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Richard E. Matland

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ARTICLES

Synthesizing the Implementation Literature: The Ambiguity-Conflict Model of Policy Implementation

Richard E. Matland
University of Houston

ABSTRACT

A review of the policy implementation literature finds the field split into two major schools, top-down and bottom-up. Previous attempts to reconcile these models are described, followed by an alternative model. This model reconciles these approaches by concentrating on the theoretical significance of ambiguity and conflict for policy implementation. A number of factors crucial to the implementation process are identified as varyingly dependent on a policy's ambiguity and conflict level. Four policy implementation paradigms are identified and the relevance of the existing literature to these conditions is discussed. The four paradigms are low conflict-low ambiguity (administrative implementation), high conflict-low ambiguity (political implementation), high conflict-high ambiguity (symbolic implementation), and low conflict-high ambiguity (experimental implementation).

INTRODUCTION

Several recent articles and books have reviewed the policy implementation literature, summarizing what has been learned and identifying obstacles standing in the way of further knowledge (O'Toole 1986; Sabatier 1986; McLaughlin 1987; Van Horn 1987; Goggin et al. 1990). The extent of agreement is surprising; most of these authors paint a similar picture of past work and suggest similar paths for future work. These reviews emphasize the need for closure and coherence in our theoretical models. Perhaps most telling is O'Toole's (1986) review of more than one hundred implementation studies, in which he finds these studies

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referring to over three hundred key variables. A literature with three hundred critical variables doesn't need more variables: It needs *structure*.

As implementation research evolved, two schools of thought developed as to the most effective method for studying and describing implementation: top-down and bottom-up. Top-down theorists see policy designers as the central actors and concentrate their attention on factors that can be manipulated at the central level. Bottom-up theorists emphasize target groups and service deliverers, arguing policy really is made at the local level. Most reviewers now agree that some convergence of these two perspectives, tying the macrolevel variables of the top-down models to the microlevel variables "bottom-uppers" consider, is necessary for the field to develop. This article reviews the two major implementation schools and previous attempts to synthesize the literature. The ambiguity-conflict model then is presented as an alternative model for reconciling the existing findings on implementation.

TOP-DOWN, BOTTOM-UP, AND ATTEMPTS TO COMBINE THEM

Top-Down Models

Top-down models (Van Meter and Van Horn 1975; Mazmanian and Sabatier 1981; 1983; 1989) see implementation as concern with the degree to which the actions of implementing officials and target groups coincide with the goals embodied in an authoritative decision. Mazmanian and Sabatier (1983, 20) define implementation as "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 . . ." The starting point is the authoritative decision; as the name implies, centrally located actors are seen as most relevant to producing the desired effects.

In the most fully developed top-down model, Mazmanian and Sabatier (1989) present three general sets of factors (tractability of the problem, ability of statute to structure implementation, and nonstatutory variables affecting implementation) which they argue determine the probability of successful implementation. These factors then are developed into a set of sixteen independent variables that are hypothesized to influence goal compliance. The complexity of their model points to one of the more striking problems and recurrent criticisms of implementation research—the lack of parsimony.

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Top-downers have exhibited a strong desire to develop generalizable policy advice. This requires finding consistent, recognizable patterns in behavior across different policy areas. Belief that such patterns exist and the desire to give advice has given the top-down view a highly prescriptive bent and has led to a concentration on variables that can be manipulated at the central level. Common top-down advice is: Make policy goals clear and consistent (Van Meter and Van Horn 1975; Mazmanian and Sabatier 1983); minimize the number of actors (Pressman and Wildavsky 1973); limit the extent of change necessary (Van Meter and Van Horn 1975; Mazmanian and Sabatier 1983); and place implementation responsibility in an agency sympathetic with the policy's goals (Van Meter and Van Horn 1975; Sabatier 1986).

Top-downers meet three sets of criticisms. First, top-down models take the statutory language as their starting point. This fails to consider the significance of actions taken earlier in the policy-making process. Winter (1985 and 1986) notes that many implementation barriers are found in the initial stages of the policy-making process and to understand policy implementation these processes must be studied carefully. Nakamura and Smallwood (1980) argue that the policy-formation process gives implementers important cues about intensity of demands, and about the size, stability, and degree of consensus among those pushing for change. An analysis that takes policy as given and does not consider its past history might miss vital connections. By concentrating on the statutory language, top-downers may fail to consider broader public objectives. O'Toole (1989) argues that a top-down analysis of wastewater treatment would find that privately managed facilities are superior because they are built more quickly, they are less expensive to build, and they provide approximately the same quality of waste treatment as publicly owned facilities. When broader issues such as affirmative action, compliance with Davis-Bacon labor laws, use and development of innovative technology, and local government autonomy and accountability are considered, publicly owned and operated facilities score much higher.

Second, top-downers have been accused of seeing implementation as a purely administrative process and either ignoring the political aspects or trying to eliminate them (Berman 1978; Hoppe, van de Graaf, and van Dijk 1985; Baier, March, and Saetren 1986). For example, the call for clear, explicit, and consistent goals contradicts much of what is known about how legislation is passed. Passage of legislation often requires ambiguous language and contradictory goals to hold together a

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passing coalition. The top-down emphasis on clarity, rule promulgation, and monitoring brings to mind the Weberian bureaucrat making independent decisions based on merit and technical criteria, free from political influence. It is, however, rarely possible to separate politics from administration. Attempts to insulate an inherently political subject matter from politics do not necessarily lead to apolitical actions. They instead may lead directly to policy failure.

Finally, top-down models have been criticized for their exclusive emphasis on the statute framers as key actors. This criticism has two primary variants. One argues from a normative perspective that local service deliverers have expertise and knowledge of the true problems; therefore, they are in a better position to propose purposeful policy. Top-down models, however, see local actors as impediments to successful implementation, agents whose shirking behavior needs to be controlled. The second variant argues from a positive perspective that discretion for street-level bureaucrats is inevitably so great that it is simply unrealistic to expect policy designers to be able to control the actions of these agents. That service deliverers ultimately determine policy is a major tenet of bottom-up models.

