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Recovering Policy Implementation: Understanding Implementation through Informal Communication

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Abstract

This study identifies themes in the theoretical literature on policy implementation that can then be used to develop a research-based framework for the scholar about how qualitative research can be used to analyze policy implementation through the investigation of informal and formal communication lines. This article draws from existing scholarship to bridge the gap between policy studies and qualitative research to explore innovative ways for scholars to expand our understanding of policy implementation. The article uses the literature to propose a framework that can be used to examine policy implementation.

The framework is based on the concepts of Orientation, Degree, Resources, Activity, Autonomy, Societal Values, Institutional Values, Rationale and Power Relationship.

Understanding policy implementation is difficult enough when sufficient documentation exists to reassemble events into a coherent picture. The problem becomes more complex when informal communication lines have been utilized to communicate or transfer information (White, 1990). Informal lines are considered to be the people-to-people communications such as conversations and often are labeled the "grapevine." Informal lines of communication are often used rather than formal lines for facility. Why write a memorandum when less effort is expended through a telephone call? Informal interactions such as telephone calls or direct encounters, however, leave little or no archival data for the scholar to reconstruct events. The issue of insufficient documentation is especially problematic with electronic mail as messages are routinely deleted after an interval of time. White (1990) uncovered frequent use of informal lines of communication consisting of unrecorded and unscheduled face-to-face interactions that paralleled a formal communication structure. Parallel systems such as the "chain of command" versus the "open door" have created problems of miscommunication and misunderstanding when enacting policy implementation (White, 1990, p. 14). Formal lines of communication were available but were often not used to transfer information or make implementation decisions.

Informal processes include, but are not limited to, conversations, disposable communications such as electronic mail and reliance on unspoken understandings such as tradition. The use of informal bureaucratic processes enables a rapid and flexible response to difficult and controversial issues. Informal communication processes enable policy to be implemented efficiently and effectively; however, they also eliminate written records of decisions and interactions. Informal patterns of communication leave few alternatives for the researcher but to rely on qualitative methods to recover policy implementation (Duemer, 1999). Even when written records exist, qualitatively based findings add depth and context to the study in question (Blount, 1992). Such context-focused information is sometimes not available from archival sources such as memoranda or minutes of meetings that lack such details for purposes of brevity (Duemer, 1999).

Reliance on informal lines of communication, rather than the formal communication structures established by the organization, suggests a need to explore and understand how informal communication channels function and their impact on policy implementation. Formal communications are directive, regulatory, and structured means of conveying information considered necessary for general audiences (Andrews & Herschel, 1996; Weber, 1947). These areas can be studied using documentary evidence generated by the formal communication process. Items such as memorandums, handbooks, meeting agendas and minutes are readily available to a scholar. The challenge is accessing the informal means of communication—the water cooler talks, the lunchroom chats, conversations in workrooms— which frequently focus on the content of formal communication documents describing policy.

A large body of scholarship exists using qualitative methods as means of emphasizing the human element (Manning, 1990). Such a human emphasis points toward potential usefulness of qualitative research in reconstructing policy implementation; however,

there does not exist a direct linkage with policy studies. March and Olsen (1976) inform us that organizational scholarship must pay particular attention to the human factors that influence decision-making. They indicate that personal values and agendas that are not on the surface evident to an investigator often influence decisions. Personal factors do not fit into a rational decision-making framework where individual compliance is expected; however, personal factors can be accounted for by a focus on the human element. The use of the personal element provides a better sense of context (Blount, 1992) through preserving the experiences of those who were involved in policy implementation (Manning, 1990).

The purpose of this article is to identify themes in the theoretical literature on policy implementation that can then be used to develop a research-based framework for the scholar about how qualitative research can be used to recover policy implementation through the investigation of informal and formal communication lines. This article draws from existing scholarship to bridge the gap between policy studies and qualitative research to explore innovative ways for scholars to expand our understanding of policy implementation. It is not intended to engage in an exhaustive analysis and interpretation of policy implementation as it applies qualitative research. Rather, the intent is to explore some of the theoretical literature as a means of provoking scholars to think about ways in which organizational theory informs qualitative research. An examination of informal lines of communication and their role in policy implementation can yield a more comprehensive understanding of how policies are implemented.

Discerning Policy Mutation

Implementation is the means by which policy is carried into effect. Implementation can refer to a one-time effort at enacting a policy, or a continuous process such as strategic planning. The implementation process may involve many different people and levels of hierarchy, any of which change the nature of policy from decision to implementation. In any event, implementation involves the process of moving from decision to operation (Williams, 1976, p. 3). Understanding efforts to mutate policy during implementation is essential to recognizing how policy may change through implementation, from its original form.

