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Guest editors: Peter Hupe and Harald Sætren

**INTRODUCTION TO THE SPECIAL ISSUE
‘IMPLEMENTATION RESEARCH IN THE AGE OF GOVERNANCE’**

**The sustainable future of implementation research:
On the development of the field and its paradoxes**

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Abstract

As fashionable as implementation studies were in the 1970s and 1980s, as *en vogue* it has become four decades later to consider implementation as a research theme of the past. It is clear that in the study of government new themes and concepts have been put on the agenda. In the 'age of governance' that study takes place under a variety of headings beyond 'implementation'. At the same time a continued attention to what happens with policies-on-paper can be observed. In this special issue the development of implementation research as a scholarly field is assessed. A closer look reveals some paradoxes, but also steady advancement.

Keywords

Public administration, public management, public policy, policy process,
implementation research

Contents of the special issue

In a book with perhaps the longest subtitle ever, Pressman and Wildavsky (1973) expressed their amazement about the way ‘great expectations’ were dashed in implementation. Those were the days of extensive political interventionism, with governments in a central role. Vast policy programmes were made, as expressions of an ever expanding Welfare State. Such times seem over. Currently, implementation research is not a ‘trending topic’ on the agenda of the study of politics and government. In the present *age of governance* new themes have come up.

In the meanwhile, however, the number of implementation studies - although perhaps less prominently visible than in the 1970s and 1980s - has grown. That fact makes it relevant to address the state of affairs. How does the scholarly field of implementation theory and research look like nowadays? What progress has been made? What omissions can be observed? Also, has the top-down view justifiably been written off? Questions like these are central in this special issue. It contains five articles, which will be positioned below. After that, an interpretation of the overall observed state of affairs will be given.

The first article is titled ‘Implementing the third generation research paradigm in policy implementation research: An empirical assessment’. Here Harald Sætren continues his documenting of the state of implementation research as a scholarly field. Using the data of his bibliometric study (2005) he provides an empirically based assessment of the state of the art, this time in qualitative terms. He does so, using the characteristic of a rigorous research design as a benchmark. The author sees such a design as the core element of what he calls *the third generation research paradigm*. As indicators are used: clear definitions of key variables; specified hypotheses; more use of statistical analysis on quantitative data to supplement qualitative analysis; more comparison across different units of analysis within and across policy sectors; and a more longitudinal research design. One of the results of the analysis is that the number of comparative studies doubled at the expense of single case studies. However, comparison at subsystem level is more common than cross-national comparison. As the use of a comparative research design increases over time, this happens at the expense of a longitudinal design. Harald Sætren concludes that there has been more progress on methodological than on theoretical issues – a topic further addressed in the fifth article, by Peter Hupe.

In the second article Lise Rykkja, Simon Neby and Kristin Hope report on their bibliometric study of articles on climate change policies. They were interested in the question how such policies get attention particularly in journals on public administration, policy implementation and multi-level governance. Their findings show a relative modest attention in such journals to climate policy issues. Articles on the latter were most often published in journals oriented towards economics, while

only a few of them concerned ‘traditional’ implementation studies. Most of the studies on climate changes policies were empirically oriented case-studies within single countries. Against the background of these findings the authors conclude that there is ‘room for more comparative cross-country analysis (..) as well as for theoretical insights’ – but also for more ‘traditional’ implementation studies focusing on specific societal settings.

Under the heading ‘Implementation structures as institutions’ Guy Peters focuses on a general point about complexity in implementation. That point regards the fact that implementation involves collaborative action by multiple organizations related to each other in both ‘vertical’ and ‘horizontal’ configurations. Approaching these inter-organizational configurations as institutions the author specifies the concept of ‘implementation structures’, once coined by Hjern and Porter (1981), as unit of analysis. Institutions imply that the behaviour of individual actors is seen as influenced by values, rules and ideas, ‘solidified’ in durable patterns of social interaction. Guy Peters explores how treating implementation structures as institutions can enhance insights in the implementation part of policy processes, by matching categories of such structures with varying institutional conceptions. The article indicates that particularly ‘cross-applications’ may provide more integrated perspectives on implementation. With its institutional view the article hence contributes in a programmatic way to the implementation research agenda.