Bottom-Up Models

Bottom-uppers, such as Berman (1978 and 1980); Hjern and Porter (1981); Hjern (1982); Hjern and Hull (1982); Hull and Hjern (1987); and Lipsky (1978) argue that a more realistic understanding of implementation can be gained by looking at a policy from the view of the target population and the service deliverers. Policy implementation occurs on two levels (Berman 1978). At the macroimplementation level, centrally located actors devise a government program; at the microimplementation level, local organizations react to the macrolevel plans, develop their own programs, and implement them. Berman argues that most implementation problems stem from the interaction of a policy with the microlevel institutional setting. Central planners only indirectly can influence microlevel factors. Therefore, there is wide variation in how the same national policy is implemented at the local level. Contextual factors within the implementing environment can completely dominate rules created at the top of the implementing pyramid, and policy designers will be unable to control the process. Under these conditions, according to the bottom-uppers, if local level implementers are not given the freedom to adapt the program to local conditions it is likely to fail (Palumbo, Maynard-Moody, and Wright 1984).

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Bottom-uppers argue that the goals, strategies, activities, and contacts of the actors involved in the microimplementation process must be understood in order to understand implementation. It is at the microlevel that policy directly affects people. The influence of policy on the action of street-level bureaucrats must be evaluated in order to predict that policy's effect (Weatherley and Lipsky 1978). Because implementation arises from the interaction of policy and setting, it is unrealistic to expect the development of a simple or single theory of implementation that is "context free" (Maynard-Moody, Musheno, and Palumbo 1990).

The most extensive empirical work within the bottom-up tradition has been that of Benny Hjern (1982) and his colleagues (Hjern and Hull 1985; Hull and Hjern 1987). Hjern's strategy is to study a policy problem, asking microlevel actors about their goals, activities, problems, and contacts. This technique enables Hjern to map a network that identifies the relevant implementation structure for a specific policy at the local, regional, and national levels, and allows him to evaluate the significance of government programs vis-à-vis other influences such as markets. It also enables him to see strategic coalitions as well as unintended effects of policy and the dynamic nature of policy implementation. Hjern finds that central initiatives are poorly adapted to local conditions. Program success depends in large part on the skills of individuals in the local implementation structure who can adapt policy to local conditions; it depends only to a limited degree on central activities.

While top-downers have a strong desire to present prescriptive advice, bottom-uppers have placed more emphasis on describing what factors have caused difficulty in reaching stated goals. The strongly inductive nature of this research combined with results finding most of the relevant factors varying from site to site has led to few explicit policy recommendations. The primary policy recommendation from researchers within this tradition is for a flexible strategy that allows for adaptation to local difficulties and contextual factors (Maynard-Moody, Musheno, and Palumbo 1990). Some researchers have suggested that policy changes should be consonant with the values of implementing agents (Berman 1978).

Two criticisms of bottom-up models appear with some consistency—one normative, one methodological. The normative criticism is that, in a democratic system, policy control should be exercised by actors whose power derives from their accountability to sovereign voters through their elected representatives. The authority of local service deliverers does not derive from this

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base of power. Decentralization should occur within a context of central control. Street-level bureaucrats *do* have great discretion in their interactions with clients. To proceed from this fact to theorize that because such flexibility exists it should serve as the basis for designing policy, however, is to turn the role of theory on its head (Linder and Peters 1987). It effectively equates description with prescription. Flexibility and autonomy might be appropriate when the goals of the policy formulators and implementers are the same, but if they differ greatly, flexibility and autonomy may lead to policies which result in lower performance on official goals. Classic organizational theory is rife with examples of agents subordinating the goals of their principals and concentrating on their own subgoals (March and Simon 1958; Merton 1957; Michels 1949; Selznick 1949).

The second criticism is that the bottom-up methodology overemphasizes the level of local autonomy. Hjern's methodology relies on perceptions; therefore, indirect effects and the effects actors are unconscious of are not registered. Variations in actions can be explained largely by local level differences, yet all actions may fall within a limited range where the borders are set by centrally determined policy. While central actors do not act in detail or intervene in specific cases, they can structure the goals and strategies of those participants who are active. The institutional structure, the available resources, and the access to an implementing arena may be determined centrally and substantially can affect policy outcomes. Sabatier (1986) notes that a bottom-up analysis of environmental regulations in the United States would find that central government authorities play only a limited role. Most suits are brought by environmental interest organizations on behalf of individuals. Yet the decision to give individuals standing and the right to sue for collective damages under class-action suits is a crucial factor that was decided by policy designers when they framed the policy. By giving these actors access, the central policy designers structured the actions that occurred later.

Combinations of the Two Perspectives: Previous Attempts

Limited number of attempts have been made to combine these two major perspectives and other perspectives on implementation. One group of researchers has proposed different ways of combining the two formats within the same model and another group has searched for conditions under which one approach is more appropriate than the other.

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Elmore's concept of forward and backward mapping (1982 and 1985) is an early attempt to combine top-down and bottom-up perspectives. Elmore argues that policy designers should choose policy instruments based on the incentive structure of target groups. Forward mapping consists of stating precise policy objectives, elaborating detailed means-ends schemes, and specifying explicit outcome criteria by which to judge policy at each stage. Backward mapping consists of stating precisely the behavior to be changed at the lowest level, describing a set of operations that can insure the change, and repeating the procedure upwards by steps until the central level is reached. By using backward mapping, policy designers may find more appropriate tools than those initially chosen. This process insures consideration of the microimplementers' and target groups' interpretations of the policy problem and possible solutions.

Elmore's approach is a useful suggestion for policy designers; micro implementers' and target groups' views must be considered in planning an implementation strategy. On the other hand, it is not a theoretical model in the traditional sense. Sellitz, Wrightsman, and Cook (1976, 16) define theory as a "set of concepts plus the interrelationships that are assumed to exist among those concepts." The consequences that logically follow from the relationships posed in the theory should be testable hypotheses. Elmore's model has no predictions as to generalized behavior. No specific interrelationships are hypothesized; effectively there are no hypotheses to test. As a tool, Elmore's discussion is useful; as a theory, however, it lacks explanatory power.

Sabatier (1986; 1988; 1991; Sabatier and Pelkey 1987) has moved away from the top-down perspective, which he helped develop, and toward a combined perspective. He now argues that policy needs to be analyzed in cycles of more than ten years. The longer time allows for an opportunity to consider policy learning, a concept emphasized by Sabatier. Policies operate within parameters most easily identified by using a top-down approach. These parameters include socioeconomic conditions, legal instruments, and the basic government structure. These remain relatively stable over long periods of time. Within this structure, however, substantial actions occur. Sabatier argues that advocacy coalitions should be the main unit of analysis in the study of these actions. Advocacy coalitions are groups of policy advocates from differing organizations, both public and private, who share the same set of beliefs and goals. These groups attempt to have their views of policy problems, solutions, and legitimate actors accepted. Sabatier urges the use of Hjern's networking methodology to develop a mapping of these advocacy coalitions.