There would be little need to explore policy mutation if individuals behaved in the same predictable sense as chemical reactions. Human reactions would be testable according to proscribed and predictable formulas; however, human beings do not behave, they act (Sergiovanni, 1984). "Actions differ from behavior in that they are born of preconceptions, assumptions, and motives, and these are embedded with meanings" (Sergiovanni, 1984, p. 106). The thoughts, assumptions, and preconceptions are filtered through values, preferences, prejudices, motives, and the like, to produce actions. Prediction is further complicated because actions vary for different individuals even if the initiating factor remains unchanged (Sergiovanni, 1984). For example, two individuals in identical administrative positions may interpret the implementation of a particular policy in different manners due to opposite philosophical perspectives.

Once an individual or policy-making body sets a policy, there is no guarantee that it will be implemented in the same way it was originally intended. The difference between institutions and individuals is central to understanding how policy can change from development to implementation. Mutation is more likely when policy is developed in a

climate that regards implementation as merely a technical detail (Pressman, 1984, p. 143). When a governing board directs an institution's officers to implement a new policy, but does not define any operational limitations or delimitations, there is no way to know how implementation will occur or in what manner. Under such conditions it is inevitable that implementation will be influenced by individual perceptions.

Mutation can also occur as policy is processed through the levels of an organization's hierarchy. One way that levels of a hierarchy differ is that some are charged with policy development while others are charged with policy implementation. School district central office administrators develop policy that is then implemented by campus personnel. Policy can be changed or revised by institutional officials from inception to implementation in a manner that more closely meets their conception of what is in their or the institution's best interests (Elster, 1989, p. 157). Individuals can surreptitiously undermine a policy or initiative or at least decline to work actively toward its implementation even when they claim to support it (Duemer, 1998; Pressman, 1984, p. 135). For example, a residence life administrator may hinder the implementation of a college's desegregation policy by creating an unwelcome atmosphere for incoming minority students (Duemer, 1998).

Some administrative positions enjoy more freedom or autonomy than others through division of labor (Sergiovanni, 1984, p. 152; Taylor, 1919; Weber, 1947). Division of labor provides for the development of specialization, separation of responsibilities, and more importantly to this article, the means of communication used by the people in differentiated roles. Autonomy provides individuals with various degrees of freedom to impose their own interpretations on the manner in which policy is implemented (Perrow, 1973). Labor division and specialization encourage individuals to identify and congregate into smaller units that share similar goals. This separation also contributes to the differences in the lines of communication, which are typically exemplified in the differences between formal and informal lines of communication. Persons at higher hierarchical levels (another characteristic of labor division) have greater access to more formal communications lines while those at lower levels can more easily participate in the informal communication channels of the organization.

The Role of the Individual in Policy Implementation

The use of qualitative research methods reflects the idea that institutions are composed of individuals, and those individuals should be the focal point of inquiry. In order for an institution to accomplish anything, it must rely on individuals. Individuals have their own interests and reflect larger societal interests, any of which may conflict with those of the institution. Investigations that focus on individuals seek to understand relationships among those inside the institution as well as relationships with those outside the institution. The use of qualitative methods is consistent with theory that recognizes institutions to be composed of human will and rejects the idea of institutions as a group mind or social reality that is above or beyond human control (Greenfield, 1984, p. 152). Understanding the human element in policy is a central aspect of qualitative research, as the human element is the basic unit of social life (Elster, 1989, p. 13). Such a perspective recognizes institutions as social constructs which serve society by holding it together and ensuring social stability (Elster, 1989, p. 13; Feinberg and Soltis, 1992). Institutions are themselves held together and maintained by individuals who share, to varying degrees, similar interests or goals.

Elster (1989) reminds us that in order to understand policy implementation it is essential to understand the actions and interactions of individuals. A human-centered focus, versus an institution-centered focus, avoids the pitfall of understanding institutions in terms of key leadership positions such as the study of leadership which is limited to a very narrow spectrum of all the individuals in an institution (Greenfield, 1984, p. 160). Such a limited focus encourages scholars to remove the personal element and focus on the generic administrator devoid of personal identity or interests. Leadership and institutional investigations present a delusive image of administrators and do not adequately account for the diversity of individuals and their organizational roles.

Investigations which emphasize the individual element focus attention on individuals' identification with their own interests and breakdowns in communication that increase the likelihood of policy mutation (Perrow, 1973). The efficiency of bureaucratic organizations is compromised by the interpretations individuals make in policy implementation as the result of their own interests (March, 1984, p. 20). The idea that institutions are rational bureaucratic organizations where decisions are regulated by a structure of rules and sanctions is rejected by the recognition of individual influence. Institutions have been compared to facades that are intentionally designed to mislead observers from the reality that within are individuals who behave as they want (Greenfield, 1984, p. 160).

Individual's Relationship to Policy Implementation

Investigations that focus on the role of individuals reject the idea that an institution can embody any value, or that any one individual can embody the values of an institution. Such individual focused investigations reflect a perspective that recognizes the power of individuals to impact policy implementation and establishes a framework where competing values are uncovered and examined to develop an understanding of policy implementation. How do people negotiate or reinterpret the policy so as to accommodate their own interests? What can be used to discover these individualized interpretations of policy? To further understand the human role, we can frame an individual's relationship to policy implementation in terms of Orientation, Degree, Resources, Activity, Autonomy, Societal Values, Institutional Values, Rationale and Power Relationship.

