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The Thesis of Incongruent Implementation: Revisiting Pressman and Wildavsky

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Abstract

The more links can be observed in the vertical line between intentions and results as embodied by a policy process, the smaller the chance will be of a congruent implementation of the public policy concerned. Pressman and Wildavsky (1973) expressed this view on implementation in one of the longest and most famous subtitles in the study of public administration. In this article this view is addressed as the thesis of incongruent implementation. Although still common with policy makers, since Bowen's (1982) critique it hardly has been investigated further. At the same time, however, scholars across different research communities have started to explore the effects of intermediary variables between government intentions and governmental performance. The objective in this article is to look at what is known about the impact of such variables currently and to explore the implications for the study of implementation.

Keywords

goal clarity, governmental performance, governance research, implementation studies, public policy, street-level bureaucracy, top-down perspective

'(T)he ability to forge subsequent links in the causal chain so as to obtain the desired results.' That is how Pressman and Wildavsky describe implementation in

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the preface to the first edition of their book (1973/1984: xxiii). They speak about understanding sequences of events as depending on ‘complex chains of reciprocal interaction’ (xxv). Using the metaphor several times, the authors see the success of implementation as highly dependent on the length of the vertical ‘chain’ implied by the policy process involved. ‘The longer the chains of causality, the more numerous the reciprocal relationships among the links and the more complex implementation becomes’ (xxiv). The essence of Pressman and Wildavsky’s argument is that the more ‘clearances’ there are in the vertical ‘chain’ of a policy process, the smaller the chance will be of an implementation congruent with the policy intentions of the policy concerned. The assumption is that if action depends upon a range of links in a vertical line of implementation, the degree of co-operation between agencies required to make those links has to be close to 100 per cent if a situation is not to occur in which a number of small deficits create a large shortfall in a cumulative way.

Pressman and Wildavsky thus introduce the idea of an ‘implementation deficit’. The goals of a public policy or a specific policy programme are supposed to have been decided upon in a legitimate and therefore binding way; now it comes down to implementation. Additionally, when appropriate resources have been supplied, no obstacle stands in the way of the realisation of the stated goals. If, nevertheless, the expected outcomes or even outputs fail to come, it is something within the implementation that must have gone wrong.

Academically it would be possible to dismiss this picture as a typical ‘top-down’ one. How about the well-known controversy in the 1970s and 1980s in which ‘bottom-uppers’ like Barrett and Fudge (1981) and Hjerm and Hull (1982) criticized the assumptions underlying this picture? And had this controversy not been ‘solved’, in the sense that since studies such as that of Goggin and his colleagues (1990), the stage of ‘synthesizing’ approaches to implementation theory and research had been reached? Even more, under the governance paradigm or a similar contemporary label, has the study of policy implementation *as such* not become a ‘yesterday’s issue’ (Hill, 1997)?

These reactions challenging the prevalence of the typical ‘top-down’ approach of implementation as exemplified in Pressman and Wildavsky’s monograph are understandable, but miss a point. They ignore the fact that in the practice of public administration such a view on public policy has remained – and will remain – very attractive and frequently used. It is functional to the Minister who wants to show he or she has acted properly. It is functional to journalists who want to tell a clear story about policy failures. And it is functional to citizens who must be convinced that their political representatives see to it that the agreed political agenda is being carried out. In short, the top-down view on implementation has a lasting functionality. This fact seems both cause and consequence of the circumstance that the view is normatively grounded in the institutions of the modern state, particularly of the rule of law and representative democracy. The latter on the input-side plus government on the throughput-side ‘add up’ to

legitimate government performance on the output- and outcome-side (Bekkers et al., 2007; see also Held, 2006).

