Recent Developments in the Study of Implementation in Britain

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Summary

This paper challenges the view that the study of implementation is a new field of academic work, by examining the contributions of British research in social policy, planning, urban sociology and organisational sociology to this subject. It is argued that a satisfactory approach to the study of implementation must be multidisciplinary. In a second section of the paper the work currently done at the School for Advanced Urban Studies on implementation is discussed. A key emphasis in this work is that the most appropriate methodology involves a bottom-up approach. Some of the difficulties this departure from a centralist perspective entails are discussed in the concluding section.

Résumé

L'article s'interroge sur la mise en œuvre en tant que récent champ de recherche académique, et ceci par un examen de contributions en Grande Bretagne dans des domaines comme la politique sociale, la planification, la sociologie urbaine et la sociologie des organisations. On arrive à la conclusion qu'une approche satisfaisante de l'étude de la mise en œuvre doit être multi-disciplinaire. Dans une deuxième partie de l'article, les recherches couramment menées à la School for Advanced Urban Studies sur la mise en œuvre sont discutées. Un des choix fondamentaux de ces recherches sur le plan méthodologique est l'approche ascendante (*bottom up*). L'article examine une partie des difficultés résultant de l'abandon d'une perspective centraliste.

1. Introduction

This paper will discuss what the study of implementation seems to involve in the context of British social science, and the particular kind of contribution we are trying to make with respect to British central-local relations.

When the research was started, the problem of defining the field of interest had to be faced. It was found that there was a growing tendency for comments upon the ineffectiveness of British government to refer to problems of implementation, to suggest a growing gap between policy intention and outcome. A developing American literature which focused upon this problem was also studied: it attempts to develop what the author called "recipe books" for policy makers and is designed to help them close this alleged gap. Both of these approaches were found to be unsatisfactory. The academic work from the United States seemed rather narrow and blinkered in its failure to relate to a rich tradition of social science literature of all kinds, which helps to explain the limited impact of government on society. The British propositions seemed to merely echo an older concern to understand the relationship between politics and administration, which had persistently run into problems because of the conventional desire to draw neat distinctions between policy making and administration. Therefore, to develop a theory on implementation, or propositions about implementation failure, without linking it in to a wider understanding of the relationship of the policy process to society, seemed to be unsatisfactory. However, it was recognised that the stance taken would (a) make the intellectual task of trying to develop an appropriate theory much more complicated, and (b) make it much more difficult to formulate any proposition which would appeal to practical people (something which is still envisaged, despite our dissatisfaction with "recipe book" approaches).

2. The British literature on implementation

Clearly there is an important relationship between work on implementation and earlier academic interest in the study of public administration. However, there are also two other significant veins of relevant work in Britain relating to (a) social administration and (b) planning.

Social administration developed as a characteristically pragmatic British subject concerned with increasing the welfare state. As it has become more sophisticated, and as disillusion has developed about the social democratic view of progress, attention has increasingly been given to the way the institutions which deliver social policies actually work. Contributions to implementation studies from this strand of work include Marsden's "Mothers Alone" (1973), the second edition of which raised many issues about the behaviour of public officials towards single parent families, Hall's "The Point of Entry" (1974), about receptionists in social services departments, and Packman's "The Child's Generation" (1975), which successfully moved to and fro in charting the recent history of child care services between the national policy debates and the activities "in the field" in individual local authority departments. The British equivalent to the important American implementation literature on the Poverty Programme is a growing number of studies on the Community Development Programme, notably Higgin's "The Poverty Business"

(1978) and Edward's and Batley's "The Politics of Positive Discrimination" (1978). Social administration as a subject has also been responsible for much quantitative evaluative work which is gradually raising issues about implementation. Finally, there is a growing Marxist contribution to social administration which, at its most sophisticated, is producing propositions about explanations for implementation deficit (e.g. Gough, 1979). This last phenomenon fuses with work from other strands and will be discussed more fully in the next paragraph.

In relation to planning studies the key developments for the comprehension of implementation have been in the understanding of the way the urban system operates. Important contributions have been made on this by urban geographers and urban sociologists. Interestingly, nearly as much of the British literature on community power has come from this source as from political science, and it is the former that has raised some of the key issues about the roles of officials, whose ostensible concern is with implementation, within the power structure: For example, some of the debates sparked off by the work on urban redevelopment and on housing policy by Rex and Moore (1967), Rex and Tomlinson (1979), Denis (1970, 1972) and Gower Davies (1974), and by Pahl's (1977) concept of "urban managerialism". The arguments between those who follow Max Weber in stressing the importance of intervening institutions, and those who adopt the Marxist stance that these institutions are ultimately irrelevant, cannot be disregarded by students of implementation. In Britain, Cockburn's "The Local State" (1977) is perhaps the most influential work in the latter category. Currently, an important younger generation of theorists, notably Saunders (1980) (a sociologist) and Dunleavy (1980) (a political scientist) occupy the middle ground, and are certainly relevant. It should be noted, here, that the underlying assumption of the author is that the urban political conflicts, which are the concern of all these writers, are manifested as much in the way policy is implemented as in the way it is made.

