

In the United States in the early 1970s and in Europe later in that decade there emerged a wave of studies examining the implementation of public policy. Their rationale was that there had been, in the study of public policy, a 'missing link' (Hargrove, 1975) between concern with policy making and

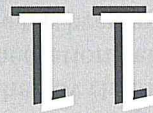
## Introduction

This chapter starts by noting how a very distinctive vein of 'implementation' studies developed towards the end of the twentieth century. It goes on to explore briefly how that work was concerned to make a clear distinction between policy formulation and implementation, and suggests that this is now a source of difficulties. This leads naturally into a consideration of the 'top-down' studies that particularly emphasised that distinction. It is followed by an exposition of the 'bottom-up' evaluation of these studies. The next section, headed 'Beyond the top-down/bottom-up debate', provides an approach which then dominates the rest of the chapter. It suggests a need for an awareness that there is a complex mix of issues to be understood about the different ways actual policies are developed, about how they may best be studied, and about the normative arguments about who should be in charge which often dominate (and obscure) discussions about implementation. Subsequent sections then highlight issues about variations in the 'policy rule framework' and about variations in the administrative system.

In this chapter the focus will be very much upon introducing issues about what happens during the implementation process. The chapters that follow it explore aspects of the organisation of the policy process that need to be looked at in any account of that process as a whole, but in which issues about implementation loom large.

## SYNOPSIS

# Implementation: an overview



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the evaluation of policy outcomes. We should perhaps be wary when academics claim to have discovered a new topic or a 'missing link', as they are very good at dressing up old concerns in new language and thereby claiming originality. The absence of theory and literature on implementation before Pressman and Wildavsky's seminal work (1973) on that topic has been exaggerated: for example, many organisational studies are de facto concerned with this phenomenon. Furthermore, a concern with the relationship between policy making and implementation is as old as democratic politics (Wilson, 1887). Nevertheless, as empirical research in political science developed in the first half of the twentieth century there was perhaps a relative neglect of the study of the processes by which policies are translated into action. They were regarded as mundane and taken for granted. As Gunn (1978) argues, 'academics have often seemed obsessed with policy formation while leaving the "practical details" of policy implementation to administrators' (p. 1).

The explosion of implementation studies therefore represents an important advance in policy analysis. Yet, like so many paradigm shifts in the social sciences, this new intellectual development has come to be seen to have its own limitations. At various places already in this book warnings have been sounded about the stages model of the policy process. At the end of the previous chapter problems were examined about the distinction between policy formulation (often, indeed, called 'making') and implementation, a division particularly highlighted in stagist approaches to policy analysis.

The case for stressing the importance of implementation as distinct from the policy formulation process, and as deserving of attention in its own right, has tended to lead to an overemphasis on the distinctiveness of the two processes. There has been a tendency to treat policies as clear-cut, uncontroversial entities whose implementation can be studied quite separately. This has raised both methodological problems and problems about the extent to which the very practical concerns of implementation studies may involve, explicitly or implicitly, identification with some actors' views of what should happen.

This difficulty has been compounded by the extent to which actors regard it as important to make this distinction. We have here an argument that may be taken in two possible directions. One is to say that inasmuch as people regard a distinction as important, then in all sorts of respects it will be evident in their activities, and the empirical study of their activities must have regard to that. The other is to say that there is a need to be sceptical about a distinction that is so widely used in policy rhetoric, closely linked as it is with the notion that some actors have responsibilities to be leading decision makers (a notion often embedded in versions of democratic theory) whilst others have duties to carry out the policies of their 'masters'. There is in this latter case a situation in which there will be powerful people who want us to believe that the reality corresponds with the rhetoric, or will want to blame the 'implementers' when events do not correspond with original expectations.



In this book the aim is to try to have it both ways – that is, both to reflect the importance of the formulation/implementation distinction in the policy process, and to be aware of how confused it may be in practice.

### The top-down model for the study of implementation

In the course of the evolution of work on implementation in the later part of the twentieth century, a debate developed between the 'top-down' and the 'bottom-up' perspectives. As in all such debates, a later resolution has been reached in which most scholars will want to avoid taking either of the extreme positions, but it is nevertheless helpful to examine this debate for the insights it gives us into some of the key issues about the study of implementation.

The top-down perspective is deeply rooted in the stages model, and involves making a clear distinction between policy formulation and policy implementation. Hence, Van Meter and Van Horn (1975) define the implementation process as 'those actions by public or private individuals (or groups) that are directed at the achievement of objectives set forth in prior policy decisions' (p. 445).

Pressman and Wildavsky go on in a similar vein:

Implementation to us, means just what [dictionary definitions] . . . say it does: to carry out, accomplish, fulfil, produce, complete. But what is it being implemented? A policy, naturally. There must be something out there prior to implementation; otherwise there would be nothing to move towards in the process of implementation. A verb like 'implement' must have an object like 'policy'. But policies normally contain both goals and the means for achieving them. How, then, do we distinguish between a policy and its implementation? (Pressman and Wildavsky, 1973; 1984 edition: xxi)

Pressman and Wildavsky thus highlight a question that is for them of more than linguistic relevance:

We can work neither with a definition of policy that excludes any implementation nor one that includes all implementation. There must be a starting point. If no action is begun, implementation cannot take place. There must be also an end point. Implementation cannot succeed or fail without a goal against which to judge it. (ibid., p. xxii)

There is an issue of logic here. The act of 'implementation' presupposes a prior act, particularly the act of formulating what needs to be done. Various questions follow from this: Who is the formulator? Who is the decision maker? Who is the implementer? If they are not integrated as a single actor,



there is a need to identify the variety of actors involved. Then there are questions about whether the formulator or decision maker has more power, or a role that is more legitimised, than the implementer. The act of formulation and decision making may take place anywhere in the policy process. There is no necessary assumption that formulators are always at the 'top' in a political or hierarchical sense, but there is embodied in this perspective a view of the prior nature of the formulation process. This may be called the '*implementation follows formulation and decision theorem*' (Hill and Hupe, 2009, p. 4).