- **Orientation:** One's position with respect to attitude, judgment, inclination or interest. Was the individual supportive, oppositional, or neutral toward the policy in question? Did the person voice his or her stance on the policy?
- **Degree:** Scale of intensity or amount. To what degree did the individual support or oppose the policy? If one opposed the policy in question, to what degree did that person attempt to stop, obstruct, or mutate implementation? Did the individual share his or her opposition or support with others in the organization? What means of communication did she or he use to do this? To whom did he or she communicate the stance on the policy?
- **Resources:** Action, money, influence, information, expertise, or measure that can be brought to bear to influence or use. What resources were available to the individual that could be used to help or hinder implementation? What types of resources did the individual expend on this policy? What resources were specifically used in communicating the policy?

- **Activity:** Specific deed, action, or function; use of force, influence, or process. What communication actions did the individual take to support or obstruct policy? How much communication activity did the individual expend to support or obstruct policy? With whom did the individual interact during these communication activities?
- **Autonomy:** Degree of independence; how closely one has to adhere to prescribed guidelines. A high degree of support or opposition will not have had much impact on expense of energy and resources if the individual had little autonomy to exert influence on policy. What level of autonomy did that person have in his or her position? How does the individual's position influence the communication modes available to her or him?
- **Societal Values:** Ideals or customs for which people have an affective regard. How did societal values influence implementation? To what extent did the individual accept or reject specific societal values that influenced implementation? How did the actions or decisions of the individual change the societal climate?
- **Institutional Values:** Professional ideals or customs for which members have an affective regard. How did institutional values influence implementation? How are the institutional values communicated to the individual? To what extent did the individual accept or reject specific institutional values that influenced implementation? How did the actions or decisions of the individual change the institutional climate? How did the institutional climate change the actions or decisions of the individual?
- **Rationale:** Fundamental, underlying reasons to account for something. What explanation does the individual provide for his or her orientation toward the policy? Does the individual have superseding interests, loyalties or values that conflict with the policy?
- **Power Relationship:** Degree of status relative to individual position. What type of communication, both informal and formal, occurred between same or different power levels?

The preceding questions establish a framework that informs us about individual perspectives toward policy and policy implementation. These criteria establish a relationship to policy implementation in individual terms and recognize that the relationship between the individual and the organization is reciprocal rather than unidirectional. Additionally, these questions can be re-worded to include issues of both informal and formal means of communication. This framework also takes into account societal and institutional contexts through investigating communication lines that influence individuals, and that individuals change institutions through actions, decisions, and participation in both informal and formal means of communication.

Conclusions

The individual emphasis of the preceding framework is consistent with the work of Bess (1988), that recognizes that ongoing and unresolvable differences exist among institutional participants. The framework also accounts for divisions of labor and labor specialization, which encourage individuals to identify and congregate into smaller units

that share similar values, attitudes or perspectives. These smaller units, in addition to organizational divisions of labor, contribute to the differences in communication. These in turn not only have an impact in how policies are interpreted but also in how they are implemented. Individual interests and breakdowns in communication increase the likelihood of irrational behavior and conflict (Perrow, 1973, pp. 2-15). Often the irrational actions are more readily recognized with the breakdowns in communication that occur.

The qualitative scholar can investigate informal communication lines to develop an understanding of how policy is developed, implemented, and how it changes in the interim. A people-centered focus encourages us to better understand the role of individuals throughout the institutional hierarchy in implementing policy and the influence they have in determining its final form. Such an approach recognizes that individuals are not machines, and cannot be programmed to consistently perform in a mechanistic and rational manner. The result is a multi-dimensional understanding of how policy is affected by individuals. We displace the locus of responsibility when we think in terms of how institutions implement policy. Such displacement shifts responsibility from individuals to institutions and compels us to assign blame or praise on constructs rather than the individuals who make and implement decisions.

An examination of the roles of the individual and communication in an institution must be understood in a bi-directional rather than unidirectional framework. A unidirectional communication focus limits access to understanding how a policy is implemented, whereas a bi-directional communication framework expands access to learning how an individual's values, attitudes, and perspectives—the human factors—impact policy implementation or mutation. Recognition of the role of formal and informal communication channels in organizations is critical in discerning the process necessary for effective policy implementation. The framework proposed in this article is an initial point for connecting qualitative research and organizational theories regarding communication in policy implementation. It is a framework for exploring how the individual shapes policy and how the institution shapes policy through the individual.

This article recognizes educational institutions to be complex social structures with multiple agendas, rather than rational-bureaucratic structures that exist in a vacuum (Dellar, 1994). As a social process that sometimes involves the use of informal, rather than formal bureaucratic protocol, policy implementation is an interconnected part of the social structure.

Where there are internally strong political undercurrents there will co-exist important informal communication systems (White, 1990). It is in investigating the role of individuals via a qualitative examination of the communication channels that exist within an organization that the scholar can begin to reassemble the factors that influenced the implementation of policy.

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