As suggested earlier, British writers in the public administration tradition have been prone to work with a politics/administration distinction which is very much like the modern policy-making/implementation one. Strangely, however, their preoccupation has been with the blurring of this distinction in two rather special ways, higher civil service involvement in policy-making and elected representative involvement in implementation in local government. There has been a prescriptive concern with keeping territorial boundaries for politicians and administrators, rather than any attempt to understand the essentially permeable nature of those boundaries.

Recently, however, there has been an input into the study of British public administration from organisational sociology which has been much more prepared to raise questions about how the administrative system works. A new approach which stresses the "limits of administration", and which is thus highly relevant to the study of implementation has begun to be developed. This has two broad strands. The first strand is a

body of organisational and administrative theory, to which Hood (1976) and Dunsire (1978a, 1978b) have been the main British contributors; it attempts to identify the logical limits to control in complex organisations. Attention has been drawn to the significance of delegation and to the harnessing of expertise within single organisations; greater complexity is added to these once inter-organisational co-operation is required. Dunsire has dealt with these phenomena using a colourful range of analogies — a Tower of Babel, a nervous system in which some parts are self-regulating and some subject to central control — to which it is difficult to do justice in a brief account. This work, however, addresses itself to problems about the *logic* of control but not to the *politics* of control.

The other strand has its roots in developments in the sociology of organisations, and thus owes an enormous debt to theorists such as Selznick, Merton, Gouldner, Blau and Crozier, who have increased or deepened our understanding of organisational dynamics and the limits to control. A number of textbooks, (e.g. Brown, 1971) including one by the author (Hill, 1972), have attempted to introduce some of this work into the study of British public administration.

Recent work, however, has gone farther than trying to understand the dynamics of organisations; it looks at the importance of inter-organisational relationships for public sector activity and raises issues about interorganisational power, and about bargaining and negotiation. Recent work undertaken by the School for Advanced Urban Studies (SAUS) has been influenced by this concern. It will be discussed later. Here the work by Greenwood *et al.*, (1980) and by Walsh *et al.*, (1981) applying contemporary organisation theory to the study of British local government should also be mentionned.

A recently developed strand of work which seems important for implementation studies is that by lawyers and sociologists on law enforcement. There has now been an extensive number of studies on differential enforcement in criminal law, and particularly on policy behaviour. It seems quite difficult to keep in touch with this work and to assess its importance. However, the developing kind of work in administrative law is more accessible. Jowell (1973) has played an important role in theorising about, and focusing attention upon, administrative discretion, though he would be the first to acknowledge the debt owed to K.C. Davis' work in the United States. Jowell (1977) has been particularly concerned in planning law, and he is one of a number of lawyers who have interested themselves in the political factors which influence the implementation of the law in this field. There has been some interesting interaction between administrative lawyers and students of social administration on the role of the law in social policy (Adler & Asquith, 1982), particularly with reference to the enforcement of "welfare rights" in relation to variable official behaviour (Hill & Means, 1982). British work on the enforcement of regulatory law has been slow to develop, but some interesting ideas are emerging particularly on the discretionary administrative practices which have been seen to be associated with the growth of the corporate state

(Adler & Asquith, 1982). This is one of those underlying theoretical issues which, like the debate about the "local state", implementation theory should not disregard.

The last few paragraphs have outlined a number of developments in British academic work largely occurring outside the conventional disciplinary boundary of political science. Within that boundary policy studies have been slow to develop. It would not be fair, however, to fail to point out some developments within political science which are relevant. The corporate state debate has bridged political science and sociology. From the former perspective, an interest in the role of pressure groups is important and recent work by Richardson and Jordan (1979) has drawn attention to their role in relation to implementation. A similar bridging between political science and other disciplines can be observed with respect to the issues of the local state and community power, with Newton (1976) and Dunleavy (1980) being key contributors from the former. The author's bias should perhaps be stated with regard to this issue as that of a political sociologist much of whose work has been in social administration and who sees political scientists in Britain following Pressman and Wildavsky (1973) in "discovering" implementation (and for that matter policy studies) often with scant references to other academic fields.