The pioneering implementation studies therefore highlighted the need to examine the process of putting policy into action. Their concern was to challenge those who, at that time, took it for granted that this process would be smooth and straightforward. Hence Pressman and Wildavsky gave their book a very long and often quoted subtitle: 'How Great Expectations in Washington are Dashed in Oakland; or Why It's Amazing that Federal Programs Work At All, This Being a Saga of the Economic Development Administration as told by Two Sympathetic Observers who Seek to Build Morals on a Foundation of Ruined Hopes'.

One senses here some of the frustration felt by many Americans about the failure, or limited success, of the war on poverty and the great society programmes of the late 1960s. Pressman and Wildavsky were not the first to observe this apparent gap between federal aspirations and local reality: there was a similar body of literature on the limitations of Roosevelt's reformist interventions in American society in the 1930s (see, in particular, Selznick, 1949). An important preoccupation in this work is clearly the concern with the problem of intervention from the top of a federal system; it comes through similarly in other analyses of American social policy which have less of an emphasis on implementation *per se* (see Marris and Rein, 1967; Moynihan, 1969).

However, the focus on American federalism does not destroy the value of this approach for the study of implementation in other societies. Indeed, if analysed in this manner it raises important questions about the ways in which policy transmission occurs, or fails to occur, through multi-government systems. Certainly, a great deal of the analysis in Pressman and Wildavsky's book is concerned with the extent to which successful implementation depends upon linkages between different organisations and departments at the local level. They argue that if action depends upon a number of links in an implementation chain, then the degree of cooperation required between agencies to make those links has to be very close to 100 per cent if a situation is not to occur in which a number of small deficits cumulatively create a large shortfall. They thus introduce the idea of 'implementation deficit' and suggest that implementation may be analysed mathematically in this way. This is an important idea, but it is perhaps stated too strongly in this formulation. Bowen (1982) points out that such a formulation disregards the extent to which the interactions between these actors occur in contexts in which they rarely concern simply 'one-off' affairs; rather, these interactions are repeated and accompanied by others,



In that sense the 'chain' metaphor is perhaps misleading. Smith and his colleagues suggest instead the notion of 'fields of action' as . . . constituted structures of social relations within which agents and their social positions are located' (Smith *et al.*, 2011, p. 979).  
 The notion of cumulative deficit if cooperation is less than perfect has similarities to the approach to the study of administration developed in Britain by Christopher Hood (1976). He suggests:

One way of analysing implementation problems is to begin by thinking about what 'perfect administration' would be like, comparable to the way in which economists employ the model of perfect competition. Perfect administration could be defined as a condition in which 'external' elements of resource availability and political acceptability combine with 'administration' to produce perfect policy implementation. (Hood, 1976, p. 6)

Hood goes on to develop an argument about the 'limits of administration' (his book title) which focuses not so much on the political processes that occur within the administrative system as on the inherent limits to control in complex systems. This is similarly the concern of a two-volume contribution to the subject by another British writer, Andrew Dunshire (1978a, 1978b). Hood and Dunshire, although they use examples from real situations, are concerned to link organisation theory with the study of implementation to provide an abstract model of the problems to be faced by persons attempting top-down control over the administrative system.

### Criticisms of the top-down approach

The argument in this section will be complicated, since there are a number of different kinds of criticism of the top-down approach which apply differently to different representatives of that school of thought. Broadly, the arguments separate out into those about the nature of policy, those about the interrelationship between policy formulation and the implementation process, and those about the normative stance adopted by students of implementation (particularly when this is implicit rather than explicit).  
 Pressman and Wildavsky were quoted earlier as approaching their definition of implementation by asserting that 'implementation' is a verb that must have an object: policy. In arguing in this way they surely run the risk of catching themselves in a linguistic trap of their own making. As was recognised in the third edition of their book (1984), published after Pressman's death, it is dangerous to regard it as self-evident that implementers are working with a recognisable entity that may be called a policy. At the beginning and in various other places in this book it has been shown that policy is an extremely slippery



concept. It may really only emerge through an elaborate process that is likely to include those stages that are conventionally described as implementation.

The definitions of policy quoted in Chapter 1 (see pp. 14-19) referred to its different characteristics. Two particularly different approaches to identifying policy described there – as a general stance and a rather more concrete formulation – both entail problems for implementation studies, however. These problems are, in a sense, mirror images of each other. Policies as defined as stances (Friend *et al.*, 1974) may be relatively clear-cut, political commitments to specific action. The difficulty is that they are made much more complex as they are translated into action. Policies as defined in more concrete terms are, as the definitions of Easton (1953) and Jenkins (1978) suggest, often so complex that we are unlikely to be able to identify simple goals within them. Friend's definition is really closer to the concept of policy as used in everyday speech. It refers to the goals embodied in the 'Queen's speeches' or the President's 'messages to Congress', not to the complex phenomena that emerge at the end of the legislative process. Yet it is surely the latter with which most students of implementation work.