Strøm (2000: 267) speaks of a 'chain of delegation' in contemporary democracies. This 'chain' goes from voters all the way to civil servants that ultimately implement public policies. Those actors authorized to make political decisions conditionally designate others to make such decisions acting on behalf of them (see also Lupia and McGubbins, 2000). Light (1995: vii) has investigated the 'thickening' of federal U.S. government over the years by measuring the 'layers of management between the president and the front lines of government'. In contrast with the linearity and singularity the metaphors of a 'chain' and 'thickening' suggest, we would like to propose the notion of the *thickness of hierarchy*. It has the following features. First, multiple hierarchies are involved. The latter include the linear set of relationships Strøm refers to, but also indicate that authority stems from a variety of institutional sources. Second, these hierarchies are reinforcing, 'adding up' to a certain degree of 'thickness'. The latter concept does not refer to the characteristics of one layer, like in Light's study, but to a multiplicity of vertical influences on the actions of actors. Third, the hierarchies have a normative character and do not coincide with the empirical relationships they are assumed to determine. In particular, hierarchy as presupposed on normative grounds cannot be equated with the actual degree of symmetry and direction of dependency. In empirical reality formal hierarchies actually may be used in multiple ways.

Perhaps one of the oldest hierarchies related with the modern state can be found in what Meier and O'Toole (2007: 520) call the 'normative logic of the politics-administration dichotomy' (cf. Wilson, 1887). Stemming from Weber's (1947) ideal-type of bureaucracy is the normative assumption that written intentions laid down in laws and statutes should in an immediate way direct and prevail in action in the real world. One could address this hierarchy as the *primacy of policy on paper*. And of course also in the stages picture of a policy process, in which policy formation is supposed to determine policy implementation, a hierarchy can be identified.

The notion of normatively embedded multiple hierarchies would explain that, years after the top-down/bottom-up controversy, so many contemporary implementation studies have a straightforward 'top-down' orientation (cf. Sætren, 2005). Given its lasting normative attractiveness, exploring the empirical tenability of the thesis of incongruent implementation is the objective in this article. The underlying question regards the effects of intermediary variables between government intentions and governmental performance. What is known about the impact of such variables? In particular, does a greater institutional distance between policy implementation and policy formation, indeed, lead to a higher chance of an 'implementation deficit'? Having identified the normative basis behind the top-down view on implementation, in the next section some supportive empirical evidence is explored. What is the impact of hierarchy on

implementation? Next, counter-evidence is sought; or, rather, a few limitations to the direct impact of hierarchy on implementation are identified. In the fourth section the lines developed in the argument are brought together. Accordingly, by way of conclusion some assumptions for further research are made explicit.

The Impact of Hierarchy on Implementation: Some Empirical Evidence

Dashed Expectations and the Layers/Deficits Nexus

In the 1980s both the top-down and bottom-up stances were identified as normatively biased. Since then it has become clear that adding new variables does not immediately bring adequate explanation within reach (Matland, 1995; Meier, 1999). The number of variables explaining implementation results is almost endless (O'Toole, 1986; Goggin, 1986). This 'too many variables' problem leaves the fact aside that since Pressman and Wildavsky's book indeed insights have been gained, within and partly outside the study of implementation.

The famous subtitle of Pressman and Wildavsky's book expresses an element crucial in their argument: the connection between 'layers' and 'deficits'. Because there are so many links in what is pictured as a vertical chain between the legitimate policy formation at the national layer and the implementation of that policy in Oakland, the chance of a deficit is deemed high. The conceptualisation in terms of 'deficits' or 'failure' is not only unmistakably normatively loaded, it also leaves unclear whether a 'success' is defined as a matter of problem solving or of exercised control.

Seldom will an employment programme, aimed at jobs for minorities and to be realised far from the nation's capital, have become more famous than the one the Economic Development Administration (EDA), part of the Department of Commerce, undertook in the second half of the 1960s in Oakland, California. As Pressman and Wildavsky (1984: 2) report, the following public works projects would receive money from the EDA: the construction of an airport hangar and support facilities; the building of a marine terminal and access roads; the establishment of a 30-acre industrial park and the building of an access road to the Coliseum area; all in and around Oakland. The EDA allocated around 23 million dollars to Oakland, while most of it was to be used by the Oakland Port Authority to construct the hangar and the terminal. An important or even principal objective was that the construction had to involve minority workers from the area. A private corporation, to whom the hangar was to be leased, would employ these workers. There was, also locally, consensus about the whole programme. The implementation of it would take four and a half years. It was only partially successful, in the sense that not all of the intended projects were realised.

