Introduction

Policy-in-Theory Is Not Policy-in-Practice

One of the biggest myths of government is that passing new laws solves problems. Policymakers and the public treat laws as if they are magic wands or silver bullets that, once written into the books, automatically change society or make problems go away. However, time and time again, policies fail to achieve their stated goals, fail to be complied with, fail to be enforced, or fail to solve the underlying problem they were designed to solve. Of course, policymakers are vested in this myth, as it creates the illusion that they have the power to solve problems. If one believes that policy magically changes the world, then policymakers are the gatekeepers of that magic, making them the most revered and important participants in government. The public buys into this myth because it is easy. It presents a clear end point, after which they can move on to the next problem. Most often, the public shifts attention to the next issue once a new law has been passed, but rarely do they stick around to watch what happens next (Downs, 1991; Peters & Hogwood, 1985). This provides the luxury of not worrying about what happens after policy is enshrined in law. In other words, it saves them from worrying about the hard part.

Yes, the hard part is not passing new laws; the hard part of policy and governance is implementation. It is where the high-minded ideas of policymakers have to be pushed and prodded into the chaos that is the real world. It is like fitting a proverbial square peg into a round hole. Those changes that policy hopes to make in the world are not magic or automatic. They follow a complicated pathway when being put into practice—practice being the actual application of the idea as opposed to the theory behind it. If done correctly, this results in a shifting of behaviors

among target populations (i.e., the sub-populations of a community that policies target for change), leading to improvements in the social or environmental conditions that policy is designed around (Fowler, 2019b, 2022; Smith & Larimer, 2016). In other words, problems are not solved through policies-in-theory, but through changes in how people behave in practice. Policies just set out guidance for what should happen. While nothing is automatic, there can be something magical about it when one realizes the sheer miracle it is that policy works at all (Pressman & Wildavsky, 1984). This is chiefly because people have a natural inclination toward doing the same thing over and over again—that is, maintaining the status quo. Creating change requires people to break out of those patterns and do something different, which at times feels unnatural (Nicholson-Crotty, Nicholson-Crotty, & Webeck, 2019; Samuelson & Zeckhauser, 1988).

While anecdotes about broken government are a dime a dozen, when I was researching this book, an interviewee shared two stories that help illustrate how important status quos are for how government works. In the first, an entomologist was contracted to review the pest control practices at a local school. The custodial staff had been using a particular type of ant spray for some time. When asked why, they responded, "Well, that's what the guy who trained me used." Unfortunately, over the decades, the active ingredients in that ant spray had been phased out of common use, because of the risks associated with exposure. Of course, this would likely explain why those school children had higher-than-usual rates of asthma and other respiratory illnesses, which was the reason the entomologist was brought into to investigate. In the second, a regional office of a state agency had stopped issuing open burn permits over a few weeks. When staff from headquarters inquired as to why, the regional office explained that they used magnets to mark a map in order to keep track of where permits had been issued. However, they recently ran out of magnets, so they stopped issuing permits. While neither of these stories is indicative of broader policy failures, they do highlight the dysfunctions that occur when people continue to follow a pattern of behavior without thinking about what they are doing and how it may look in the bigger picture.

In contrast, another interviewee described her experiences in a federal agency under three presidents, remarking that even where new administrations pushed new policy initiatives, the day-to-day work remained the same; it was just rebranded. This by no means equates to a failure, because the policy changes at hand were superficial to begin with. It was not until a non-incremental budgetary change brought significant

new resources and expectations that a rethinking of how policy works was undertaken. This is notable because it tells us that status quos may be entrenched but they can also be altered with the right tools. Creating change, as to break away from the "way things have always been done" is ultimately what policy implementation is concerned with; it is certainly why new policies are adopted. But, as stories and experiences of bureaucrats often tell us, new policies are not always met with new actions. Change is necessary to improve the conditions and circumstances of our society, though, particularly as it applies to the dynamic wants and needs of citizens in a democracy. Of course, this change can be targeted at what public services are provided, how they are provided, to whom they are provided, or when they are provided.