The argument so far has been that implementation studies face problems in identifying what is being implemented because policies are complex phenomena. This needs now to be taken a stage further. Perhaps policies are quite deliberately made complex, obscure, ambiguous or even meaningless. In the most extreme case the policies that are the concern of politicians may be no more than symbolic, formulated without any intention to secure implementation (Edelman, 1971, 1977). Politicians may want to be seen to be in favour of certain ideals or goals while actually doing nothing about them. Any system in which policy making and implementation are clearly separated, either by a division between legislature and executive (as in the United States) or by a division between levels of government or ministries and implementing agencies (present in most systems but most clear in federal ones), provides opportunities for the promulgation of symbolic policies. In Britain, for example, many regulatory policies require parliamentary enactment but local authority implementation. Parliament may relatively easily pass laws allowing the control of certain activities or the provision of certain services whilst not providing the resources to make action possible. Relatively small teams of local environmental health officials, for example, have to cope with a mountain of legislation designed to protect the public from many potential health hazards in restaurants, shops, etc. Box 11.1 sets out an example where local discretion is evident, something that many will regard as desirable but others may condemn it as involving 'symbolic' legislation.

Even when policies are not simply symbolic it is important to recognise that the phenomena upon which action must be based are products of negotiation and compromise. Hence, as Barrett and Hill (1981) argue, many policies:

- represent compromises between conflicting values;
- involve compromises with key interests within the implementation structure;
- involve compromises with key interests upon whom implementation will have an impact;



Local government and litter

Box 11.1.1

In the UK there are laws to enable local governments to prosecute those who drop litter. In 2008 a television programme drew attention to the considerable variations in the extent to which prosecutions occur, whilst some authorities bring many actions, many others do not prosecute at all. In defence of the inactive authorities attention was drawn to the complexity of the law and the difficulty in achieving prosecutions. Nevertheless some authorities spent considerable sums to overcome these.

In many other areas of policy, central government exercises pressures to compel local authorities to act in matters like this. A particularly important device here is requirements for statistical returns on performance. Clearly, for example, numbers of prosecutions for litter offences could be added to the list of required performance indicators. On the other hand, there are important distinctions to be drawn between litter offences, running across a continuum from casual droppings of a single item to organised disposal of rubbish (so-called 'fly tipping'). Performance indicators could easily be manipulated, with perverse effects on actual behaviour. It may be argued that it is best for local authorities to organise their own approaches to this problem, depending on local circumstances. Even further than that it is arguable that this is a localised problem where local choice about action is most appropriate. But alternatively, as the TV programme suggested, this may be seen as an issue on which the government has been content to provide the legislation which facilitates action, without addressing the issues about making it effective.

■ are framed without attention being given to the way in which underlying forces (particularly economic ones) will undermine them. (Barrett and Hill, 1981, p. 89)

It must, then, be recognised, first, that compromise is not a once-and-for-all process but one that may continue throughout the history of the translation of that policy into action. Second, the initial 'policy makers' may be happy to let this occur as it enables them to evade decision problems. If, then, the implementers are distanced from the original policy-forming process, and indeed perhaps even belong to separate, 'subordinate' organisations, they may be perceived as responsible for problems and inconsistencies and for unpopular resolutions of these.

A further complication for the analysis of policies is that many government actions do not involve the promulgation of explicit programmes requiring new activities. They involve adjustments to the way existing activities are to be carried out. The most common and obvious interventions of this kind are increases or decreases in the resources available for specific activities. In this way programmes are stimulated or allowed to wither away. What, however,



makes implementation studies even more complex is that the relationship between resource adjustment and substantive programmes may be an indirect one. This is particularly a feature of central local government relations in Britain where, generally, central government does not explicitly fund programmes but makes resources available to multi-purpose authorities. In some policy fields – notably education and social care – central government has become increasingly explicit about what it expects local governments to do, and has been prepared to apply sanctions to authorities considered to be ineffective implementers. Hence, whilst local authorities may still appear to have expenditure choices, these are very constrained in practice.

Adjustments to the context in which decisions are made do not only come in the form of resource change, they may also come in the form of structure change. These structure changes may or may not carry implications for substantive outputs. Hence services may be transferred from one agency to another, new rules may be made on how services are to be administered, or new arrangements may be made for policy delivery. These changes are common top-down interventions in public policy, but the analysis of their effects must rest upon an elaborate study of the way in which the balance of power is changed within the implementation system. In purposive language they are concerned with means, not ends, therefore explicit goals cannot be identified, yet they may be of fundamental importance for outcomes and may embody implicit goals. Developments (discussed further in Chapter 14) that are transforming the way policies are delivered – replacing large, bureaucratic departments by hived-off agencies, units that are placed in a quasi-market situation, or even private organisations operating as contractors for public services – must be seen not merely as restructuring the policy delivery system but also as often transforming the policies themselves. (See also the discussion of health service privatisation in Chapter 7.)

The last chapter looked at the importance of the policy formulation process and ended by pointing out the difficulties in determining where policy formulation stops and implementation begins. That point should be emphasised further:

to say that some policies are easier to implement than others one has to be able to identify the point at which they are packaged up ready for implementation. We may be able to say some commitments in party manifestos are easier to implement than others. We may equally be able to say that some Acts of Parliament are easier to implement than others. But in both cases such generalisation may be heavily dependent upon the extent to which aspirations have been concretised. (Hill, in Barrett and Fudge, 1981, p. 208)

The concretisation of policy continues way beyond the legislative process. There is something of a seamless web here, though it may be that it is possible to identify some decisions that are more fundamental for determining the major 'policy' issues than others. There is, however, no reason why we should always expect to find such decisions, nor is it the case that these decisions,



when they exist, are invariably taken during what we conventionally define as the policy formulation process. There are, on the contrary, a number of reasons why they may be left to the implementation process, of which the following is by no means an exhaustive list:

- because conflicts cannot be resolved during the policy formulation stage;
- because it is regarded as necessary to let key decisions be made when all the facts are available to implementers;
- because it is believed that implementers (professionals, for example) are better equipped to make the key decisions than anyone else;
- because little is known in advance about the actual impact of the new measures;
- because it is recognised that day-to-day decisions will have to involve negotiation and compromise with powerful groups;
- because it is considered politically inexpedient to try to resolve the conflicts early in the policy process.