The latter fact, but actually the laborious character of the process as a whole, invited Pressman and Wildavsky to express the experienced disappointment in the subtitle of their book. The policy goals were not only formulated in an articulate way, they were broadly endorsed. The money needed was provided. ‘Once the funds are committed and the local agreements reached, the task is to build facilities to create new jobs so that minorities will be hired’ (xxiii). And yet it took so long before the goals were realised – and only partially.

The book would become a classic in the study of public administration because it expresses a view so fundamentally appealing in a democracy. The relation between the normatively presupposed multiple hierarchies sketched above and the empirics of implementation are explored in the present and next sections. In order, first, to identify supportive empirical evidence, our starting point is a range of suppositions that can be derived from the top-down view on implementation.

Supposition 1: Limitation of the Number of Vertical Links Enhances Congruent Implementation

The range of decision points requiring ‘clearances’ from a variety of actors appears to be extensive. It is this sheer ‘complexity of joint action’ (chapter 5) that Pressman and Wildavsky identify as reducing the chance of successful policy implementation. Like many contemporary ‘sympathetic observers’ they do not like what they see. ‘Though we can isolate policy and implementation for separate discussion, the purpose of our analysis is to bring them into closer correspondence with one another’ (Pressman and Wildavsky, 1984: xxv). The combination of observed facts (many actors involved, a time span perceived as lengthy) and a judgement about those facts seems crucial for Pressman and Wildavsky’s argument. It made them focus on what happens between intentions (‘great expectations in Washington’) and achievements (‘dashed in Oakland’). If the implementation of such a relatively simple programme appears to be so difficult already, how about more complex policies?

Pressman and Wildavsky’s disappointment inherent in their top-down view, still widespread, may be expressed as *the thesis of incongruent implementation*. This thesis entails both a chronological and a hierarchical order. The former implies that goals can only be realised once a preceding legitimate decision has been made. The hierarchical order means that once this has been done, the most important task has been fulfilled. ‘And the rest is implementation’, is then said. Essential to this thesis is the assumption that policy determines its execution. The outputs and inputs of a policy process are assumed to relate to each other in a one-to-one relationship. What is realised ex post and what ex ante has been formulated and agreed upon as policy goals, are expected to be fully congruent. If it turns out to be otherwise, the standard reaction is that the implementers are to blame. They obviously have not fulfilled their – subordinate – task properly. That is not what

the Oakland study shows. Rather, Pressman and Wildavsky point to the length of the vertical 'chain' in which each actor involved should unconditionally comply with the policy goals; which they deem unlikely. On arithmetical grounds they arrive at a plea for fewer 'clearances'. The 'chain' must be as short as possible.

Supposition 2: Centralisation Enhances Congruent Implementation

In fact – in an implicit way, without reference to the thesis formulated above or to Pressman and Wildavsky – Winter, Dinesen and May (2007) have quantitatively tested the supposition that a smaller number of vertical links enhances congruent implementation. They researched whether it made a difference where the same (Danish) employment policy was implemented by a national agency (direct provision) or by the relatively autonomous municipalities (indirect provision). Their hypothesis was that the goals of policy reforms would be more internalised with actors within central government than within local government. In addition to that, the more direct lines of authority in the former locus would foster greater policy commitment, attention to rules, and adherence among frontline workers. The researchers found support for their hypotheses. The implementing actions of street-level bureaucrats within central government appeared to be more in line with the national policy than those of their counterparts in local governments.

Winter and his co-authors point to the fact that in the structures for the implementation of public policies, variety can be observed, not in the least historically. As Hall and O'Toole (2000) show, in the 1960s the U.S. government had a preference to have national policies implemented in multi-actor structures spanning various governments, sectors, and agencies. Referring to Stoker (1991), Winter et al. (2007: 1–2) speak of 'implementation regimes' as heading for the different modes of governmental provision of services. It should be noted that the present use of both the concepts of 'structure' and 'regime' is to be distinguished from the notion 'implementation structure' (Hjern and Porter, 1981). The latter concept refers to the range of horizontally linked organizations 'at the street-level' responsible for implementing specific public policies. Rather, Winter et al. focus on the vertical links within a 'multi-tiered governmental system' (Winter et al., 2007: 1). Key components of such a system are delivery organizations, as well as the persons working there. Indeed, central government service provision appears to yield better implementation outputs than local government provision. Winter et al. attribute the differences in perceived policy outcomes to the 'greater emphasis that caseworkers who are employed by central government place on finding jobs for clients and a clientele that on average is less difficult to place into jobs' (25).