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Sabatier's proposal represents a legitimate method for studying public policy. When examining a broad policy area over a long period of time, however, the question of whether this is actually studying implementation becomes a relevant concern. Sabatier's definition of implementation (see p. 146) does not appear to be about the same process. A policy field followed over many years can change so radically that it bears little resemblance to its initial form. If implementation research is to retain a meaningful definition, it should be tied to a specific policy rather than to all actions in a policy field.¹

Goggin et al. (1990) present a communications model of intergovernmental policy implementation that sees state implementers at the nexus of a series of communication channels. They describe three clusters of variables that affect state implementation: inducements and constraints from the top (the federal level), inducements and constraints from the bottom (state and local levels), and state-specific factors defined as decisional outcomes and state capacity. Elements of the two major models are considered by including signals from both the top and the bottom. The communication model also emphasizes that signals are perceived differently, distortions occur, and contextual conditions can affect the interpretation of signals.

Some authors prefer to discuss when a model is appropriately applied rather than to try to build a combined model. Dunsire (1978) and Saetren (1983) argue that the two perspectives should apply to different times in the implementation process. Top-down perspectives are more appropriate in the early planning stages, but a bottom-up view is more appropriate in later evaluation stages.

Berman (1980) argues that an implementation plan should be developed using either the top-down or bottom-up approach depending on a set of parameters that describes the policy context. He argues that these situational parameters are dimensions that the implementation designer cannot influence. They include scope of change, validity of technology, goal conflict, institutional setting, and environmental stability. Berman suggests that when change is incremental, technology is certain, environment is stable, goal conflict is low, and institutional setting is tightly coupled, an implementation plan should follow the tenets of the top-down model. He convincingly argues that when a viable solution already exists, efforts should be concentrated on making sure that solution is used. Therefore a top-down strategy is appropriate. Berman suggests further that major policy changes involving uncertain technology—with goal conflicts and an unstable and loosely coupled environment—should be built around a

¹It should be noted that Sabatier doesn't see his advocacy coalition model as an implementation model; he sees it as a broader approach to studying public policy.

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bottom-up framework. This argument is less convincing. Part of the confusion lies in the distinction between a descriptive and a prescriptive model. It virtually is certain that when major policy changes are implemented where technology is uncertain and goal conflict high, bargaining *necessarily* occurs and adjustments are made. As a description of the process, many factors emphasized in bottom-up models are relevant. A prescription that suggests these conditions should lead to the delegation of autonomy to microlevel implementers, however, makes implementation feasibility the sole criterion on which to evaluate implementation plans. Linder and Peters (1987) argue that while feasibility is an important consideration, other political, economic, or ethical criteria may lead to a desire for a more centrally directed policy. For example, instituting or expanding civil rights to a new sector of the populace is a policy that probably exhibits most of the conditions in which Berman recommends a bottom-up strategy. Nevertheless, a policy with strong central steering may be preferred as the most effective way to assure actions consistent with policy objectives. Berman argues that choosing a top-down strategy can lead to resistance, disregard, and pro forma compliance. Such dangers certainly do exist. Choosing a bottom-up strategy, however, may lead to cooptation and pursuit of individual goals that run contrary to the policy objectives, and these are often more objectionable.

In synthesizing the two implementation models I have chosen to develop a model that explains when the two approaches are most appropriate rather than to develop a model that combines both simultaneously. I believe this is the most fruitful approach to synthesis for both theoreticians and practitioners. Until now, implementation studies have tended to present long lists of variables that may affect implementation. The conditions under which these variables are important and the reasons we should expect them to be important have been ignored to a large degree or have been treated superficially. This has given us a field overflowing with diagrams and flow charts with a prodigious number of variables. Synthesis that merely combines ten variables considered by the top-downers with ten variables considered by the bottom-uppers, without exploring the theoretical relationship between them, is likely to exacerbate the problem. I have chosen, therefore, to concentrate on a more limited set of variables and to explore their theoretical implications more fully.

Structuring implementation research and bringing some closure to the topic is likely to be even more important for policy designers. While many factors may be relevant and more accurate decisions could be made if all factors were considered, even

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readily available information isn't considered when decisions are made (Feldman and March 1981). Therefore, while it is proper to remind policy designers to consider all relevant factors, a much greater service is rendered if policy designers are given an adequate description of the implementation process that directs them to the variables of greatest importance and to the factors on which to focus their scarce resources should their search processes be limited, as they inevitably are.

WHAT IS SUCCESSFUL IMPLEMENTATION?

Before turning to model exposition, a proper definition of *successful implementation* should be discussed. Policy can be defined as the programmatic activities formulated in response to an authoritative decision. These activities are the policy designer's plans for carrying out the wishes expressed by a legitimating organization, be it a legislature, a judicial agent, or an executive body. The pivotal question is whether attention should be focused on fidelity to the designer's plan or on the general consequences of the implementation actions when determining success? Disagreements between top-down and bottom-up theorists have at their very base disagreements over this question. Top-down theorists desire to measure success in terms of specific outcomes tied directly to the statutes that are the source of a program. Bottom-up theorists prefer a much broader evaluation, in which a program leading to "positive effects" can be labeled a success (Palumbo, Maynard-Moody, and Wright 1984).

The failure to specify what is meant by *successful implementation* causes considerable confusion. Ingram and Schneider (1990) note several plausible definitions of successful implementation. Among these are: agencies comply with the directives of the statutes; agencies are held accountable for reaching specific indicators of success; goals of the statute are achieved; local goals are achieved, or there is an improvement in the political climate around the program. In determining which of these definitions is appropriate, the decision hinges on whether the statutory designer's values should be accorded a normative value greater than those of other actors, especially local actors. If the policy designers' desires do have a superior value, then the bottom-uppers' measure of success is inappropriate. This assertion is grounded in democratic theory. Statutory designers derive their power by being elected or by receiving a mandate from duly elected officials. This mandate can be revoked through electoral disapproval by sovereign voters. The street-level bureaucrat has no such base of power. Clearly, discretionary power exists at the local level, but this power is based on the inability to control

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actions. Street-level bureaucrats do have legitimate claims to power based on their expertise, but this power claim does not have the same moral quality as claims based on powers bestowed by a sovereign citizenry. It is therefore legitimate to measure implementation success in terms of its ability to execute faithfully the goals and means present in the statutory mandate.

This proposal quickly runs into difficulties, however, when specific policies are considered. Statutory mandates often are exceedingly vague. They do not incorporate specific goals and they fail to provide reasonable yardsticks with which to measure policy results. Broader evaluation standards need to be used when significant ambiguity exists regarding the specific goals of a policy.² These can range over a broad set of plausible measures. For example, efficiency gains and economic growth may be used in one case, whereas enhanced support of the political system may be valid in another. Increased understanding and alleviation of local problems are two measures of success that frequently are likely to be relevant.