Considerations of this kind must lead us to regard the policy-making process as something which often continues during the so-called implementation phase. It may involve continuing flexibility, it may involve the concretisation of policy in action, or it may involve a process of movement back and forth between policy and action. Barrett and Fudge (1981) have stressed the need, therefore, to consider implementation as a policy/action continuum in which an interactive and negotiative process is taking place over time between those seeking to put policy into effect and those upon whom action depends' (p. 25). The study by Smith and his colleagues, mentioned above, which stresses 'fields of action' rather than implementation 'chains', explores how a 'top-down' initiative encountered this issue; it is featured in Box 11.2.

**Box 11.2**

Implementation as an interactive and negotiative process: Smith *et al.*'s (2011) study of government initiatives on street crime and anti-social behaviour

This study examines the local impact of policies where the government clearly aspired to achieve top-down control. A mechanism was created by the Blair government (the Prime Minister's Delivery Unit) to give particular attention to implementation: 'extending the traditional empiricism of British government beyond policy-making to policy-delivery' (p. 982). The study looks at two initiatives: one seeking to reduce street crime, the other setting up a system to impose 'anti-social behaviour orders' on minor offenders.

The verdict of a senior official on the local impact of the street crime initiative was that it 'ran out of steam', it 'worked when it had Prime Ministerial authority behind it, and the resources to act as incentives, but it had less long-term ability to impact on the behaviour at constabulary level' (p. 990).

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In respect of the use of anti-social behaviour orders, the study concluded that there was considerable variation in local practice. It noted: 'Anti-social behaviour is not easily defined and it is clear that local authorities and police forces are focusing on different phenomena when tackling it' (p. 995).

The article stresses the 'relatively autonomous fields' (p. 996) in which local actors like police forces, local authorities and magistrates operate. Then when 'the problem is amorphous and there are multiple agencies involved in implementation, the ability to deliver can be severely compromised'.

Lane (1987) highlights some of the key points here in a paper in which, amongst a variety of approaches to implementation, he identifies it as 'evolution' (p. 532; see also Majone and Wildavsky, 1978), as 'learning' (p. 534; see also Browne and Wildavsky, 1984), as 'coalition' (p. 539, with important references to the essentially collaborative implementation implicit in corporatist relationships), and as 'responsibility and trust' (p. 541; this is a theme which we will explore further in later chapters in relation to organisational life). All of these imply a system in which a close collaborative relationship characterises relations within the policy system, allowing policy to emerge in action.

### The bottom-up alternative

These arguments lead us on to the view that a model of the policy implementation relationship in which the policy formulation process can be seen as setting 'goals', the extent of whose realisation can be measured, provides an insufficient foundation for studies of implementation. It is this that has led various students of implementation to argue for a bottom-up rather than a top-down stance for the study of implementation. Elmore has coined the term 'backward mapping', which he defines as

'backward reasoning' from the individual and organisational choices that are the hub of the problem to which policy is addressed, to the rules, procedures and structures that have the closest proximity to those choices, to the policy instruments available to affect those things, and hence to feasible policy objectives. (Elmore, 1981, p. 1; see also Elmore, 1980)

Focussing on individual actions as a starting point enables actions to be seen as responses to problems or issues in the form of choices between alternatives. One of Elmore's justifications for this approach derives not so much from the concern explored here about the difficulty in separating policy formulation and implementation, as from a recognition that in many policy areas in



the United States implementation actors are forced to make choices between programmes which conflict or interact with each other.

The proponents of the bottom-up approach argue that it is, by comparison with the top-down model, relatively free of predetermining assumptions. It is less likely to imply assumptions about cause and effect, about hierarchical or any other structural relations between actors and agencies, or about what should be going on between them.

The approach is expounded even more forcefully by Hjerm and his associates (Hjerm and Hull, 1982; Hjerm and Porter, 1981), who argue for a methodology in which researchers construct empirically the networks within which field-level, decision-making actors carry out their activities without predetermining assumptions about the structures within which these occur. Susan Barrett and I added support to the methodological argument for this perspective, arguing as follows:

to understand the policy-action relationship we must get away from a single perspective of the process that reflects a normative administrative or managerial view of how the process should be, and try to find a conceptualisation that reflects better the empirical evidence of the complexity and dynamics of the interactions between individuals and groups seeking to put policy into effect, those upon whom action depends and those whose interests are affected when change is proposed. To do this, we have argued for an alternative perspective to be adopted – one that focuses on the actors and agencies themselves and their interactions, and for an action-centred or 'bottom-up' mode of analysis as a method of identifying more clearly who seems to be influencing what, how and why. (Barrett and Hill, 1981, p. 19)

These are to a large extent arguments about methodology, about how to study implementation. But they also suggest a more realistic approach to the discussion of how implementation occurs than do those propositions rooted in a concern about how implementation should be controlled. What, in many respects, is being emphasised in this more action-centred mode of analysis is that the very things that top-down theorists urge must be controlled are the elements that are difficult to bring under control. The reality, therefore, is not of imperfect control but of action as a continuous process of interaction:

- with a changing and changeable policy,
- a complex interaction structure,
- an outside world which must interfere with implementation because government action does, and is designed to, impinge upon it,
- implementing actors who are inherently difficult to control.