From the perspective of the present article these findings can be summarized as follows: the shorter the vertical chain, the higher the chance of congruent implementation. Oversight and control can be exercised more easily to the degree that the relationship between formulator and implementer more resembles

a one-to-one relationship between persons. When I can observe the work of the carpenter whom I have asked to hang my painting on the wall, I can react to the choices he or she considers.

Supposition 3: Goal Clarity Enhances Congruent Implementation

In the literature on public policy it is accepted that the design of a policy influences the implementation of that policy. The substantive nature of a policy matters (Lowi, 1972), but in particular ‘statutory coherence’ is deemed relevant (see Mazmanian and Sabatier, 1983). The latter entails goal clarity: that policy goals are formulated in as uncontested a way as possible, clearly defined and not too difficult to operationalise. Besides, a certain robustness of implementation structure is required. In what O’Toole (1986) characterises as the ‘top-down perspective’s conventional wisdom’ the numbers of actors involved in the implementation of a policy – preferably only actors sympathetic to it – should be kept to a minimum.

In policy studies the requirements of statutory coherence and simple implementation structures have largely remained – we will come back to a few exceptions – untested claims. In that perspective the research of Chun and Rainey (2005a) is relevant here. They developed four measures of goal ambiguity for public management: mission comprehension ambiguity, directive goal ambiguity, evaluative goal ambiguity, and priority ambiguity. Then they analysed (2005b) the relation between organizational performance in U.S. federal agencies. The performance variables included managerial effectiveness, customer service orientation, productivity, and work quality. On the basis of a quantitative test the authors found that directive, evaluative, and priority goal ambiguity related negatively to managerial effectiveness. All four performance indicators showed significant negative relationships with evaluative goal ambiguity and directive goal ambiguity.

It is obvious that the concept of organizational performance Chun and Rainey use is not identical to implementation results or policy outputs as ‘policy performance’. Nevertheless the supposition of an analogous argument seems justified. The more unambiguously formulated the goals of a public policy or policy programme are, the clearer the implementum will be. The more clear what needs to be implemented – ‘a policy, naturally’, as Pressman and Wildavsky (1984: xxi) state – the less variation in interpretation will occur. Formulated in household terms the objective of hanging a painting on the wall leaves greater choice for the technical way to do that, than when the objective is accompanied by the addition ‘while damaging the wall as little as possible’. Task ambiguity and complexity are at stake here (cf. Matland, 1995).

Given this empirical evidence in support of the top-down view on implementation, it now seems appropriate to seek some counter-evidence.

Limitations on the Impact of Hierarchy on Implementation

Empirical Variety: Systems of Governance

In the normative foundations underlying implementation a common denominator can be found, as was shown in the first section. The ways these foundations have been institutionally embedded show resemblances stemming from the fact that the former are connected with the modern state, in particular with the rule of law and representative democracy. At the same time, however, and contrary to Pressman and Wildavsky's argument, the contexts in which public policies are implemented vary greatly. The number of dimensions on which the contexts of policy implementation vary seems endless. Hill and Hupe (2009, chapter 8), for instance, map the dimensions of contextual variety by distinguishing between constitutional systems, public-administrative styles, social-economic regimes, and implementation regimes. These four dimensions, or, rather, clusters of dimensions, of contextual variety can be added to more general characteristics of the countries in which public policies are implemented. In particular the four clusters of dimensions provide a framework of classification to position countries that, in one way or another, have the features of the rule of law (cf. *Rechtsstaat*), some type of democracy (representative democracy) and some form of social policy (welfare state). Within that context it may indeed make a difference if the public policy looked at is implemented in the setting of a federal state like the U.S. or Germany, or of a centralised state like France and, within a devolved UK, England.

