Michael Hill and Peter’s Hupe’s revised version of Implementing Public Policy offers a concise delineation of the approximately forty-year story of implementation research. The timing is based on the publishing of a particular book (Pressman & Wildavsky 1973), but, as Hill and Hupe point out, and Harald Saetren (2005) has shown, relevant research was conducted prior to this, and much of the literature does not explicitly use the term implementation, but can be considered to deal with similar questions (for example, in education and health). The objective of the book is to “bring together the major insights presently available from implementation theory and research” (ibid., 2). The book begins with the concept, then proceeds to the history, before discussing the theories of implementation, and finally looking at the future of the approach. A good way to start discussing the book is to look at the very basic concept of the field, “implementation”. Hill and Hupe discuss some alternative definitions which, however, share the idea of transfer, the focus being on how public policy is formulated. As Mazmanian and Sabatier (1983, 20) define it, implementation is the carrying out of a basic policy decision, usually incorporated in a statute, but which can also take the form of important executive orders, or court decisions. The difference to public administration research per se would be a dynamic perspective. However, the difference is only marginal, and hence Hill and Hupe (2014, 19-34) take the readers all the way back to classical times, and Max Weber, to construct an accumulated understanding of how public administration works.

The first question is how this process, the implementation process, is described. In the very beginning, when the Pressman and Wildavsky book was published, the view was that implementation concerns the carrying out of basic policy decisions. The exceptionally long and witty subtitle of the book refers to “great expectations which were dashed in Oakland”. However, this somewhat rigid view soon provides space for accounts which took a broader look at the administrative process and began to consider implementation more as an interactive than a hierarchical process. Hill and Hupe emphasise that governance is currently a central concept when discussing the characteristics of the process. Governance refers to a plurality of actors, and from the implementation point of view, it implies the sharing of power and influence when policies are being implemented. However, does this mean that the government just one partner amongst others? In the governance literature, delineations which emphasise the
change, as Kickert et al. entitled their book, one finds that implementation becomes “managing complex networks”. However, perhaps governments are not that weak. Pierre (2010) claims that there are myths in governance literature, such as governance being something new, that the state is much weaker, and that governments do not distinguish themselves from other types of actors. Pierre shows that governments do matter, and they may have enjoyed power in an altered form. In other words, as Hill & Hupe note, governance arguments change the implementation models scholars use to describe the process, there are more actors. Hill and Hupe also emphasise the contextual influence on implementation (ch. 8). This is a plausible assumption as anybody doing comparative analysis will acknowledge. Scandinavian countries are rather similar from the European perspective, but a closer look reveals they have different features as well. The Danish municipal territorial reform, for example, could not easily be copied elsewhere, as there were a number of contextual factors affecting the outcome.

How you describe the process depends on your interests. A view from above might ask the extent to which it is possible to control a process, and from below, what other processes and actors there are to deal with, say environmental or labour policy (Hjern and Porter 1981). If implementation was to focus solely on new policies we would lose sight of much of what takes place in public administration. I would argue that a better way to discuss the governance of a specific sector is to delineate the whole of the actor structure, and then discuss what kinds of roles the different actors have, how power is dispersed in the structure, and what kind of dynamics are at play when, for example, reforms are undertaken (Kettunen 2012). Similarly, Colebatch (2006, 3) argues that policy is not an attribute of government that is either there or not there; it is a way for both participants and observers to make sense of the governing process, and to contribute to it. To the extent that we delineate policy process as multi-actor governance, the question of what is implemented, and who are the implementers, becomes cumbersome.

The second question to discuss is a normative one. Hill and Hupe (p. 196) put it this way: whose will should prevail in the implementation of policy. For some it is still the hierarchy, or the democratic chain of command, for others it is a more pluralist view. The hierarchic view was more or less the formula offered by Mazmanian and Sabatier (1981) though maybe anticipating the ideal nature of these demands. Christopher Hood (1976) set out five such conditions for perfect implementation: that ideally it is a product of unitary “army”-like organisations, with clear lines of authority, that norms would be enforced and objectives given, that people would do what they are told and asked, that there should be perfect communication in and between units or organisations, and that there would be no pressure of time.

We can either say that control must be restored, or that modern governance is based on negotiations with the other actors and this is also the starting point in normative valuing. It may depend on the society, how much public control is maintained, what kind of cooperation there is between the different types of actors and how it is appreciated. In a review article, Paul Sabatier (1986, 34)
argues that putting too much emphasis on the street-level actors overemphasises the ability of the periphery to frustrate the centre. But what kind of rule system could anticipate all the individual cases, the whole spectrum of the daily routines of teachers, doctors, and social workers to name just a few. This does not mean that these “street-level bureaucrats” would be left alone, but that influencing their choices is usually based on a combination of rules, supervision, reporting, professional ethics and so forth.