Analysis is best focussed upon the levels at which this is occurring, since it is not so much creating implementation deficiency as recreating policy. This emphasis, in the bottom-up critique, upon the complexities in the concept of policy and the way it is made also suggests that implementation may itself be an ambiguous concept. Lane has argued that there is some



confusion in the implementation literature between 'implementation and successful implementation as an outcome, and the implementation process or how implementation comes about' (Lane, 1987, p. 528). The classical top-down studies are principally concerned with explaining why an expected outcome does or does not occur, and to do this they need clear goal statements to work with. These may be supplied by the policy makers or imputed by the researchers. Without such yardsticks we may still study processes, but our activity is rather different. Sabatier, in an attempt to fuse the best ideas from both top-down and bottom-up processes, rightly suggests that the presence or absence of a 'dominant piece of legislation structuring the situation' (1986, p. 37) may help to determine which approach is appropriate. However, that may involve starting with a question begging the assumption that this structuring has in fact occurred. One can obviously treat a piece of legislation as dominant, but if one does so the problems for explanation, in cases of implementation failure, tend to be either what others have done to subvert it, or what is wrong with it. As the arguments above suggest, both of these may be oversimplified questions about both policy and its implementation context, and particularly about the relationship between the two.

### Beyond the top-down/bottom-up debate

The methodological argument that surfaces in the discussion above can be resolved relatively simply. It may be possible to examine an implementation process in terms of what happens to goals proclaimed early in the policy process (or even in terms of imputed goals) and then look at what happened. It may also be possible to start at the output end and engage in 'backward mapping'. Both approaches will have strengths and weaknesses; both may be biased by the prejudices of the actors, the researchers or the research funders; and choices between them need to be determined by empirical factors and contingencies. Mixed approaches, with triangulation between them, may be desirable.

Winter, in two reviews of this topic, has adopted a pragmatic response to the theoretical debate as far as implementation research is concerned (2003, 2006). He argues that 'looking for *the* overall and one for all implementation theory' is a 'utopian' objective which is not feasible, and may even inhibit the creativity that comes from diversity (*ibid.*, p. 158). He argues that we should look for partial rather than general implementation theories.

From that point of view Winter sees implementation research as able to address concrete issues, of a kind that an obsession with all-encompassing theories will tend to inhibit. He argues that there needs to be an emphasis on exploring the determinants of policy outputs:

... I suggest that we look for behavioural *output* variables to characterize the *performance* of implementers. ... The first aim of implementation research then should be to explain variation in such performance. (*ibid.*)



While this argument is framed in terms of choice about methodology, what it implies is a wider need to avoid the obsession with whether the 'goals' of policy designers are achieved, that characterises top-down theory. Goals are contestable and change over time. Work that focuses upon goals gets into questions about what the 'real goals' in a policy process are, and often gets tangled up with debates about what they should be. Variation in performance can be identified without engaging with these issues.

The case for trying to ensure that normative preoccupations do not interfere with a clear analysis of the implementation process has been emphasised throughout the discussion. The issue, then, for discussion here about ways to move beyond the top-down/bottom-up debate is about recognising that there will be various ways in which actors will attempt to exercise prior control over the implementation process. The concern is with a variety of issues about the extent to which actors impose rules upon others. The other side of this is about how discretion is structured, about how easily actors can exercise autonomy. In the last analysis these are questions about hierarchies and their legitimacy, but we want to leave these out of the discussion at this stage (we will come back to some of these points in later chapters).

The discussion (in Chapters 7 and 8) of types of policy suggested various ways in which decisions may be structured. It also suggested that the quest for some simple policy typology that would help with the interpretation of when different structuring will occur has been fruitless. It was suggested however that Matland's use of 'ambiguity' and 'conflict' to typify different policy issues is helpful (see pp. 142-3). Ambiguity tends to make the delegation of discretion likely (the need to make judgements during the process highlighted in the cookery example in Box 10.7). In the absence of conflicting goals, experimentation will be feasible. Conflict, on the other hand, implies a desire to control. Actors claiming hierarchical rights will seek to assert them, and this will be particularly evident in the absence of consensus. If low ambiguity is involved then rules will be formulated (the cookery book approach to implementation). High conflict and high ambiguity is a difficult combination. Matland, in his original analysis, called this 'symbolic implementation'. This puts it perhaps too strongly, inasmuch as symbolic implies no effort to implement whilst what is actually being highlighted is the level of difficulty. Nevertheless, of course, there may be situations in which those attempting to dictate policy want merely to claim to have tried. Figure 7.1 Matland's original text).

Matland's approach is still rather static, however, and his model of conflict rather a simple dichotomy. Many of the most controversial (and perhaps most interesting) implementation stories involve prolonged interactions in situations of considerable and very complicated multi-party conflicts. This leads us on to two crucial issues for the examination of the implementation process:

- the fact that policy processes vary greatly in the extent to which there is an attempt to prescribe a rule framework;



While this argument is framed in terms of choice about methodology, what it implies is a wider need to avoid the obsession with whether the 'goals' of policy designers are achieved, that characterises top-down theory. Goals are contestable and change over time. Work that focuses upon goals gets into questions about what the 'real goals' in a policy process are, and often gets tangled up with debates about what they should be. Variation in performance can be identified without engaging with these issues.

