaluation approach, and promote the use of findings.

The democratic turn in policy studies coincides with the introduction of more participatory evaluation approaches, whether qualitative, quantitative, or mixed-methods approaches are used. For instance, evaluation models

advocated by Guba and Lincoln (1989), House and Howe (1999), and Fetterman and Wandersman (2005) promote stakeholder participation and empowerment of stakeholders through methods consistent with constructionist and other interpretive paradigms. Similarly, the application of participatory research approaches to evaluation, such as action research (Stokols, 2006), participatory research (Green et al., 1995), and community-based participatory research (Israel, Schulz, Parker, & Becker, 1998), especially at the program level, is also consistent with this democratic turn in policy evaluation. When these approaches are applied to policy implementation, such tenets as ensuring stakeholder engagement may promote the increased use of evaluation results (Weiss, 1998). Wang, Morrel-Samuels, Hutchison, Bell, and Pestronk (2004) describe a participatory action research effort using PhotoVoice that involved local policymakers as well as youths and resulted in a leveling of experience and social power. PhotoVoice engages people who are affected by an issue in a participatory process of using photography to identify and express issues and concerns that are important to their community. PhotoVoice can be used for needs assessment, asset mapping, and evaluation and is often used as a means for reaching policymakers.

Greene (2001) also recognizes the importance of discursive practices in facilitating more democratic deliberation about social programs that embrace evaluators' civic responsibility to improve society and contribute toward democratic reform. She suggests, "It is time to acknowledge that the social practice of evaluation helps to shape and constitute the sociopolitical institutions and political discourse to which it is designed to contribute. That is, our work is neither scientifically nor politically neutral" (p. 400). Greene also advances a pluralistic approach as central to understanding, and she encourages evaluators to adopt a stance of value plurality in order to better advance the interests of a diversity of stakeholders.

Striving for a more democratic practice requires that evaluators challenge their philosophical assumptions and consider alternative paradigms that embrace contextually sensitive methods and approaches, experiential knowledge, and the multiple perspectives and values of participants. Given that policy implementation is significantly influenced by context and the multiple actors engaged in the process, employing methods insensitive to both would likely compromise an evaluation effort. Qualitative methods, particularly forms of case study and grounded theory, represent evaluation approaches that aim for contextual, pluralistic understanding. These methods are also valuable in facilitating understanding of policy implementation processes, especially when time-series or other longitudinal designs are employed. In addition, integrating qualitative methods into quantitative evaluation designs can help evaluators understand why and how intended policy outcomes were or were not achieved and identify potential unintended outcomes that manifest during the course of policy implementation.

**New Public Management.** New public management (NPM), a global, public management reform that emerged in the early 1990s, advocates, in part,

outcome-based performance. In fact, performance is so central to NPM that it has been called “results-oriented government” (Osborne & Gaebler, 1992, p. 138). Performance, as measured through outcomes rather than outputs, is emphasized in NPM as a means to assess management and policy effectiveness, as well as a means of accountability (Peters, 2001). The best-known manifestation of NPM is the Government Performance and Results Act of 1993 (GPRA), which was followed by a similar policy, the Program Assessment Rating Tool (PART). PART was developed to assess federal programs based on program performance and evaluation information and brings even greater attention to outcomes and results than GPRA did (Brass, 2004).

In regard to policy implementation, GPRA and PART reflect to some extent traditional top-down approaches. Their emphasis on performance outcomes, which are typically defined by the statute or by federal-level administrators, often with input from state and local partners, has significant implications for programming. For instance, given requirements to meet specified indicators, program managers must stress implementation activities that ensure those targets are met. Consequently, performance measurement offers an important tool for federal managers to promote priority activities, monitor policy implementation, and influence implementation behavior in positive ways. At the same time, performance measurement may compromise activities and outcomes deemed important by program implementers, and it can produce unintended effects (for example, creaming, goal displacement) with troublesome implications (Perrin, 1998).

*Implications for Evaluation.* As federal policies, GPRA and PART have important implications for evaluation practice. A 2005 study by the U.S. Government Accountability Office found that the PART process stimulated agencies to build their evaluation capacity, although programs more typically designed evaluations to meet their own needs related to program improvement rather than broader evaluations. Given this, evaluators may be well positioned to direct how limited evaluation resources are allocated and advocate for evaluation efforts deemed most likely to promote social betterment.