Blume has had the following to say about the development of policy studies in Britain:

"Research of this kind must draw upon a contribute to other kinds of research, sharing with them both concepts and problem foci: it cannot develop in isolation either from research in sociology, economics and so on, or from more practical short-term work." (Blume, 1979, 333)

In this article Blume also comments on how difficult it is to develop such a subject in the face of powerful forces towards disciplinary fragmentation. Since implementation studies are a key ingredient of policy studies his remarks equally apply to our concern. There is a strong belief at the School for Advanced Urban Studies (SAUS) for the need to develop inter-disciplinary work on implementation that leads to an understanding of some of the strands which contribute to the subject. The last part of this paper will be concerned with describing our recent and current work.

3. The SAUS contribution to the study of implementation

In 1978, largely through the efforts of Ken Young, a commission from the Social Science Resrarch Council's (SSRC) Panel on Central-Local Government Relations provided an opportunity for SAUS to undertake a study on the relevance of implementation for central-local relations.

The study (Hill *et al.*, 1979; Hill, 1980) identified two perspectives evident in current concern wich implementation, one preoccupied with policy design in explaining policy "failure" and one preoccupied with the "failure" of implementing agencies to put policy into effect. Whilst

accepting a distinction between issues concerning the nature of policy and those concerning inter- and intraorganisational relationships in the study of implementation, the study emphasised the interaction between these two "ingredients" and the importance of examining the relationships between them. It also stressed the dependence of the centre on separate and disparate "peripheral" organisation for the formulation and implementation of policy. It discussed such issues as the importance of policy origins (whether arising from central or local initiatives), the motives behind its formulation (e.g. promoting or regulating local action) and the degree of consensus over policy goals. These were seen as factors affecting the nature of policy itself, modes of government adopted for its promulgation from the centre, and the degree of discretion given to implementation agencies.

The study examined implementation issues under four headings:

— the nature of policy;
— the centre-periphery relationship;
— the characteristics of implementation of agencies;
— the social, political and economic environment within which implementation occurs.

As a result of this study the SAUS acquired a further commission form the SSRC's panel. This was partly to undertake some empirical work on implementation and partly to make further efforts to advance implementation theory, drawing upon the commissioned empirical work and upon other relevant research in progress both at SAUS and elsewhere.

Our empirical work is more or less completed. It is briefly described below. Two colleagues, Tom Davies and Charles Mason have been examining the local implementation of manpower policy. This has concerned itself with two themes central to the study of implementation:

(a) There are elements which recur in implementation which suggest that economic factors have precedence over social factors and make economic goals more easy to implement than social goals. The research is designed to explore this by looking at implementation in restructuring (new industry in a new location); dealing with the effects of restructuring (redundancies in a ship-repairing town); attempting to redistribute changes in the labour market (policies to reduce discrimination against women in the labour market).

(b) The research is examining actions "on the ground" and how they relate back to policy formulation — whether policies are formulated before, during or after actions; whether policies are altered during action; whether policies alter action; when policies legitimate or rationalise action; when policies which are relevant do not get implemented; co-ordination and competition between agencies with different, complementary competing or mutually exclusive policies; the relative power of "central" and "local" policies; the use of the local agencies to implement central policies and vice versa.

Another colleague, Robin Means, and the author have been examining issues of discretion in local policy implementation. For the authors this has been an attempt to explore the usability of another concept in which they have had a long-term interest, "discretion", and to see how much it could contribute to the understanding of implementation. Three considerations guided their choice of topics for research:

(a) There seem to be very different considerations which arise, in connection with discretion, in relation to the concrete "policy" at stake. In particular, it seems important to bear in mind three rather different kinds of implementation situation; where activities are being regulated, where services are being provided and where cash benefits are being given.

(b) The concept of "discretion" is very largely linked with considerations of "top-down" control. Attempts to develop typologies tend, therefore, to concern themselves with the various kinds of "licence" given to field implementers. Since the general approach to implementation had been to question the value of this as a research approach, it was decided it was most appropriate to cencentrate on the constraints to decision-making perceived and experienced by field level implementers. This is a more satisfactory approach to field work, in any case, since there are difficulties in asking actors about their "discretion". It is easier to seek to find out about their tasks and the constraints imposed upon them as they undertake them, interpreting discretion in relation to the areas of freedom of action which become apparent in this way.

(c) A focus upon "constraints" on field level actors seemed likely to reveal a wide range of ways in which discretion is confined or discretionary freedom defined. It seems to us that it would be important to be able to contrast different kinds of constraint — laws, circulars, local policies, managerial decisions — in different policies and different authorities. In particular, it would be important to identify some very different kinds of "central" constraint upon "local" discretion.