Against the background of this multi-dimensional variety we now can identify some limitations on the impact of hierarchy on implementation. We present them in a mirror relationship to the suppositions in the previous section.

Limitation 1: Implementation Results from Mechanisms of Social Interaction

Bowen (1982) provides 'four addenda' to the argument of Pressman and Wildavsky on the chance of successful implementation. She adopts the same notion of implementation success, but points at persistence, packaging of clearances, engineering bandwagons and policy reduction, as tactics actually employed in implementation. Persistence refers to the likelihood that repeated efforts to gain each needed clearance – although at the expense of delay – may enhance implementation. Packaging implies that one negotiation entails a number of clearances needed for several programme elements. Bandwagons refer to the situation in which each clearance obtained increases the probability of the next one. An agreement as a result of one negotiation enhances other clearances. Policy reduction entails the differentiation of a policy programme into several parts to be treated separately. Therefore contrary to Pressman and Wildavsky's

rather pessimistic conclusions, Bowen (1982: 1) sees in the probability of these tactics reasons for 'increased optimism about the likelihood of successful implementation'.

Most public policies or policy programmes have an inter-agency as well as an inter-governmental character. This means, according to Bowen, that interaction may take the form both of subordinate compliance and open conflict; but also of indifference and inertia, and even active opposition. Furthermore, implementation takes place in an 'open system' (Bowen, 1982: 3). Unforeseen contingencies may occur, such as shifts in personnel, changes in lines of authority within organizations, and fluctuations in agency priorities. Bowen challenges Pressman and Wildavsky's mathematics, suggesting that it exaggerates the probability of disagreement and divergence from the initial policy goal. Hill and Hupe (2003: 480) endorse Bowen's arguments but suggest she could also have given attention to the specific characteristics of the players and the institutional settings in which they operate. They refer to Scharpf's emphasis on the fact that actors 'play games' 'in the shadow of the state' (1997: 200), that is within pre-existing institutional structures.

What Bowen makes clear is the limited influence of hierarchy as a force guiding behaviour in implementation. In practically any policy process a variety of actors is involved. There may even be a range of 'clearance points', but the mechanisms at work certainly do not have effects all going in the same direction. Rather than a linear adding up of such effects – what Pressman and Wildavsky do and what makes them so pessimistic – compensation, buffering, outweighing and similar mechanisms may be observed too. The results of those will differ and can only be researched in a contextualised way.

Where mechanisms of social interaction are at work in the line between 'top' and 'bottom', they are operative in the horizontal dimension as well. This particularly implies that statutory coherence may be more difficult to achieve. Often the goals of the policy-programme-to-be-implemented have been formulated in an ambiguous way. In most cases this formulation is the result of negotiations in the policy formation part of the policy process. In implementation, as the following 'stage', the interpretation of what the policy goal is, then is unavoidable. Accordingly, variation in the identification of what needs to be implemented may lead to different action as well as to varying results of that action. With ambiguous policy goals not only implementation may vary, but evaluation, too. After all, what can be called a 'success'?

The point is that given the political nature of policy formation in most public policy processes, policy goals laid down in official documents often will be compromises, and therefore susceptible to multiple interpretations. Authors like Lindblom (1959, 1979), Allison (1971) and also Wildavsky (1979) have convincingly shown that most public policies can hardly be explained as rational decisions of single policy designers. In policy formation, conceived as social interaction punctuated by moments of reflection, politics is involved. Such politics

may involve party politics, but often also 'idea-politics', and almost always bureaucratic politics. This social interaction character makes the result of policy formation in a policy process an ambiguous, multi-interpretable basis for the subsequent 'stage', the sub-process of implementation. Instead of resulting 'from a single blueprint as if designing a house' (May, 2002: 224), a policy programme almost by definition is the result of 'policy politics' (226).