The fourth article is titled ‘Studying implementation beyond deficit analysis: The top-down view reconsidered’. In that article Monika Nangia, Michael Hill and Peter Hupe underline the relevance of values, stakes and action when analyzing implementation as part of an ongoing process of policy making. They make a case for a re-assessment of the top-down view on implementation, when asking attention to the normative, political and practical dimensions of the – in fact, *any* – policy process. The authors use empirical material from a study of UK educational inclusion policy. This policy is aimed at having children with special educational needs as much as possible attend ‘regular’ schools. Rather than conceiving a public policy as a set of instructions prescribing from a singular perspective, a policy expresses multiple values. In implementation, the intentions of *the* policy ‘formator’ – unrealistically presumed as a single rational actor – need to be interpreted. Hence, the results of a policy are co-produced by a variety of actors, both in vertical and horizontal configurations. Making an amendment to ‘third generation’ assumptions the authors argue that, with these characteristics, a public policy and its implementation *can* be analyzed in a top-down view in a relevant way, also as a single case. However, the latter presupposes the explanation of variation in outputs, the specification of the activities of multiple actors on the various political-administrative layers involved, and looking - beyond policy-on-paper – at the micro-level of social interaction.

In the fifth and final article Peter Hupe goes back to the top-down/bottom-up controversy and the standard for ‘third generation’ implementation research since

then, as formulated by Goggin et al. (1990). Complementing the first article, by Harald Sætren, Peter Hupe measures the ‘progress’ made in implementation research by exploring to what extent four substantive issues identified by Goggin et al. have been dealt with. It appears to be possible to make a categorization of contemporary implementation studies. Using Goggin’s (1990) et al. dimensions for implementation studies with a ‘synthesizing’ character Peter Hupe distinguishes ‘mainstream’, ‘neo-’ and ‘advanced’ studies; the latter split into two subcategories. Each category deals differently with the identified research issues. The conclusion is that the issue of the ‘too many variables’, one way or another, has been settled. The other three distinguished issues, however, the theory/practice relationship, the multi-layer problem and the policy/politics nexus, have remained on the table. Therefore the article’s subtitle speaks of ‘persistent issues’.

All five articles, each in their own way, review the state of the art. The first two are bibliometric studies based on quantitative data collection. Two articles provide theoretical arguments, one of which illustrated by the findings of an empirical case study. In the fifth and final article a qualitative assessment of the field is given, specified in terms of the degree to which ‘persistent issues in implementation research’ have been resolved. The first and last articles can be seen as complementing each other in a mirror relationship. Both take Goggin’s ‘third generation research paradigm’ as point of reference, and are looking at the academic progress made. Where Harald Sætren primarily focuses on the methodological elements of a rigorous research design, Peter Hupe specifies the substantive research issues Goggin and his colleagues indicated as ‘major impediments’ to the achievement of a satisfactory theory of policy implementation. This dual mode of addressing means that the standard set by Goggin et al. hence functions at the beginning and at the end of this special issue.

The state of the field interpreted

This is not the place to report on a systematic study of the factors and mechanisms *explaining* the state of the field – simply because such a study has not been done yet; neither was it the goal here. Rather, the objective of this special issue is to identify the relevance of implementation studies *in the age of governance*. Nevertheless it may be worthwhile to reflect a little on the context of the perceived ‘rise and decline’ of implementation studies.

Formulated on the most general level the state of the field can be characterized as *multiple approaches combined with steady scholarly advancement*. Next, three paradoxes can be observed. They regard, respectively, the way the object of research is approached, the act of research, and the look at the development of implementation research over time.

The paradox of general singularity

Earlier Harald Sætren (2005) documented that there is still an ongoing stream of single-case implementation studies. It is the category Peter Hupe in his article calls ‘mainstream’ implementation studies. They may be less visible in Harald Sætren’s present selection of *core journals*, because to a relevant degree – as evidenced in his 2005 article – they are being published in journals on particular policy sectors, like health.