The case for trying to ensure that normative preoccupations do not interfere with a clear analysis of the implementation process has been emphasised throughout the discussion. The issue, then, for discussion here about ways to move beyond the top-down/bottom-up debate is about recognising that there will be various ways in which actors will attempt to exercise prior control over the implementation process. The concern is with a variety of issues about the extent to which actors impose rules upon others. The other side of this is about how discretion is structured, about how easily actors can exercise autonomy. In the last analysis these are questions about hierarchies and their legitimacy, but we want to leave these out of the discussion at this stage (we will come back to some of these points in later chapters).

The discussion (in Chapters 7 and 8) of types of policy suggested various ways in which decisions may be structured. It also suggested that the quest for some simple policy typology that would help with the interpretation of when different structuring will occur has been fruitless. It was suggested however that Matland's use of 'ambiguity' and 'conflict' to typify different policy issues is helpful (see pp. 142-3). Ambiguity tends to make the delegation of discretion likely (the need to make judgments during the process highlighted in the cookery example in Box 10.7). In the absence of conflicting goals, experimentation will be feasible. Conflict, on the other hand, implies a desire to control. Actors claiming hierarchical rights will seek to assert them, and this will be particularly evident in the absence of consensus. If low ambiguity is involved then rules will be formulated (the cookery book approach to implementation). High conflict and high ambiguity is a difficult combination. Matland, in his original analysis, called this 'symbolic implementation'. This puts it perhaps too strongly, inasmuch as symbolic implies no effort to implement whilst what is actually being highlighted is the level of difficulty. Nevertheless, of course, there may be situations in which those attempting to dictate policy want merely to claim to have tried. Figure 7.1 is repeated here as Figure 11.1, including some examples (not taken from Matland's original text).

Matland's approach is still rather static, however, and his model of conflict rather a simple dichotomy. Many of the most controversial (and perhaps most interesting) implementation stories involve prolonged interactions in situations of considerable and very complicated multi-party conflicts. This leads us on to two crucial issues for the examination of the implementation process:

- the fact that policy processes vary greatly in the extent to which there is an attempt to prescribe a rule framework;



Figure 11.1 Matland's analysis of the impact of conflict and ambiguity upon implementation, illustrated with examples

	Low conflict	High conflict
Low ambiguity	1 Example: a social benefit like 'child benefit' where there is general acceptance of the case for it and the qualification test is simple (in the UK responsibility for a child with a right of residence in the country).	3 Example: privatisation of health and social care services where, in the face of resistance, government can nevertheless still drive through change.
High ambiguity	2 Example: localised measures to try to combat health inequalities where there is general acceptance of the case for action but uncertainty about what is effective (Matland calls this 'experimental implementation').	4 Example: equal pay legislation where definitions are based on complex comparisons of activities and are often contested.

Source: Adapted from Matland (1995), p. 160, Table 4.1. By permission of Oxford University Press.

- the importance of variations in the administrative framework within which the process occurs.

In the terms of the cooking analogy in Box 10.7, the issues can be said to be about the extent to which there is a cookbook containing clear prescriptions, and about the relational frameworks in which that will be used (not just two persons in a household but something much more complex).

### The nature of the policy rule framework

Much attention was given in Chapter 10 to the ways in which details are formulated which will govern policy implementation. At the same time it was acknowledged that there will be differences in the extent to which this takes place, from policy to policy or policy system to policy system. Crucial then for the examination of implementation is the extent to which this concretisation of policy has occurred. Whilst some policies pass out of the legislative stages with very clear rule structures, enabling implementation deficits to be easily identified, others are much less fully formed.

It can generally be argued that, in modern taxation, initiatives will reach the implementation stage with comparatively clear rule structures. Those rules may be hard to implement and may be the subject of formal disputes in the courts, hence implementation deficit may be analysed, but political and social forces have taken taxation a long way from the vague 'tax farming' that characterised such policies in early mediaeval societies when implementers were charged to bring in money – to profit if they were good at it and to be punished if they were not – by rulers who cared little about how it was done.



Similar points may be made about cash benefit systems. Many income maintenance systems have evolved a long way from the decentralised 'poor law', in which a great deal of discretion was vested in local 'boards of guardians', to a modern situation in which all the main benefit systems have strong rule-based structures which facilitate computerised calculation and the operation of formal appeal mechanisms.

Cash benefit systems (amongst which are included what Americans call 'welfare') have been given attention by many implementation scholars. Systems of all kinds are likely to have rules to establish relevant contingencies (sickness, unemployment, old age, etc.). But then a contrast may be drawn between those where entitlement then depends upon past contributions, where clear rules in respect of ways of calculating the cumulative implications of these, and those that use means-tests to determine entitlement where rules may be more complex and forms of discretion may be given to administrative staff. The author wrote about a UK means-testing system on which he worked many years ago (Hill, 1969) where implementation involved the extensive delegation of discretion to implementing staff at 'street-level'. However, since that time the UK system has become much more rule based, and decision making rests more upon office-based scrutiny of forms completed by applicants as opposed to the face-to-face interviewing described in that article (this is a development in respect of implementation to which we will return in Chapter 13). Nevertheless, as Box 11.3 indicates, there are still interesting variations around this theme.

Box 11.3

Jewell's comparative analysis of the administration of social assistance (2007)

Jewell carried out case studies of social assistance officials in the United States (California), German (Bremen) and Sweden (Malmö). He shows that those in California work within a system with simple rules but minimal discretion, while in Bremen they are seen as the formally qualified operators of a complex legal structure and in Malmö they have high levels of discretion. There is a fascinating contrast in Jewell's book between the elaborate legal structure of the German system, where ironically high discretion emerges principally from the difficulties staff have in navigating through complex and ever changing rules, and the very loosely regulated Swedish system where high discretion is implicit and even administrative court decisions do not create precedents.