GPRA's and PART's emphasis on outcomes over process or outputs to assess policy implementation also has implications for evaluation practice. Radin (2006) suggests that the focus on outcomes fundamentally entitles accountability as an evaluation purpose over other purposes such as program improvement. In fact, the influence of NPM, specifically GPRA and PART, has spurred what some have described as an accountability movement in government (Behn, 2003; Radin, 2006). However, the complexity of contemporary social problems, along with implementation structures increasingly defined by networks, often makes attributing longer-term outcomes and results to a particular program difficult, if not impossible.

Evaluators may have opportunities for improving the practice of performance measurement while also educating decision makers; promoting alternative evaluation approaches, values, and purposes; and advocating for additional evaluation resources. First, evaluators can offer needed expertise

in the development and design of performance measurement systems—in particular, on issues of measurement (Scheirer & Newcomer, 2001). Second, given the methodological challenges of assessing accountability based solely on outcome-level performance measures, evaluators can help educate decision makers, including policymakers, about such constraints, especially in relation to long-term outcomes. Specifically, evaluators can help shift the dialogue from one focused on attribution and accountability to one centered more appropriately on notions of contribution and shared accountability. Third, evaluators can help construct theory-based logic models to identify short- and intermediate-level outcomes that may be attributable to specific program efforts. Ideally, such indicators will have been demonstrated through prior research to relate to the long-term outcomes of a policy initiative.

Next, evaluators can emphasize the importance of other evaluation purposes and methods, including process evaluation, to better understand why certain outcomes may or may not have been achieved and to inform ongoing implementation decisions. Because policy and program implementation are evolving processes that typically entail extensive adaptation, evaluation efforts must continue to attend to process issues. As Green (2001) suggested, there is a need to reconceptualize “best practices” as “best processes.”

## Conclusion

Policy implementation is a dynamic and evolving change process owing to a confluence of factors, including networked implementation structures, sociopolitical conflict, and administrative reforms that shape how policy ideas are translated into social betterment programs. As Majone and Wildavsky (1984) point out, “When we act to implement a policy, we change it” (p. 177). And although parsimonious theoretical frameworks describing the policy implementation process continue to evade the profession, theory sharpens how evaluators understand the policy implementation process, as well as the methodologies and approaches applied to its evaluation. Although theorists agree on the adaptive process characterizing implementation, this chapter highlights both top-down pressures (administrative reforms such as NPM) and bottom-up influences (network management) that support an integrated view of the implementation process—one that is enmeshed in a sociopolitical context throughout.

The policy implementation lens invites evaluators to consider a multifaceted set of challenges, especially when evaluating macrolevel change processes. Some of these include contending with multiple institutional actors with variable degrees of power and influence, contemporary health and social problems that are inherently complex, and a political environment emphasizing accountability and program outcomes. These challenges suggest that evaluators must come to their task equipped with a cogent understanding of the health or social issue, a deep toolbox of evaluation

approaches and methods, and strong facilitation skills to contend with the multiplicity of agendas, interests, and values represented throughout the implementation chain. Finally, the importance of the sociopolitical context of implementation encourages evaluators to consider democratic practices and other methods that embrace a stance of value plurality and promote mutual respect and trust among stakeholders throughout the evaluation process.

### **Case Study Application: Evaluating the Gatehouse Project With an Implementation Lens**

The Gatehouse Project was a successful multilevel, school-based intervention aimed at promoting the emotional well-being of young people by increasing students' connectedness to school (Patton et al., 2000, 2006; Patton, Bond, Butler, & Glover, 2003).

The intervention included a curriculum component focused on increasing students' skills and knowledge for dealing with everyday life challenges and a whole-school component that sought to make changes to the schools' social and learning environment to enhance security, communication, and positive regard through valued participation. A member of the research team facilitated the project implementation process. Key elements were the establishment of a school-based health action team, the use of local data to review the school environment and drive change, targeted professional development, and opportunities for reflective practice (Glover & Butler, 2004; Patton et al., 2003; Patton et al., 2006). This process resulted in schools' identifying and implementing activities and strategies appropriate to their local context; thus, what was done varied from school to school.

One unique area that the implementation literature invites the evaluator to explore is the sociopolitical context of project delivery. Who was on the school health action teams? What were their networks and connections, inside and outside the school? How were these resources enabled and drawn on to influence the way the intervention was delivered or sustained? This network perspective focuses on the people, or actors, and how different characteristics of the different actor networks in different schools might have influenced the change processes in diverse directions. Exploration could be quantitative, using network analysis, or qualitative, or both. Such insights might help evaluators appreciate why an intervention seems to have more sway in some contexts than others. It also might assist with identifying minimum or threshold levels of interconnectedness among key champions that might predict both intervention effectiveness and sustainability.

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