By creating the right change, there is a shift in how government and society interact that is built on hopes of solving public problems, and those changes do not happen just because policy says so. For instance, *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) is most famous for the phrase "separate is inherently unequal" in ordering schools to be desegregated; but a subsequent ruling in *Brown v. Board II* (1955) ordered this to occur "with all deliberate speed." The latter phrase ended up being more important for explaining how schools were desegregated. While *Brown* is a policy statement carrying the weight of law and ordering a social change in how education is provided in the US, it relied on states to implement those changes. Consequently, Southern states used the ambiguity of acting "with all deliberate speed" to rationalize their resistance, and integration in many states did not occur on any substantial level until the late 1960s. This followed several additional court rulings, including *Green v. County School Board of New Kent County* (1968), dealing directly with how school integration was implemented, as opposed to the merits of integration, which were decided upon in previous cases (Ogletree, 2004; Daugherty & Bolton, 2008).

Unfortunately, this is a relatively common story, where it is not a revolution of ideas that is needed, but the implementation of ideas that already exist. Take for instance the national debt that the US federal government has amassed (estimated at around $30 trillion in June 2022) (US Department of the Treasury, 2022). While many have put forth proposals that require a fundamental shift in how money is spent, one of the simplest ways of reducing annual budget deficits is by enforcing existing tax code (Yarrow, 2008). An Internal Revenue Service (IRS) report examining tax revenues from 2008 to 2010 indicates that about $400 billion a year (or

about 16% of tax revenue) is not collected (IRS, 2016). This is mostly due to the American tax system's reliance on voluntary compliance (Christian, 1994; Manhire, 2015). While the IRS does have mechanisms to punish tax evaders and recoup tax losses after the fact, it has to catch them first. However, between 2010 and 2020, the IRS conducted audits on between 0.45% and 1.11% of taxpayers (Picchi, 2020), meaning the IRS is typically unaware of whether 99 out of 100 taxpayers are complying with tax code. Of course, this is why President Biden floated increased support for the IRS as a means to pay for his broader economic agenda during his first year in office, as it is likely to create new revenues without changing tax policy (Tankersley & Rappeport, 2021).

Or take the global pandemic brought on by COVID-19. Although there has been significant controversy surrounding what policy solutions are available, one of the most common tools at the local level is mask mandates, which require individuals to wear a face covering while in public. But again, this largely relies on citizens following the rules. In Boise, Idaho, a mask mandate was put in place in July 2020, but the city's plan rested wholly on voluntary compliance. As one can imagine, this did little to quell the number of COVID-19 cases, which continued to increase through community spread over the following months (Frankel, 2020; Harding & Scholl, 2020; Idaho Press Staff, 2020). In November 2020, the city took a more aggressive approach, and decided they would in fact begin enforcing the mask mandate—but only in response to complaints. That is, law enforcement and public health officials would not actively patrol or look for non-compliance; they would only respond if someone not wearing a mask was causing alarm for others. While reports suggest that mask wearing increased, there was by no means universal compliance with the mandate (Berry, 2020; Beck, 2020). Thus, a simple solution to a devastating pandemic was thwarted by how to make it work in practice as local leaders navigated controversial politics during a crisis, as a polarized political environment made it difficult to find functional solutions.

Implementation challenges even arise where policies are largely successful. For instance, the Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944 (commonly known as the GI Bill) established benefits for veterans returning from World War II, including low-interest mortgages or business loans, unemployment compensation, and educational assistance. The overall goal was to help veterans readjust to civilian life. This was largely met through greater educational attainment and economic security, as well as more civic participation and volunteerism. This focused on household

economics as opposed to macroeconomics, which was a shift in thinking from previous social benefit programs, such as the New Deal. Problems with implementation occurred almost immediately, and many of these were tied to administrative procedures and the reliance on states to determine eligibility of service members, leading to institutional barriers to access. This inevitably contributed to racial discrimination and low participation rates for women, as the same problems that existed in other social programs seeped into veteran services. While the success of this policy is contemporarily accepted by academics and the public, one could still question how effective implementation was (Mettler, 2005; Compton, 2019).