However, is it normative to say that actors have discretion at the grass-roots level? Hill and Hupe (p. 199) state that the debate concerning the top-down and bottom-up perspectives was partly about methodology, it was perhaps primarily driven by concerns about accountability. I agree that public administration ought to have some coherence and acknowledge such values as public interest, equality or transparency, but it should not be ruled out that network-like institutions or local communities carry out public tasks, and then the question becomes more how the accountability of these institutions is arranged.

Thirdly, there is the question of where implementation stops. Is implementation simply the process until the output has been delivered? Hill and Hupe discuss this issue in the beginning of the book under the headline outputs and outcomes (p. 9-10). They refer to Lane and Ersson (2000, 62), who argue that “outcome analysis in evaluation research came to include all kinds of results that were relevant to the understanding of policies, including outcomes that have no link whatsoever with the policy…” Likewise, Hill and Hupe (2014, 10) offer the formulation that “…for implementation research, dependent variables may be outputs or outcomes, after the implementation part of the policy process. Where they are outcomes, however, it is particularly important to identify influences that are quite independent of that process”.

I would like to argue that the implementation of public policy ought to include results, what happens to public policies when they tackle the economic sector and/or civil society. There is an intensive debate about evidence (Strassheim & Kettunen 2014). Implementation research doesn’t seem to be able to contribute to this debate if it only looks at the process. At the same time, I would like to emphasise looking at the process and the results simultaneously.

The question could be what instruments and processes seem to bring about good results when the target is to, say, decrease poverty, increase good health, or educate children. This sort of question would assume the nature of a vivid debate on the instruments and institutional mechanisms to achieve results. A wise policy designer would probably benefit from this sort of information and plan a public intervention so that it takes place. It has been said that for a designer it may be as good to put money into bike paths as into health care. It is more a sociological approach, dealing with collective solutions per se. As Elinor Ostrom (1990) writes, different methods are needed to solve collective problems. Currently, what happens after a policy is implemented is still quite unknown territory (Chen 2005; Vedung 2009). Governments aim to influence societal development. However, governments have limited resources to do that, and citizens and enterprises may not agree with them. Hence governments are seldom omnipotent. Using
more money and enacting more laws may achieve results in education, for example, but not necessarily in health. We would also need to look at collective choices, how civil society and the markets deal with various decisions, and what role government plays vis-à-vis these other factors.

Not all government policies face similar kinds of uncertainty. However, trying to regulate both the economy and civil society may bring surprises, anomalies and negative side-effects not foreseen by lawmakers. There are policies which are more certain, based on long experience and government control of the process. Not surprisingly, most of the what-works-type of evidence stems from medicine. There are more uncertainties in play when governments deal with education, criminology, public health or social problems. Limitations can also be set by the economy and by the consent of the citizens. In every case, the success of policies depends on the willingness of the people to follow. There are a number of social problems and issues which, having been a target of government policy in different forms, still prevail, such as poverty, substance abuse, and environmental problems, to name but a few. Depending on the case, these can represent problems of implementation, or examples of inaction.

Fourthly, we can discuss the future role of implementation research. Michael Hill and Peter Hupe’s book is first and foremost an analytic view of the development of the research area, with the central debates and theoretical as well as methodological perspectives. The authors themselves come to a conclusion that implementation research has a future. Alas, the transformation of the public administration into governance networks (to the extent that views differ) might mean that the whole starting point of implementation research, carrying out a policy decision, is losing importance and diminishing the relevance of the field. As the subtitle of the book suggests, the authors emphasise operational governance, in other words, perspectives on managing governance. The current talk of meta-governance could very well be one such viewpoint.

On the other hand, it is likely that the demands to provide evidence will only increase. Can implementation research respond to this? Hill and Hupe (p. 198) state that many of the people who fund research work want to see attempts to answer specific questions about differences in implementation, and often about the reasons for what is called implementation “success” and “failure” (citation in original text). Success and failure can, on the other hand, deal with both the process and the results. At the end of the book, Hill and Hupe (p. 203) refer to some promising developments, for example studies of government performance, measuring the results of government action. On the other hand, governments implement programmes and services in order to achieve something, services are instruments. Over the decades, implementation research has brought forth a better understanding of the twists and turns in the process, emphasising more recently layers, institutional embeddedness and contextual factors. However, we would need more in terms of combining the process and the results, and the outcomes. All in all, what we want to know is when governments implement public policies, how it proceeds (explanation) and how it can be improved (prescription). It should be possible to say in general terms whether governmental
goals are being realised, and if not, on what it depends. There are presumably
differences between nations and between policies, but it would be important in
comparative terms to say something about how the implementation of public
policies usually proceeds. Hill & Hupe’s book encourages researchers to pose
such questions and think about descriptive, explanatory and prescriptive perspec-
tives on policy-making. The book provides a good idea of what implementation
research has been and is about. The 22 pages of references show that the issue
has been debated, though more at an earlier stage of the debate than currently.
An in all, the book is a good summary of the debates, and a delineation of the
research approach.

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