May (1993) has empirically investigated the influence of mandate design upon implementation efforts in state-level land-use and development management. Considering goal clarity as an indicator for statutory coherence overall, he found that a high degree of the latter is not a necessary condition for strong implementation efforts. In case of a lack of such coherence this may be compensated for by what May calls 'mandate specification of facilitating features along with strong agency commitments to mandate goals' (654). In a prescriptive perspective the specification of such features can imply that 'strong signals be sent about implementation expectations' (*ibid*). In their empirical study of child support enforcement, Keiser and Meier (1996) conclude that 'policy coherence and target population characteristics alone cannot explain enforcement success' (359). They remark that policy design hypotheses are not easy to test. Therefore 'it is difficult to state with certainty that any particular design problem is the reason that a policy failed' (*ibid*). By implication Keiser and Meier can reassure policy makers and public managers that they 'do not... need to be overly concerned with controlling the bureaucracy with coherent legislation' (*ibid*).

Overall it seems that what from a rational, top-down perspective is perceived as shortcomings may be compensated for by mechanisms of social interaction. Opposite cognitive limitations, unclear instructions, and insufficient compliance, may stand, for instance, professional behaviour and the use of common sense. Of course if, when, and to what extent these occur are empirical questions.

Limitation 2: Implementation is Multi-local

In policy studies the stages heuristic still holds as a paradigmatic analytical framework for research (despite criticisms; see Sabatier, 2007). At the same time in the study of government it is nowadays perceived as relevant to combine the persistent awareness of the 'too many variables' problem with the need for structure (O'Toole, 1986; Matland, 1995; Meier, 1999). In ways reminiscent of the focus on the relation between policy intentions and their implementation as parts of 'the policy process', there is now attention to the layered, 'multi-level' character of governance systems (see Peters and Pierre, 2001). Lynn (2007: 450), for instance, states, 'It is becoming increasingly clear... that various levels of management and supervision mediate the relationships between public policies and the outputs of administrative systems, and do so with decisive consequences for service delivery performance'.

Lynn, Heinrich and Hill (2000a, 2000b, 2001) have developed a 'logic of governance'. This refers to 'a system of hierarchically ordered institutions' (Forbes, Hill and Lynn, 2007: 454). The 'chain of delegation' mentioned above results in 'a set of hierarchical interrelationships linking the institutional choices of policy makers to service delivery through intervening levels of management' (Forbes, Hill and Lynn, 2007: 455). Forbes et al. point to the fact that in singular research projects 'skipping levels' for practical reasons (data limitations) is often inevitable, but that consciousness of the subsequent 'omitted variable bias' is important (473). The outline of the analytical 'logic of governance' framework now suggests 'how hierarchical levels of institutions might be interrelated in explaining public service outputs and outcomes' (454). Meier and O'Toole (2007: 508), having developed and tested a formal model of their own and being justifiably self-conscious about the relevance of their contribution, interpret their approach 'as one theoretical model that fits within the Lynn et al. logic of governance'.

Coming from a policy studies rather than public management background, Hill and Hupe (2009) try to position 'implementation' and similar objects of analysis conceptually and theoretically into a larger analytical framework. Exactly because of the 'too many variables' problem they underline the need to know which variables to select in research projects. As an alternative to the so-called 'stages model' in the study of the policy process, Hill and Hupe (2006, 2009; Hupe and Hill, 2006, 2007) developed the 'multiple governance' framework. It offers a three-by-three matrix in which the columns refer to clusters of activities (focus) and the rows to scales of action (locus). Departing from Kiser and Ostrom's (1982) 'three worlds of action' and explicitly relating them to governance Hill and Hupe distinguish between designing institutions (constitutive governance), giving direction (directional governance) and getting things done (operational governance). Research may be complex in the sense that nested configurations of relations are at stake. Composed systems comprise separate organizations; organizations comprise the behaviour of individual persons; like Russian dolls.

A consequence is an awareness that there are always other 'layers' involved – formal administrative ones including representative organs, as well as constitutionally less formal ones, like hospitals – but at the same time the act of implementation cannot be equated with a certain layer. Implementation is multi-local in the sense that clusters of activities (focus) as well as the scale (locus) and layer on which they are observed, do not coincide (for a discussion of the multi-layer problem in the context of 'multi-level governance' see Hill and Hupe, 2003; see also Peters and Pierre, 2001). Addressing public policy implementation as a part of governance means looking at it in a different way than as a 'stage' within a hierarchy, automatically to be located at the 'street' or other lower 'level'.¹ What the sub-process of implementation is, is not given. It is context-bound and

varies empirically. Rather than presuming its location on normative grounds, the latter should be researched.