Therefore, with those considerations in mind, it was decided to investigate three very different policy areas — the provision of meals (known as "meals on wheels") to elderly or handicapped persons in their own homes by social services departments, the regulation of industrial air pollution by environmental health departments and, the administration of rent rebate schemes by housing departments.

The three case studies have been written up. They demonstrate a wide range of forms of discretion operating at the local level and raise some key implementation problems which are associated with them. It would not be appropriate, here, to detail these. However, this work in general feeds into the theoretical work envisaged.

This last is the responsibility of Susan Barrett and the author. At the present point in time the kind of contribution that can now be made is being determined. So far, the following three particular themes have been considered:

(1) The question of how far policy-making and implementation can

or should be regarded as distinct activities, or whether it is more appro-
priate to think in terms of a policy/action continuum involving action,
interaction and response over time (though not necessarily in a linear
sequence "starting" with policy). Following on from this are issues about
the way in which politicians pressure groups and the public relate to so
called "implementation processes", in which key "policy" issues are
settled.

(2) The importance of negotiative and bargaining activity in the
interactions between actors and agencies involved in or affected by the
policy process, and the need for more detailed investigation of the scope
and necessity for negotiations and definition of the kinds of negotiations
taking place in different circumstances. Associated with this are questions
about how far policy-makers may successfully impose statutory limits on
these bargaining processes.

(3) The need to readdress the question of the nature of policy itself
and the relative influence of policy on the behaviour of actors and agencies
in varying circumstances. This involves examining the nature of policy
not only in terms of modes of action, such as used by Lowi (1972) and
developed by Hargrove (1982), but also in terms of what it represents or
appears to represent to promoters or recipients embracing such aspects as
"real" or "symbolic" interventions, policy as change, historical context,
policy as a bargaining counter.

To date, Barrett (Barrett & Fudge, *forthcoming*) has given attention
to the second of these themes, examining the relevance of Strauss' work
on "negotiated order" for the understanding of implementation. She has
recently completed research for a government department, the Depart-
ment of the Environment, on land policy, and has raised some interesting
issues about the implications of local authority interventions in the land
market which involve them not merely as regulatory agencies but also as
entrepreneurs, behaving in very similar ways to private agencies. This
seems to involve a type of public agency action not very adequately
covered by the Lowi typology.

The author has examined the circumstances under which the policy
making – implementation distinction may be made (in Barrett & Fudge,
forthcoming), suggesting that this relates more than anything else to the
extent to which interests become involved in the implementation process.
Where they become heavily engaged in trying to influence the latter,
then policy is most likely to be determined or re-determined at that stage.
The author has attempted to relate this to kinds of policy.

Susan Barrett and the author have both become convinced of the
weakness of approaching implementation studies making "top-down"
assumptions about clear headed legislators facing implementation deficits
as a result of unreliable implementers. Thus considerable attention has
been given to contemporary work by researchers, who emphasise the need
to conduct research from the "bottom up", notably Hjern (1978) and his
colleagues (Hjern & Porter, *forthcoming*) in Berlin, and Elmore (1980)
in Seattle. We accept the value of the "bottom up" methodology for

research, and have tried to adopt it in some respects for our discretion studies. However, it is less clear what it contributes to theory. There seems a danger in approaching policy systems like, or pretending to be like, an early anthropologist with no knowledge of the formal institutions or history of the "tribe" to be studied. Of course, conventional "top-down" working assumptions about how implementation occurs may mislead us, but it is equally misleading to pretend they do not exist. The author recognises, as Elmore (1981) has effectively spelt out, considerable problems in working out what segment of a policy system should be examined. Elmore has shown that much implementation research looks at too narrow a segment, yet there may be a danger in proposing that one which is too broad is examined.

This paper has presented the argument for defining implementation studies very broadly. Intellectually we are convinced that this is the right approach. In practical terms, however, there are problems about research activities which stress the need to appreciate all the factors which impinge upon an identifiable implementation issue. Complexity must not be ignored simply in order to make our task easier. However, the issue of complexity which poses problems for data analysis, also naturally raises difficulties for those who would make recommendations for policy makers or implementers. The most disconcerting praise received from adminis-trators has been to be told that we have confirmed their essentially intuitive, "seat of the pants" approach to decision-making by an analysis which dis-credits simplistic "recipes", stresses the complexity of the factors which determine outcomes, and emphasises the roles of negotiation in bargaining. The challenge is to develop implementation theory which steers effectively between the Scylla of simplistic recommendations and the Charybdis of saying everything is just too complex. If the analysis of the issues is over-simplified it will only give naive advice. The faith of the social scientist who works on policy studies must be that some things can be learnt from others' experience. The problem is to determine what those things are. We are still at a very early stage of grappling with this problem for implemen-tation studies. What we have to offer so far is an approach to generalis-ation, which should not be dignified with the name of general theory, but which suggests a checklist of issues that must be taken into account, and some rules for trying to make sense of the essentially complex inter-actions which occur.