Jewell explores the impact of growth of caseloads and pressure of work upon the three systems. What he found was variation in all three systems arising from the impact of efforts to cut administrative costs, leading to staff shortages and staff turnover. The Swedish system seemed to be suffering least from these problems, but then it was from the outset the system in which most variation was likely. In the German case rule application seemed to have become more erratic, whilst in the American one it was 'corner cutting' by a system under great strain that was the principal source of diversity.

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**Box 11.4**

## Trial and error implementation: general practice fundholding in the UK

Glennerster *et al.* (1994) studied the early history of a health policy initiative designed to enable primary health care doctors to secure hospital services for their own patients by entering into contracts without reference to health authorities. These 'general practitioner fundholders' were allocated budgets based upon the size of their lists and past referral practices. The initial setting of those budgets was very much a matter of 'trial and error'. Similarly the establishment of rules to regulate this activity – to prevent possible abuses of autonomy and to cope with unexpected problems – was an evolutionary process, involving collaboration between the health authorities, the national Department of Health and the 'fundholders' themselves. Glennerster and his colleagues describe this as 'Lewis and Clark planning' (adapting an idea from Schultze, 1968). They say:

The American explorers, Lewis and Clark, were merely told to find a route to the Pacific. They did so by finding the watershed, following the rivers to the sea using their wits as they went.

The implementation of fundholding can be seen as a Lewis and Clark adventure – but in this instance there was telephonic contact between the field explorers and the equivalent of Washington and regular flights back to discuss progress with other explorers. (Glennerster *et al.*, 1994, p. 30)

These are other areas of policy where there is a complex and dynamic relationship between rule structures and their interpretation. Two British examples, both involving what have been regarded as controversial policy changes driven by political commitments, illustrate this. They are set out in Boxes 11.4 and 11.5.

The two examples set out in Boxes 11.4 and 11.5 were selected because in both cases the authors were using new ways to try to capture the complexity of the policy/implementation relationship. Many others could have been chosen from areas where policy implementation involves complex service activities. In both cases issues about the way policy was realised during implementation are emphasised.

Similar issues arise in many areas of regulatory policy. In this area of policy, alongside the problems of complexity, there may be other features which complicate implementation: in particular, the fact that the regulatee often understands the process better than the regulators, that there are difficult trade-off judgements to be made about the costs of compliance and that the ability of the regulatee to evade control puts willing compliance at a premium. This has led Hanf to see much regulatory activity as involving 'co-production' between regulator and regulatee (Hanf, 1993).

At its extreme – and this probably characterised much British pollution control until very recently – policy is essentially no more than the terms that



The National Curriculum in England and Wales: interactions in making policy aspirations a reality

Box 11.5

The 1988 Education Act set up a 'national curriculum', providing parameters for teaching in schools. In this case the legislation did little more than prescribe broad subjects to be included (maths, English, science, etc.) and organisations and procedures were set up to determine more detailed content and to enforce compliance. Then, even within the implementation process, there is – not surprisingly, given the complexity of the issues – latitude to enable individual schools and teachers to select topics to emphasise, approaches to teaching and so on. Bowe *et al.* (1992) use a concept from sociology and linguistics, 'texts' (Atkinson, 1985), to explain what is here being described as an implementation process. They argue:

Texts carry with them both possibilities and constraints, contradictions and spaces. The reality of policy in practice depends upon the compromises and accommodations to these in particular settings . . . [o]ur conception of policy has to be set against the idea that policy is something that is simply done to people . . . (Bowe *et al.*, 1992, p. 15)

They go on to highlight the peculiar combination of ' . . . policy-making which rides roughshod over the sensibilities of teachers, lack of public confidence in teachers and low morale on the one hand with the fact that it has depended upon a very complex interaction between education officials, advisory bodies and teachers themselves to make the National Curriculum 'work'. Thus it is argued that:

Policies . . . are textual interventions but they also carry with them material constraints and possibilities. The responses to these texts have 'real' consequences. These consequences are experienced in . . . the arena of practice to which policy refers . . . policy is not simply received and implemented within this arena, rather it is subject to interpretation and then recreated. (ibid., pp. 21–2)

the regulator is able to reach with the regulatee. (This issue was explored a little in Chapter 7, on p. 135.) In industrial air pollution control the statutory concept of the use of the 'best practicable means' to limit emissions had little meaning except in the context of such an agreement (Hill in Downing and Hanf, 1993). It certainly could not in any realistic sense be described as defined in the policy-making process. Since then, under pressure from the European Community for a more precise approach, this 'policy' has moved on a little, but the policy emphasis is still rather more upon ambient air quality targets than upon specific control over what goes up individual chimneys. There are very important areas of policy where the policy/implementation distinction is even more blurred than in these examples from service



provision and regulation. Oddly, these do not seem to have been given much attention in the implementation literature, perhaps because they concern issues at the very centre of national politics – economic and foreign policy. These issues were also discussed in Chapter 7.

If your primary aim is to understand the implementation process, a great deal is going to depend upon the activity in which you are interested. If you are looking at one in which there is a quite explicit 'top'-initiated, goal-directed activity, it may be justifiable to use a 'top-down' methodology and work with a notion such as 'implementation deficit'. This may be particularly the case where a quantifiable output is available and explicit inputs can be measured. Yet many other events in the policy process do not involve such clarity. Examples can be taken of complex and confusing cases where central goals were not nearly so clear, or where central goal statements should be received with great scepticism – in fields like community care, employment policy, urban renewal or the prevention of crime, for example. Furthermore, as suggested above, concern may be with an ongoing process where explicit change is not initiated from above, or where there are grounds for scepticism about whether efforts to bring about change will carry through to the 'bottom'.