Limitation 3: Implementation Refers to Human Agency

With his focus on the human factor in implementation Lipsky (1980) has asked attention for what he calls the ‘dilemmas of the individual’ in public services. Not only the behaviour of street-level bureaucrats but also the actions of their managers matter for performance. Meier and O’Toole (2007) add, in respect of the latter, that this impact is often non-linear, on the basis of a review of more than twenty-five studies within the research agenda they launched in 1999 (O’Toole and Meier, 1999). Seeking parsimony they have formulated a set of hypotheses on expected relations between four variable clusters: performance, management, stability, and the environment. They conclude (2007) that managerial networking and its impact on performance is contingent on an organization’s environment. In particular, managerial networking seems to matter more in structural networks. The relationship between management and performance appears to be mediated by managerial quality, in the sense that skilful managers at the top of an organization are able to avoid diminishing returns by economizing on their investment in external interactions (Hicklin, O’Toole and Meier, 2008: 269–70).

Meier and O’Toole’s explicit plea ‘to relax the assumption of exclusively top-down relationships in governance systems’ is directly relevant here. They mention their finding that ‘lower levels of the organization consistently influence actions at higher levels’ (2007: 520). Similar to the way they have provided evidence that ‘management’ features can and should be measured via multiple indicators, it can be deemed justified to interpret their findings as pertinent to the study of the operational part of governance (see also Riccucci, 2005). Thus their conclusion that management contributes positively to public programme performance can be seen as another limitation to the assumption that a normatively institutionalised hierarchy would have a linear, direct and unambiguous impact on implementation.

Given the supposed impact of hierarchy, the presented supporting evidence, as well as the limitations to that impact, it seems appropriate to review the thesis of incongruent implementation.

Reviewing the Thesis of Incongruent Implementation

There is still a critical mass of straightforward implementation studies. For most of them the Oakland study remains a reference point. That fact justifies giving new attention to the view underlying it. An even more persuasive argument to do so is provided by the fact that the top-down character of that view remains

persistent in the *practice* of public administration. The combination of the sustained normative attractiveness of the top-down view on implementation and its unresolved explanatory power makes it worthwhile to explore what kinds of insights have been gained that might help explain questions ‘classical’ to implementation studies.

In the research findings of Winter et al. (2007) and Chun and Rainey (2005a, 2005b) we found evidence supporting the suppositions drawn from Pressman and Wildavsky’s study. Winter and his colleagues observed that a smaller number of vertical links enhances congruent implementation. In a public management research context Chun and Rainey produced evidence that goal clarity enhances organizational performance, inviting for a similar interpretation. Their findings can be read as a plea for clear goals – a typical top-down advice. At the same time, however, they can be interpreted as in support of what ‘implementers at the bottom’ are doing. Given the need to act, the latter usually will try to make the best of it, even in situations of goal ambiguity. This is, in fact, what May (1993) and Keiser and Meier (1996) conclude on the basis of their empirical studies. Policy design indeed does matter, but lack of statutory coherence can be, and often is, compensated for by other factors.

Searching for counter-evidence Pressman and Wildavsky’s view on implementation was confronted with Bowen’s critique providing ‘four addenda’, with efforts towards formal modelling and other forms of framing, and with insights about the impact of managerial behaviour. Implementation can be seen as ‘a-symmetrical bargaining in an open system’ (Bowen, 1982: 3). It can be conceived as a range of governance activities instead of a subordinate ‘stage’ in a policy process, with the variety of dimensions of human agency acknowledged. If that is so, the thesis of incongruent implementation no longer seems adequate. Apart from the identified dimensions of contextual variety – policy implementation in a unitary state is something different than in a federation – the seeming similarity implied by the hierarchy normatively embedded in the institutions of the modern state may put researchers on the wrong foot. The thesis of incongruent implementation entails a problem definition formulated on the basis of a prevailing, certainly legitimate but fundamentally normative perspective. Although any implementation researcher will endorse the principles of the rule of law and democracy, it can be seen as his or her task to investigate empirically their working rather than presuppose it.