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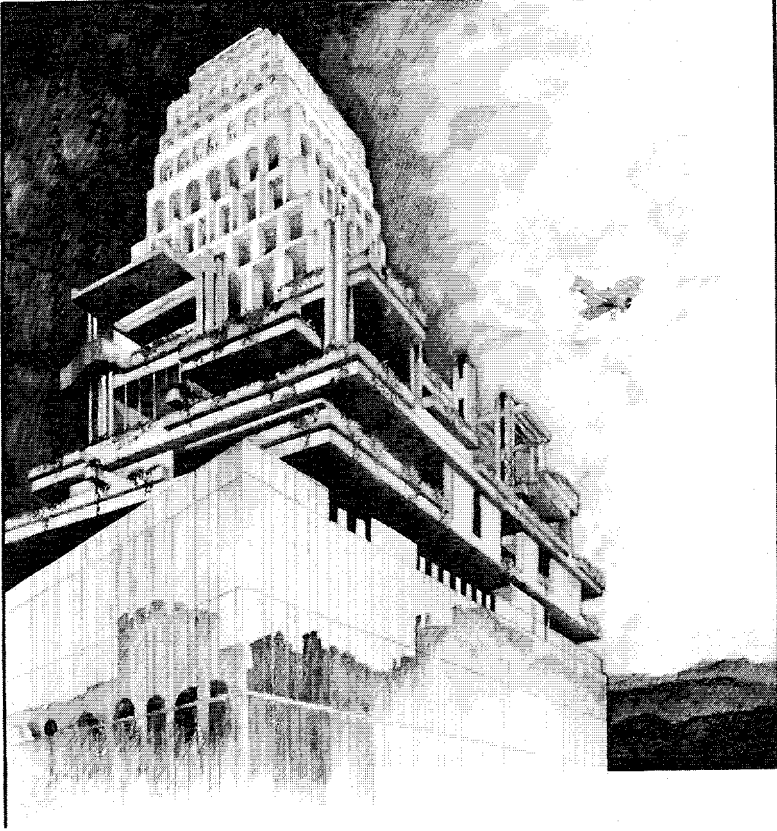
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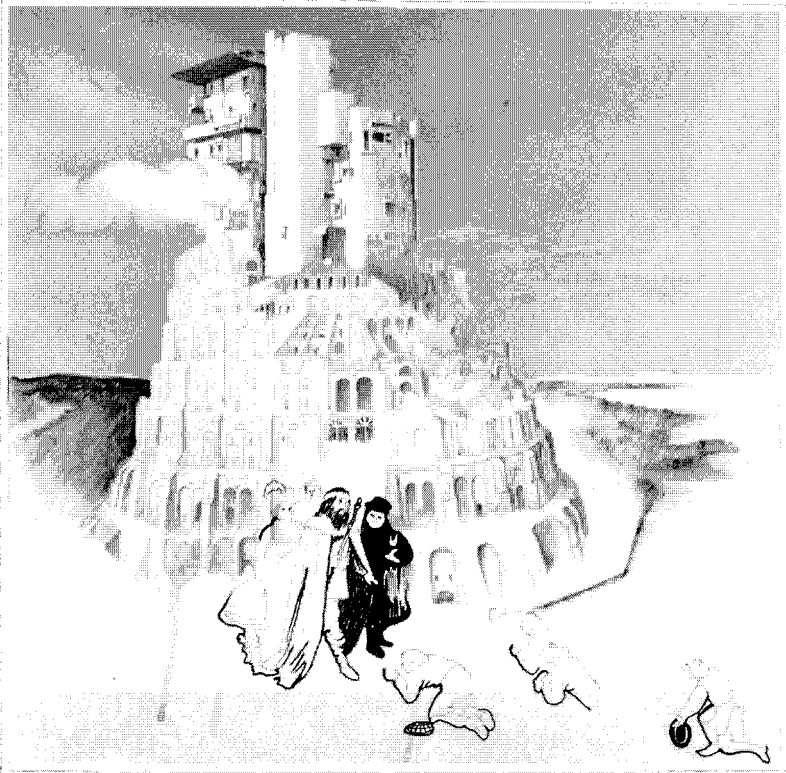
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