### The importance of variations in the administrative system

The discussion in the last section has drawn distinctions between situations in which rules for implementation are very much in evidence, situations in which implementation is very much a process of developing and elaborating initial policy frameworks and situations in which either we need to say that the implementation process *is* the policy-making process or to regard this distinction as meaningless. This variation may, of course, be influenced by the characteristics of governmental systems and by political or administrative culture.

It is perhaps not surprising that issues about the capacity of policy makers to influence implementation have been given particular attention in the United States, because of the ways in which federalism, the division of executive, legislative and judicial powers and the written constitution complicate executive action. As suggested above, ever since the New Deal in the 1930s the exploration of ways to increase Washington's influence in Oakland, or wherever, has been a key preoccupation of those Americans who regard active federal government as important for their society. In the 1960s the struggle against racial segregation in the Deep South and the efforts to develop new initiatives in welfare policy and in urban policy offered particularly salient examples.

A major factor contributing to that complexity is the fact that often intervening levels, as layers in the political-administrative system, have a legitimate claim to engage in policy formulation and decision making: where does 'policy formation' end and 'implementation' begin? It is in recognition of this that Goggin *et al.* (1990) refer to federal 'messages' to states rather



than of federal policies. Similarly, studies of the implementation of European Union policies (Knill and Lenschow, 1998; Lampinen and Uusikylä, 1998) indicate very distinct processes of re-formulations within individual nation states. What is called 'implementation' in those studies in fact may rather be seen as 'policy formulation'.  
A realistic approach to the examination of implementation in its administrative context therefore needs to give attention to the facts:

- that implementation involves complex intra-organisational interactions;
- that the analysis of those interactions must take us into issues about negotiations between actors who are at least quasi-autonomous;
- that this autonomy may be linked with claims of legitimacy which render beside the point those analyses that emphasise recalcitrance, shortfalls and deficits;
- that these complexities need to be seen as contained within different national or transnational political systems which influence the games played and the legitimacies claimed.

These themes are explored further in Chapter 14.

## Modelling the influences on implementation

The discussion of the importance of giving attention to variations in the form policy takes shifts the focus a long way from approaches to the topic which sees implementers simply as people who change the policy as it is put into action. It suggests that influences upon the implementation process extend from considerations about how policy is formulated through to factors that influence behaviour close to 'street-level'. They may be modelled in terms of six categories (this categorisation owes a great deal to Van Meter and Horn's (1975) original modelling of the implementation process):

- policy characteristics, including issues about the way in which these have been shaped by the formulation process;
- issues about 'layers' in the policy transfer process, or what may be called 'vertical public administration', that is the issues about the vertical inter-organisational relationship that so concerned Pressman and Wildavsky;
- horizontal inter-organisational relationships (relationships between parallel organisations required to collaborate in implementation);
- factors affecting the responses of implementation agencies (their organisation, their disposition, and so on) – these may be subdivided into issues about the overall characteristics of the agencies and issues about the behaviour of front-line (or street level) staff;
- the impact of responses from those affected by the policy; and
- wider macro-environmental factors.

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Theoretically it should be possible to try to sort out the respective impacts of these elements using, as an independent variable, policy outputs. Box 11.6 works through an example where this approach is feasible. In practice the feasibility of this depends upon a number of things. First, the extent to which distinct outputs can be identified. It is important here to bear in mind Winter's distinction between outputs and goals (see pp. 216–7). There has been a tendency for implementation studies to use goal statements made by actors with a distinct, but contestable, view on what *they* think should be achieved. Second, a policy may have various outputs (the complexity of policy hardly needs emphasising at this stage in the book). Third, policy outputs may be hard to identify let alone quantify. Fourth, an approach of this kind depends upon being able to separate implementers (different parts of a department or different local authorities for example) in order to tease out differences; this will often not be feasible.

**Box 11.6**

### Studying implementation: an example involving comparison of the responses of English local authorities to a central government policy initiative

In England there is a central government policy concerned with facilitating arrangements in which individuals in need of social care can be given direct payments of cash to purchase services for themselves instead of being provided with services commissioned by local authorities. Whilst some local authorities had been pioneers of this approach, central government adopted the policy and is putting increasing pressure on local governments to implement it. However, local authorities vary significantly in their enthusiasm for the policy. Hence there was thus a relatively straightforward 'dependent variable' published in official statistics: numbers of payments made by each local authority over a period corrected to take into account variations in overall population size.

It is then possible to identify factors affecting implementation:

- Policy characteristics – features of the policy which affect implementation (such as rules about preventing the misuse of direct payments).
- Layers in the policy transfer process – the mechanisms that govern central/local government relationships (inspection, the collection of performance indicators etc.).
- Horizontal inter-organisation relationships – social care direct payments may require liaison between local authorities and the health service and these vary from place to place.
- Factors affecting responses by implementing agencies – the enthusiasm of politicians and senior officials, whether there is a 'champion' who pushes the



study of implementation, and the recognition of the overwhelming importance of the negotiation and bargaining that occur throughout the policy process. We argue:

many so-called implementation problems arise precisely because there is a tension between the normative assumptions of government – what ought to be done and how it should happen – and the struggle and conflict between interests – the need to bargain and compromise – that represent the reality of the process by which power/influence is gained and held in order to pursue ideological goals. (Barrett and Hill, 1981, p. 145)

This general exploration of implementation – with its emphasis upon the significance of organisational complexity and upon the sources of variation in discretion in the implementation process – is now followed by chapters which look at some of these issues more fully.