One way or another, there seems a continued attraction of the stages view of the policy process, implying a two-layer comparison between intentions and achievements. The fact that this view may be observable both in the practice and the study of public administration, would explain the single-case character of a still substantial number of implementation studies. This fact as such already would mean that the top-down view on implementation cannot be written-off – a case that is made in the three-authored article with the subtitle ‘The top-down view reconsidered’. This leaves aside that also within the range of ‘traditional’ implementation studies omissions can be observed, like the ones indicated in the article by Lise Rykkja and her colleagues on the topic of climate change policies.

At the same time the upcoming orientation towards comparative research cannot be mistaken. As one of the striking findings from Harald Sætren’s article, this development may be enhanced in a programmatic way when an institutionalist view on implementation structures is adopted. That is what Guy Peters in his article asks attention for. The mixed (single case-studies/comparative case-studies) picture of the state of the field seems to indicate the dualistic character of the way public policy implementation as empirical object is being approached: as a phenomenon unique and idiosyncratic in its specific context but, in a patterned reality, globally with quite similar traits.

The paradox of institutionalized solipsism

Between the social and natural sciences there are both obvious (such as qua empirical object) and less obvious (such as qua organization of scientific work) differences. However, looking at social science as work practice one can observe, there as well, a contrast between the ‘discovery ideal’ as norm versus making small steps as daily reality. Researchers may aspire to become ‘mothers of invention’, as Frank Zappa’s band was called in the 1970s. They are being socialized to a kind of solipsism. In the present context this means the adoption of the view that only one’s own thinking matters and that everything next stems from that thinking. The adoption of this view leaves the fact aside that, simultaneously, researchers experience the need to ‘muddle through’ (cf. Lindblom 1959).

In the study of politics and government this paradoxical situation may induce an aspiration of concept promotion. The nature of academic labour division and an ongoing specialization may make it worthwhile in given institutional settings to adopt a fashionable concept, if not to come up with a new one. ‘Magic concepts’ like governance in the first place function as attractive containers without immediate explanatory value. A variety of meanings can be projected on them, unless these concepts are specified and positioned in a broader theoretical lens (Pollitt and Hupe 2011). Such concept production and promotion institutionally may be seen as more rewarding than making laborious efforts deliberately dedicated to the accumulation of knowledge. Rather than looking over the hedge researchers find work satisfaction in involving themselves in the study of a relatively small topic, joining the corresponding scholarly community, and embracing the appropriate discourse.

Working at the individual level these mechanisms can be observed at the collective level as well. While one could suppose that the increased internationalization of academic work would mean a broadening of scope, in fact the opposite is true: the observed solipsism is reproduced on a higher scale of aggregation. The result is a globalised ‘silo effect’ (the latter term has been picked up from Weible 2014). It may lead to ‘renaming the wheel’, like in the case of studies of multi-level governance. Hill and Hupe (2014) characterize the latter as ‘neo-implementation studies’, because a new ‘silo’ is being created. At the same time here and there alternative activities can be observed, like systematic meta-reviewing enabled by the availability via internet of large data sets. The classic idea of accumulating knowledge hence comes into an up-to-date perspective.

The paradox of a too-much-promising past

Looking over time is what several implementation scholars have been doing when wondering ‘what has happened to implementation research’. It is also what the present authors do, respectively in the first and last articles of this special issue. In fact, however, it is an open question to what extent such exercises in other fields of social science tend to occur, and with what results. In case of implementation research, anyhow, this measuring of scholarly progress seems more complicated, because of the nature of the object of comparison itself: rationalist expectations versus laborious practice. No wonder, then, that disappointment is lurking – implementation researchers can be supposed to be familiar with ‘dashed expectations’. The fact that a documented view on the state of the field provides a mixed picture, to a large extent may have to do with the exaggeratedly high expectations implied by implementation research as such. There are persistent issues because there are enduring puzzles.

Conclusion

In implementation research clearly analytical advancement can be observed. The objective of rigour is taken seriously. There is a growing comparative orientation. Although not stressed in the present articles, concerted attention to street-level bureaucracy can be seen (cf. Brodtkin, ed. 2011) – deliberately not to be institutionalized as another ‘silo’ - as well as to policy design. Finally, some authors accept the challenge posed by novel themes and concepts while remaining dedicated to the original object of attention. Hill and Hupe (2014), for instance, address implementation explicitly in terms of governance research. After all, what’s in a name when giving an adequate account of what happens is where it is all about.

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