To recapitulate, when policy goals explicitly have been stated, then, based on democratic theory, the statutory designers' values have a superior value. In such instances the correct standard of implementation success is loyalty to the prescribed goals. When a policy does not have explicitly stated goals, the choice of a standard becomes more difficult, and more general societal norms and values come into play.

A COMPREHENSIVE MODEL OF IMPLEMENTATION: THEORETICAL BASES

In reviewing the implementation literature it becomes apparent that top-downers and bottom-uppers choose to study different types of policies. Top-downers tend to choose relatively clear policies. Bottom-uppers study policies with greater uncertainty inherent in the policy. Because so many of the studies are single case studies, few consider how implementation varies when a different type of policy is considered. Building a more effective model of implementation requires a much more careful evaluation of a policy's characteristics. The ambiguity/conflict model presented below is a contingency model that attempts to provide this more comprehensive and coherent basis for understanding implementation.

²Ingram and Schneider (1990) provide a discussion of the conditions under which various alternative definitions of successful implementation are appropriate.

Four implementation perspectives are developed in the ambiguity/conflict model, based on a policy's ambiguity and conflict level. Organizational theorists and decision-making

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scholars have invested substantial effort in showing how conflict and ambiguity affect decision making. The ambiguity/conflict model draws extensively on that work. Through analysis of a policy's level of ambiguity and conflict this model provides an analytical tool for identifying which of several differing models in the literature best describes the implementation process. Before considering the four perspectives individually, the attributes by which policies are to be differentiated—ambiguity and conflict—need to be described thoroughly.

Policy Conflict

Conflict plays a central role in distinguishing between decision-making models; it is just as relevant when distinguishing between descriptions of the implementation process. Both rational and bureaucratic politics models of decision making assume that individual actors are rationally self-interested. They differ, however, on the degree of goal congruence that exists. Rational models assume goals are agreed upon and therefore one can maximize individual or social welfare functions, subject to a set of situational constraints. The problem is defined as finding the one best way to attain an agreed-upon goal (Luce and Raiffa 1957; Raiffa 1970; Lave and March 1981). Bureaucratic politics models (Allison 1971; Halperin 1974), on the other hand, posit that a utility function cannot be written, because there is no agreed-upon set of goals. While the rational model defines decision making so that conflict does not exist, the bureaucratic politics model makes conflict its primary emphasis. When conflict exists actions change and actors resort to bargaining mechanisms such as side payments, log rolling, and oversight to reach agreements and hold coalitions together. Coercive methods of insuring compliance are used. Actions tend to be the results of a long bargaining process. The bargaining process does not lead to an agreement on goals, rather it focuses entirely on reaching an agreement on actions (means). Often the process culminates in no action, because actors are unable to reach agreement.

For conflict to exist there must be an interdependence of actors, an incompatibility of objectives, and a perceived zero-sum element to the interactions (Dahrendorf 1958). Policy conflict will exist when more than one organization sees a policy as directly relevant to its interests and when the organizations have incongruous views. Such differences can arise regarding either the professed goals of a policy or the programmatic activities that are planned to carry out a policy. Disputes over policy means can develop over jurisdictional issues or over the substance of the proposed means for reaching the goals. For example, pollution

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reduction may be an agreed-upon goal. Nevertheless, an engineer, an economist, and a lawyer may prefer very different means to carry out the agreed-upon policy. The intensity of conflict increases with an increase in incompatibility of concerns, and with an increase in the perceived stakes for each actor. The more important a decision is, the more aggressive behavior will be.

Many top-down authors have treated conflict as an endogenous variable that policy designers can influence and should minimize. Virtually all have emphasized the importance of delegating policy to a sympathetic agency. Placing a policy in an agency where it conflicts with existing policies and goals leads to few resources, little support, and almost certain failure. Top-downers also recommend scaling back a project to engender less opposition and limit interdependence. The hope is that by decreasing the conflict level the implementation process will move toward the rational decision-making model and away from the bureaucratic politics model. While top-downers have seen conflict as manipulable, bottom-uppers have argued that the policy's conflict level is not manipulable and is given, because of subject matter (Berman 1980).

Certain types of conflict are manipulable. It is possible to make policies more palatable by limiting the changes they bring about, by means such as hold-harmless clauses, or by providing remunerative incentives for essential actors to join. On the other hand, there are clear limits to this. Some policies are inevitably controversial and it is not possible to adjust them to avoid conflict. Often a conflict is based on an incompatibility of values and it is not possible to placate the involved parties by providing resources or other side payments. The level of policy conflict has a number of important effects. Policy conflict directly affects the ease of access to the implementation process. At low levels of conflict access is relatively easy; at high levels of conflict barriers to entry are higher. Intensity also rises with conflict levels. The types of conflict resolution mechanisms also change: analytical methods such as persuasion or problem solving are most common at low levels of conflict and bargaining and coercion are most common at high levels of conflict.

Policy Ambiguity

Policy ambiguity in implementation arises from a number of sources but can be characterized broadly as falling into two categories: ambiguity of goals and ambiguity of means. In top-down models goal clarity is an important independent variable that directly affects policy success. Goal ambiguity is seen as

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leading to misunderstanding and uncertainty and therefore often is culpable in implementation failure. The position of top-downers is quite explicit—policies should be pushed in the direction of greater goal clarity.

This recommendation fails to consider the dysfunctional effects of clarity and the positive effects of ambiguity. In designing a policy, goal conflict and ambiguity often are negatively correlated. One of the ways to limit conflict is through ambiguity. The clearer goals are the more likely they are to lead to conflict. In a study of personnel information policy in the United States and the United Kingdom, Regan (1984) argues that considering implementation in the policy formulation phase led to the sacrifice of programmatic goals. As the policy became more explicit, existing actors became aware of threats to their turf and acted to limit the scope and range of proposed policy changes to maintain existing patterns of bureaucratic power and structure. Under other conditions, ambiguity is often a prerequisite for getting new policies passed at the legitimation stage. Many legislative compromises depend on language sufficiently ambiguous that diverse actors can interpret the same act in different ways. This is a natural and inevitable result of the working of political process (Berman 1978; Baier, March, and Saetren 1986).

Ambiguity is not limited to goals; it also affects policy means. Ambiguity of means appears in many ways, perhaps most obviously in cases where the technology needed to reach a policy's goals does not exist. Policy means also are ambiguous when there are uncertainties about what roles various organizations are to play in the implementation process, or when a complex environment makes it difficult to know which tools to use, how to use them, and what the effects of their use will be.