Since an opposite but similar normative bias was identified in the bottom-up view on implementation, it has now become possible to look at the same phenomena with a more open view, without at the same time immediately in a ‘synthesizing’ way reaching for one grand theory. The insights collected in this article have various scholarly origins. They stem from implementation research (Bowen, 1982; Winter et al., 2007); from policy studies in general (May, 1993); from public management studies (Chun and Rainey, 2005a, 2005b; Keiser and Meier, 1996; Meier and O’Toole, 2007), and from analytical frameworks

designed to enhance governance research in general (Lynn and colleagues; Hill and Hupe, 2009). The insights from these sources are based on systematic theoretical and empirical research, some with a quantitative character. The drift of all this work is to contribute to getting what Forbes et al. (2007: 454) call 'bigger pictures' by addressing specific elements and positioning them within that whole.

It can be observed that this, indeed, has consequences for the study of implementation. First, mechanisms become visible that had remained unidentified, some of them with effects opposite to the ones presupposed on normative grounds. Furthermore, it becomes clear that context matters. When one wants to explain empirical variation, it is important to have identified the dimensions of variety in institutional settings and other contextual aspects. Third, more factors appear to have an impact. Among them person-related factors like managerial skills seem to be not the least important. Fourth, exactly when more factors appear to be involved, the need for structuring research becomes more pressing (cf. nested systems).

Conclusion

How can knowledge about effects of intermediary variables between government intentions and governmental performance contribute to the explanation of variation in implementation results? That underlying research question is addressed here in a concluding way by drawing some lines consequential to the argument of the previous sections. With an eye on future research a number of methodological and theoretical assumptions are identified.

As far as methodology is concerned, deciding in research whether the activities looked at involve rule application (cf. 'policy implementation'), or rather rule setting (cf. 'policy formation'), is a matter of empirical observation on the basis of operationalised theoretical concepts. Labelling then what has been observed as a 'deficit' is a matter of normative judgement that is to be distinguished from the clinical observation of what happens. Policy performance can be seen as the result of multi-layer interaction between various actors.

The developed theoretical argument can be summarized as follows. a) Inherent to the modern state and particularly institutionalised in the rule of law and representative democracy is a variety of normative principles. Some of them, like the politics-administration dichotomy, regard hierarchies normatively. Because these hierarchies are multiple, instead of the metaphor of a 'chain' the notion 'thickness of hierarchy' seems appropriate. b) The greater the variety of public-administrative regimes within that range of hierarchies, the larger the freedom to act in the contacts on the scale of organizations and individual actors. c) Given the range of institutionalised hierarchies, the thicker the hierarchy, the more the managerial competence and professionalism of public servants in practice will count.

The variety of such person-related characteristics can be called governance skills. d) Such skills, in particular managerial competence and other forms of craftsmanship, may compensate for the lack of goal clarity of the policy to be implemented.

Hierarchy matters, but it alone cannot explain empirical variation in implementation results. If there is anything the study of Pressman and Wildavsky has drawn attention to, it is the fact that public policy implementation does not take place in a normative vacuum. The multiple ways in which the implementation of a policy like the employment programme in Oakland is grounded in the institutions of the modern state made us speak of the thickness of hierarchy. Empirically, next, all is open. What has been identified as the multi-layer problem in implementation research has two major dimensions. First, the legitimacy of the action observed is a matter of normative judgement. Each of these two, observation and judgement, deserves to be addressed distinctively. Secondly, the location of the implementation part of a policy process in a given (macro-)system of vertical public administration is a matter of theoretical reflection, conceptualisation, operationalisation, and empirical observation. Presupposing different parts of governance as exclusively located on certain layers may hinder an open empirical analysis of what actually happens and why. The same goes for a priori assuming, on normative grounds, a literal congruence between them.

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Note

1. In the context of representative bureaucracy and multi-level governance Meier and O'Toole (2007: 520) report on research they have done earlier. They state to have measured Latino representation 'at four different levels – the school board, the superintendent, school administrators, and teachers.' Following Hill and Hupe (2009) we would use the term *levels* as referring to clusters of activities (focus) and reserve the term *layers* to identify a real world cut of spots in which actors act (locus).

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