There have been calls to avoid ambiguity in policy means by limiting policy to those areas with an understanding of how actions occur and those areas with known instrumental means to attain desired goals. If actions were thus limited, however, many important but difficult questions would remain unanswered. As Tukey (1962) has noted, "Far better an approximate answer to the *right* question, which is often very vague, than an exact answer to the wrong question, which can always be made precise." Finding an answer often requires a learning and experimenting process. The implementation process not only provides an opportunity to learn new methods, it also provides an opportunity to reach new goals (Offerdal 1984). Offerdal suggests implementation should be a phase where principles and visions as well as technological knowledge are tested.

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While several top-down models recommend eliminating ambiguity, it is unclear whether policy ambiguity can be manipulated easily when designing policy. At times, ambiguity more appropriately is seen as a fixed parameter. Even when it is not completely fixed, it is likely to be resistant to substantial movement. This may be due to a fragile political coalition, but it also may be due to poor understanding of a problem. Especially when prescribing means, policy designers rightly may believe they lack the technical knowledge to produce a programmed implementation package.

Leaving aside the normative aspect of whether ambiguous policies should be enacted, it is sufficient to note that such policies *are* enacted. Politicians react to demand for action by producing action. They do not pause to consider the feasibility of policy implementation (Jones 1975). The system routinely produces policies with ambiguous goals and exceedingly ambiguous means (Lowi 1979). It is therefore reasonable to expect that public policy will have a wide range of ambiguity.

The degree of ambiguity inherent in a policy directly affects the implementation process in significant ways. It influences the ability of superiors to monitor activities, the likelihood that the policy is uniformly understood across the many implementation sites, the probability that local contextual factors play a significant role, and the degree to which relevant actors vary sharply across implementation sites.

A COMPREHENSIVE IMPLEMENTATION MODEL: EXPOSITION OF THE FOUR PERSPECTIVES

In reviewing proposals for remedying implementation failure O'Toole (1986) found that the literature makes contradictory recommendations. I believe this occurs because the underlying antecedent characteristics of a policy are analyzed insufficiently. The factors that help implement policy under one set of conditions exacerbate already existing problems under another. Previous theoretical work has failed to identify the conditions under which policy recommendations will be effective.³ The conflict-ambiguity matrix presented in exhibit 1 is an initial step toward sorting out various useful recommendations in the literature.

Each box in exhibit 1 presents the type of implementation process, the central principle determining outcomes for this type of implementation, and an example of a policy that fits this category.⁴ The four cells in the conflict-ambiguity matrix are reviewed below. The following aspects are discussed for each

³For an important exception within the regulatory field see Gormley (1986).

⁴In exhibit 1, ambiguity and conflict are presented as dichotomous; this is strictly to simplify the exposition. The theoretical constructs are continuous. As a policy gradually moves across a dimension, for example from low to high conflict, the implementation process is expected increasingly to show the characteristics of the paradigm being moved toward and decreasingly to show the characteristics of the paradigm being moved away from. There is no tipping point at which a slight move up or down causes a radical shift from one type of implementation to another.

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Exhibit 1

Ambiguity-Conflict Matrix: Policy Implementation Processes

| | | CONFLICT | |
|-----------|------|--|--|
| | | Low | High |
| AMBIGUITY | Low | <i>Administrative Implementation</i> Resources Example: Smallpox eradication | <i>Political Implementation</i> Power Example: Busing |
| | High | <i>Experimental Implementation</i> Contextual Conditions Example: Headstart | <i>Symbolic Implementation</i> Coalition Strength Example: Community action agencies |

perspective: the central principle describing the factor expected to have the greatest influence on the implementation outcome; a description of the implementation process with special emphasis on the implications of policy ambiguity and conflict; a discussion of the expected pitfalls; and the appropriateness of top-down or bottom-up approaches as a description of the process.

Administrative Implementation: Low Policy Ambiguity and Low Policy Conflict

In decision-making theory, choice opportunities where ambiguity and conflict are low provide the prerequisite conditions for a rational decision-making process. Goals are given and a technology (means) for solving the existing problem is known. Simon (1960) called decisions of this type "programmed decisions." The central principle in administrative implementation is *outcomes are determined by resources*. The desired outcome is virtually assured, given that *sufficient resources* are appropriated for the program.

The implementation process can be compared to a machine. At the top of the machine is a central authority. This authority

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has information, resources, and sanction capabilities to help enact the desired policy. Information flows from the top down. Implementation is ordered in a hierarchical manner with each underlying link receiving orders from the level above. The policy is spelled out explicitly at each level, and at each link in the chain actors have a clear idea of their responsibilities and tasks. The paradigm invoked is Weberian bureaucrats loyally carrying out their appointed duties.

Low levels of ambiguity mean it is clear which actors are to be active in implementation. As the actors are stable over time, they develop standard operating procedures to expedite their work. The transparency of the technology makes clear which resources are required, and resource procurement is built into the implementation process. The system therefore is relatively closed to outside influence. The isolation from environmental factors, along with the programmed nature of policy, results in relatively uniform outcomes at the microlevel across many settings.

Etzioni (1961) describes three types of mechanisms for gaining compliance from an actor: normative, coercive, and remunerative. A normative mechanism induces compliance through reference to a mutually held goal or to the legitimacy of the person requesting action (for example, a superior in a hierarchy). A coercive mechanism threatens sanctions for failing to comply with a request for action. A remunerative mechanism includes sufficient incentives, often additional resources, to make the desired course of action attractive to the agent. For administrative implementation, where levels of conflict are low, normative compliance mechanisms are generally sufficient. The orders given are perceived as legitimate, and there is little controversy that might lead to subversion. Remunerative mechanisms may be used, especially for pulling in outside resources, but most actions are induced through normative mechanisms. In those few cases where coercive mechanisms are needed, they can be expected to be effective since means are clear and easily monitored.

Since a technology for dealing with the problem exists, implementation activities are concerned primarily with getting the technology in place and functioning. They often consist of a set of rules that structures discretion so as to insure the preferred outcomes. Implementation failure occurs because of technical problems: the machine sputters. Problems occur because of misunderstanding, poor coordination, insufficient resources, insufficient time to use the correct technology, or lack of an effective monitoring strategy to control and sanction deviant behavior.

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As messages pass through a communication network, they tend to get distorted. Even when the message appears clear to the sender, it may fail to be comprehended fully due to cognitive limitations of the receiver. In addition, cognitive dissonance may lead to selective perception. Pressman and Wildavsky (1973) calculate the probability of successful implementation as less than 50 percent if an order is followed with 90 percent accuracy after going through six hierarchical levels. If orders are comprehended with less than 90 percent accuracy, the probability of success will fall even faster.

This description of the implementation process closely parallels those found in traditional top-down approaches. Top-down models are descended from old public administration models, and the Wilsonian tradition, which defined administration as separate from politics, is effective in these cases. When a policy is characterized by a high degree of consensus and the means for reaching the policy goal are known, the implementation process becomes dominated by technocratic questions of compliance and follow-up. An example of such a policy is the World Health Organization's (WHO) program to eliminate smallpox. The means—mass vaccination and quarantine—and goals—eradication of smallpox—were clear. As the program developed, standard operating procedures were established to decrease discretion and increase efficiency. Success was determined largely by the level of resources available and the efficiency of the program developed to implement the policy. The difference between WHO's program to eradicate smallpox and the U.S. program to contain tuberculosis show strikingly the crucial role that resources play for administrative policies. In the case of smallpox, there were sufficient resources to continue active implementation until the disease was eliminated completely. In the case of tuberculosis, existing policy led to a decreasing number of cases and appeared to have effective control over tuberculosis into the early 1980s. At that time federal funding was cut off. The consequence of that action has been both a resurgence of tuberculosis in the 1990s and the appearance of a drug-resistant strain of tuberculosis.

Kelman (1984) describes how he developed an implementation plan for the Emergency Energy Assistance program.⁵ This program was to take effect in case of a new energy crisis. The policy theory was to allow market prices on energy, tax the windfall profits of energy companies, and recycle the money back to citizens via an emergency energy rebate. The rebate portion of the program was both clear and nonconflictual, and therefore it fit the administrative implementation paradigm. Nevertheless, difficulties existed with implementation. This

⁵While this program was never implemented, his discussion is very instructive on how implementation plans are developed.

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program required substantial new capacity; virtually all adult citizens in the United States would need to be identified and to have checks mailed to them, all in a short time. There were many obstacles: finding an agency with the expertise and capacity to process tremendous numbers of cases quickly (i.e., a problem of sufficient resources); combining several different lists to develop one complete list of eligible recipients (coordination problems); and providing citizens access throughout the country to file complaints in case of oversight (resource problems). Kelman, using the implementation literature as a guide, revised the initial plans, which called for state agencies to provide lists of recipients. Noting the great difficulties involved in getting 150 different agencies to provide data on short notice, he devised a plan that gave full responsibility to the Internal Revenue Service (IRS) and based the identification of recipients on IRS records. Placing the primary responsibility for the program with the IRS helped to minimize possible coordination problems and enabled policy designers to take advantage of IRS's capacity to train large numbers of employees quickly. IRS also had the necessary expertise to quickly process applications and to deal with consumer complaints. According to Kelman, IRS support was relatively easy to enlist because of its loyalty to the congressional mandate, a promise of resources, and an opportunity for the IRS to improve its image by giving people money rather than taking money away from them. Kelman's discussion is instructive: it indicates that the problems that arise under conditions of low ambiguity and low conflict are primarily technical, and it shows that, even for policies with low levels of conflict and ambiguity, an implementation plan can require substantial effort.

Political Implementation: Low Policy Ambiguity and High Policy Conflict

Low ambiguity and high conflict are typical of political models of decision making (Allison 1971; Halperin 1974; Elmore 1978).⁶ Actors have clearly defined goals, but dissension occurs because these clearly defined goals are incompatible. Equally conflictual battles can occur over means. It is often precisely in the designing of the implementation policy that conflicts develop and vigorous battles erupt. The central principle in political implementation is that *implementation outcomes are decided by power*. In some cases one actor or a coalition of actors have sufficient power to force their will on other participants. In other cases actors resort to bargaining to reach an agreement.

For policies of this type, compliance is not automatically forthcoming. While there is an explicit policy, essential resources

⁶By calling this *political* implementation I am not implying that other types of implementation do not have political elements, any more so than calling the previous category administrative implies that it is the only category with administrative elements. The term is merely meant to emphasize that this type of policy is expected to prominently exhibit bargaining and other activities associated with the bureaucratic politics tradition of decision making.

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are controlled by skeptical actors outside the implementing organization or by actors actively opposed to the proposed policy. Often both conditions exist. Such a system is more open to influences from the environment than from administrative implementation. The implementation program consists of securing the compliance of actors whose resources are vital to policy success and ensuring that the process is not thwarted by opponents of the policy. Since some of the actors whose cooperation is required may disagree with the policy goals, successful implementation depends on either having sufficient power to force one's will on the other participants or having sufficient resources to be able to bargain an agreement on means. Coercive and remunerative mechanisms will predominate.

Coercive mechanisms are most effective when the desired outcomes are easily monitored and the coercing principal controls a resource essential to the agent. This point is made convincingly by Durant (1984) in his study of two controversies involving the Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA) and the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA). He found that where the sanctions available to the EPA threatened the central mission of the TVA, compliance was quickly forthcoming. In the case where the controversy did not threaten the central mission of the TVA and the sanctions seemed less onerous, several years were spent arguing and litigating before the TVA finally complied.

The greater the implementer's authority to require agent action, the more likely it is that agents will comply with the principal's requests. Agents, however, often are not in a direct line relationship with the implementer, and coercive mechanisms fail to bring about compliance. Many actors have independent bases of power and can refuse to participate without having their own missions threatened. Even where there are relatively strong sanction opportunities (such as federal grants to states and local entities) states and municipalities exhibit a surprising degree of independence (Ingram 1977). Under these conditions, activities are directed toward reaching a negotiated agreement on actions. Agreement on goals is unnecessary, agreement on actions is sufficient. Many bargaining techniques commonly found in the legislative forum reappear. Disputes are resolved through side payments, logrolling, oversight, or ambiguity. Questions that cannot be resolved can be buried in ambiguous text and left for later resolution.

The opposing sides of a policy question previously may have done battle at the policy adoption stage. The shift of forum, however, can result in a change in the balance of power. A legislative coalition often consists of actors whose support is fleeting.

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Supporters agree to vote for a policy on the basis of logrolling, in response to political pressure, or simply because it appears to be a sensible policy. Many of these supporters have little interest in the implementation stage. Even among those with an active interest the rewards from oversight are limited and likely to lead to only sporadic activities (Mayhew 1974; Ogul 1976). This venue shift can result in the nonimplementation of policy. This view is borne out by the regulation literature, which finds industries more successful at influencing the implementation phase than the legislative phase of policy (Stigler 1971; Joskow and Noll 1981).

The description of the policy process proposed by the newer top-down models comes closest to capturing the essence of the implementation process under these conditions. The traditional public administration models and the earliest top-down models took an administrative view of what is essentially a political problem; they failed to identify the sources of implementation barriers. The more sophisticated top-down models, which were developed partially in response to the failings of standard public administration teachings, emphasize political factors. Among the political factors built into Mazmanian and Sabatier's model (1989) are general public support, support from upper-level political leaders, resources and support from relevant constituency groups, and the commitment of implementing officials.

The bottom-up argument, that policies are decided at the microlevel, fails because it does not take account of the considerable forces and power that can be brought to bear upon an issue when it is unambiguously and explicitly formulated. School integration through busing is an example of a highly contentious yet unambiguous issue implemented by central authorities, with local officials looking on with little power to halt actions. While local authorities may disagree, sometimes vehemently, with the means that are used, the central authorities (i.e., the courts) have sufficient power to force their plan on the other participants. Low ambiguity insures that monitoring of compliance is relatively easy; attempts at subversion are likely to be caught and swiftly punished.

Experimental Implementation: High Policy Ambiguity and Low Policy Conflict

If a policy exhibits a high level of ambiguity and low level of conflict, 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*

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process. Outcomes depend heavily on the resources and actors present in the microimplementing environment. These are likely to vary strongly from site to site, therefore broad variations in outcomes will occur. In decision-making terms, this type of implementation condition closely parallels a "garbage can" process with streams of actors, problems, solutions, and choice opportunities combining to produce outcomes that are hard to predict. The conditions that are required for a choice opportunity to develop into a garbage can are problematic preferences (ambiguous goals); uncertain technology (no predefined correct behavior); and fluid participation (actors vary over time) (Cohen, March, and Olsen 1972; March and Olsen 1976 and 1986). By definition, experimental implementation defines cases where preferences are problematic and technology is uncertain. The crucial element is: Which participants are active and what is their intensity of participation? Participants' level of activity in a choice situation depends on the intensity of their feelings, the number of other demands on their time, their physical proximity to the place where decisions are made, and a host of other variables.

As a result of policy ambiguity, the implemented program differs from site to site. The constellation of actors participating, the pressures on the actors, the perceptions of what the policy is, the available resources, and possible programmatic activities vary widely across policy settings. The lack of conflict is likely to open the arena for a large number of actors to participate and to provide those who have intense interests, or substantial slack resources, with an opportunity to mold policy significantly. The opportunities are excellent for bureaucratic entrepreneurs to create policies to deal with local needs.

This process is more open to environmental influences than are other forms of implementation. Program mutations arise as different organizations implement different policies in different environments. These mutations can be seen as natural experiments, and it is important for policy designers to actively use them to enhance their knowledge of change processes within the policy area, with a strong emphasis on formative evaluations (Mohr 1988). For policies that have clear goals, it is possible to carry out and use summative evaluations that explicitly state whether the policy has reached its appointed goal. For policies with unclear goals, it is far more useful to use formative evaluations that describe the process and describe the way outcomes are arrived at without an explicit stamp of approval or disapproval.

Policies where both goals and means are unclear naturally fall into the category of experimental implementation. In

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addition, policies with clear and widely supported goals but with unclear means of implementation take on experimental characteristics. For many policies the goals are agreed upon and known, yet the means of reaching these goals is unknown. Implementing policies of this type can be technology-forcing and can lead to the development of entirely new capabilities. Nakamura and Smallwood (1980) point to the Clean Air Act of 1970 as a prime example of a case where the technology did not exist before the policy was passed; it developed quickly in response to the Act. Biomedical research is another example where technology doesn't exist but policy is widely supported. On the other hand, ambiguous policies can breed limited accountability and can lead to the creation of minifiefdoms with leaders pursuing their own interests. These may have little, if any, connection to the public interest.

The emphasis on seeing each iteration of a policy as an experiment is important when one evaluates possible pitfalls to the implementation process. More important than a *successful* outcome is one that produces learning.⁷ Policies operate in areas where there is insufficient knowledge to institute programmed implementation or of how elements in the policy environment are causally connected. Ambiguity should be seen as an opportunity to learn both new means and new goals. Two pitfalls must be avoided. First, the process should not be forced into an artificially constrained form. Programs demanding conformity are likely to meet with superficial compliance efforts from local implementers. In addition, demanding uniformity when processes are poorly understood robs us of vital information and limits the street-level bureaucrats' use of their knowledge as a resource. Since uniformity is to be discouraged, development of effective compliance monitoring mechanisms is of limited relevance. Second, the process requires a conscious realization that learning is the goal. If there are fifty sites with fifty differing results, but the information is neither gathered nor compared, then learning is likely to occur in a random pattern. Evaluation and feedback are vital components of effective learning.

The bottom-up description of the policy implementation process is superior to the top-down in describing conditions in this category. The emphasis on the opportunities available to local-level actors appears most appropriate. Tolerance for ambiguity is much greater in bottom-up than in top-down models. The top-down models emphasize command, control, and uniformity and fail to take into account the diversity inherent in much implementation that occurs.

⁷See Ingram and Schneider (1990) for a similar argument in discussing a grass roots approach to statutory design.

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Headstart is an excellent example of experimental implementation. It officially was approved in March 1965 and was to begin in the summer of 1965. The Office of Economic Opportunity (OEO) had barely three months to prepare, far too short a time to develop any type of comprehensive plan. The central administration had only the most general notion of what the goals of a preschool program for disadvantaged children should be. At the same time, Sargent Shriver III, the director of the OEO, had a serious problem in that he was unable to spend all of his budget. These factors combined to produce a situation in which virtually all proposals for summer school programs were approved. There was a cornucopia of proposals, and Headstart meant many different things for its first several iterations. Over time, as information was gathered, the program became more structured, but at the start few attempts were made to steer it from the top. The meaning of Headstart in those early stages was dependent almost exclusively on which actors were involved at the microlevel and what resources they had at their disposal.

Symbolic Implementation: High Policy Ambiguity and High Policy Conflict

It may seem implausible that a policy can have high levels of ambiguity and yet be conflictual. As was noted earlier, many scholars suggest making a policy more ambiguous to diminish conflict. Nevertheless, policies do exist that appropriately are characterized as having both high levels of ambiguity and high levels of conflict. Policies that invoke highly salient symbols often produce high levels of conflict even when the policy is vague.⁸ Symbolic policies play an important role in confirming new goals, in reaffirming a commitment to old goals, or in emphasizing important values and principles (Olsen 1970). The high level of conflict is important, because it structures the way resolutions are developed. The high level of ambiguity results in outcomes that vary across sites. The central principle is that local level *coalitional strength* determines the outcome. The policy course is determined by the coalition of actors at the local level who control the available resources.

⁸Traditionally, symbolic politics has been associated with nonimplementation of policy (Edelman 1964 and 1977). The typical example is a policy that receives substantial exposure at the adoption stage, but that ultimately has little substantive effect. While that tradition is important, it ultimately is very confining. Symbolic politics is almost always tied to substantive failure. A considerably richer understanding of the effects of symbols on politics can be produced if policies are defined as symbolic *before* they have been implemented.

For policy with only a referential goal, differing perspectives will develop as to how to translate the abstract goal into instrumental actions. The inherent ambiguity leads to a proliferation of interpretations. Competition ensues over the correct "vision." Actors see their interests tied to a specific policy definition, and therefore similar competing coalitions are likely to form at differing sites. The strength of these actors will vary across the possible sites. Contextual conditions at the local level

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affect outcomes through their effect on coalition strength. Variations in coalition strength and dominant coalition make-up manifest themselves in differing programs in different localities. Outcomes are bounded and less differentiated than for cases of experimental implementation, because opposition coalitions are able to put effective limits on policy even when they cannot determine its content. Nevertheless, substantial variation is expected, with coalition strength at the local level being of central importance in determining the policy outcome.

Professions are likely to play an especially important role for symbolic policies. Professional training provides a strong set of norms as to legitimate activities and effective problem-solving actions. When faced with a vague referential goal and an ambiguous program of action, actors with professional training are likely to step in quickly with proposals grounded in their professions. Professions with competing claims over an area and different standard programs for attacking problems often form the core of competing coalitions. For example, a youth employment program may have an official goal of improving opportunities for disadvantaged youths. This policy has a referential goal that may include any of the following subgoals: decreased crime, increased educational opportunities, increased income, and provision of on-the-job training. Among actors with different training, there are substantially different proposals for implementing this policy. Their implementation battles are likely to be long and bitter.

Policies aimed at redistributing power or goods are perhaps the most obvious examples of programs that fall under this category. Policy goals often provide little information to a policy designer about how to proceed, yet the symbols are sufficient to create significant opposition before any plans are promulgated. The Community Action Agencies (CAA) established as part of the War on Poverty are a prime example of a symbolic policy. The stated goal of the CAA was to facilitate local citizenry empowerment. What this meant was unclear to virtually all participants. Despite great ambiguity, the CAA generated considerable controversy and animosity, often precisely because the policy was ambiguous and there was a fear of what the policy implied for existing relationships.

Symbolic implementation policies are conflictual, therefore they exhibit similarities to political implementation. Actors are intensely involved, and disagreements are resolved through coercion or bargaining; problem solving or persuasion are used to a limited degree only. Any actor's influence is tied to the strength of the coalition of which she is part. Symbolic implementation

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differs from political implementation in that coalitional strength at the microlevel, not at the macrolevel, determines the implementation outcome. This difference occurs because of a high ambiguity level. When a policy has a referent goal and ambiguous means it is solidly in the symbolic quadrant. As the ambiguity level decreases the policy moves upward, toward the political implementation quadrant. A decrease in ambiguity, either through explicit goals or a crystallization of discussion around a limited number of possible means, would provide central level actors an increased opportunity to assert some control and influence. When the policy is very clear, the macrolevel actors are able to exert considerable control, and this becomes a case of political implementation.

When dealing with cases of symbolic implementation, identifying the competing factions at the local level, along with the microlevel contextual factors that affect the strengths of the competing factions, is central to accurate explanations of policy outcomes. Neither the top-down nor bottom-up models appear entirely appropriate in describing the implementation process when there is substantial conflict and an ambiguous policy. The macroimplementers who are so prominent in the top-down models see their powers diminish. Policy ambiguity makes it difficult for the macroimplementers to monitor activities, and it is much more difficult to structure actions at the local level. Nevertheless, centrally located actors do constitute an important influence through provision of resources and incentives and through focusing attention on an issue area. Because of the higher level of conflict, the process is likely to be highly political, but it will be dominated by local actors. The bottom-uppers are correct in that the local actors are paramount, but their models do not emphasize the strongly political nature of the interactions.

CONCLUSION

I noted at the outset that the implementation literature suffers from a lack of theoretical structure. By drawing on the organizational theory literature, considering how ambiguity and conflict affect policy implementation, and combining these factors into the ambiguity/conflict model, this article provides a more theoretically grounded approach to implementation. By studying a policy's level of conflict and ambiguity, testable predictions can be made as to how the implementation process will unfold.

Traditional top-down models, based on the public administration tradition, present an accurate description of the implementation process when policy is clear and conflict is low. The

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recommendations found in this literature provide a useful set of heuristics in promulgating an implementation plan. Because there is a clear policy, macroimplementation planners wield considerable influence. Bottom-up models provide an accurate description of the implementation process when policy is ambiguous and conflict is low. The expectation is that conditions at the microimplementation level dominate and should be encouraged to vary. Under conditions identified as political implementation, where conflict is high and ambiguity is low, the newer top-down models—which emphasize the importance of structuring access and providing resources with a conscious concern for the heavily politicized atmosphere that attends such policies—provide an important starting point. When there is substantial conflict and an ambiguous policy, both models have some relevancy. Microlevel actors dominate the process, but actions are highly political as emphasized by top-down models.

One implicit concern underlying this model is that ambiguity should not be seen as a flaw in a policy. Despite its being blamed often for implementation failure, ambiguity can be useful. Ambiguity can ease agreement both at the legitimation and the formulation stage. It provides an opportunity to learn new methods, technologies, and goals. Widespread variation provides an abundance of knowledge which should be actively nurtured. Ambiguity should be viewed neither as an evil nor as a good. It should be seen as a characteristic of a policy, without imbuing it with any normative value.

Finally, while I have argued that under certain conditions it is most appropriate to hold either a top-down or a bottom-up perspective, it is important to recognize that both schools contain kernels of truth relevant in any implementation situation. For example, central authorities inevitably influence policy implementation through decisions on funding and jurisdiction, even when policies are vague and conflict is low. It is also clear that policies are almost never self-executing. A microimplementation process occurs, even for purely technical questions with all the characteristics of administrative implementation. This model provides a description for the policy designer pondering where the most important problems are likely to lie. For the researcher it provides a map to those elements expected to most greatly influence policy outcomes.

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