Again, stories of great ideas hashed out by policymakers being dashed when they crash into the real world are so common that "business as usual" is a fitting label (Peters, 2015). Given this, the motivation for this volume is twofold. First, and primarily, how policies are implemented is a cornerstone to the quality and character of democratic governance, but too little is known about why it happens the way it does. Far too often, what happens after policies are adopted is taken for granted, or swept under the rug of broader questions of government that provide too little depth to the specific challenges associated with translating policy into practice (deLeon & deLeon, 2002; Hill & Hupe, 2014; O'Toole, 2000). But policy implementation sits as the core mission of public service organizations and warrants a complex investigation to understand why policies do not always work or why they take on unexpected forms in practice. Second, by doing so, I also hope to explain how collective choices translate into collective action across broad networks of policy actors and ultimately transform social and environmental circumstances. This hits at the heart of questions of democratic governance through multi-level institutions with pluralistic interests, and opens the door to providing better advice to practitioners on how to achieve the public interest (and not just talk about it) (Hill & Hupe, 2014; Ostrom, Cox, & Schlager, 2014; Peters & Pierre, 1998).

While these are ambitious motivations, the coming chapters will unpack an argument of how and why patterns of policy implementation manifest the way they do. The core of this argument rests on policy implementation being the process of altering status quos in what normal behaviors are. Thus, the research question here is: how are norms in these behaviors constructed and deconstructed? In this volume, I will explain how policy serves as a cue to what behaviors are wanted (or at least, which ones are unwanted), but implementers still have to figure out how to

accomplish it in the best way possible and how to institutionalize behaviors so that they become the new normal. Complicating this process is the fact that implementers are often operating in ambiguous environments, so that the world is only partially comprehensible. Using the multiple streams framework (MSF) as theoretical framework, I analyze how and where implementers look for decision cues about problems, solutions, and stakeholder values in deciding how or if to shift their behaviors. Based on those decision cues, implementers translate ideas into actions. Of course, this is not the end of it, and the actions of implementers feed into a larger process by which social and environmental conditions are impacted by human behavior (i.e., governance, and more importantly, democratic governance).

Implementation, Policy, and Failure

Now, let us consider an important question: does bad implementation lead to policy failure or is policy failure part of a broader question about bad policy? In other words, does the blame lie with policymakers who come up with ill-fated ideas or with administrators who fail to effectively or efficiently operationalize those ideas? When policy fails, any politician would tell you that it is clearly the fault of bureaucrats. This trope of attacking the bureaucracy is so common in American politics that it is almost cliché (Hall, 2002). Elected officials often argue that they have got it all figured out, but everything falls apart when lazy, self-interested, or incompetent bureaucrats get in the way. Although bureaucrats tend to hesitate to publicly defend themselves, most will say privately that it is the politicians, who are disconnected from reality and more concerned with re-election, who adopt bad policies and force bureaucrats to retrofit those bad policies to meet the needs and wants of their communities. The truth likely lies somewhere in between. Legislators have a bad habit of writing policy that only makes sense in their closed-door sessions and that suffers from too many cooks in the kitchen, and bureaucrats do not always get it right when it comes to implementation (Pressman & Wildavsky, 1984; Hudson, Hunter, & Peckham, 2019).

The phrase "policy failures" (also referred to as "fiascos," "disasters," or "blunders") is used relatively frequently by journalists, commentators, and politicians to grab attention as these issues are examined. In fact, it is no secret of politics and government that failures are far more interesting

than successes, to the point that most often when government programs are discussed in media or in academia the focus is on failure, rather than success. To this end, Peters (2015) argues that "for most developed political systems [policy failure] is indeed 'business as usual,' with the system as a whole performing reasonably well, but individual policies failing and then being replaced" (p. 270). However, in the common lexicon, policy failure has taken on a range of meanings, including government policies or programs that fall short of expected outcomes (e.g., Hurricane Katrina response); prove difficult or unwieldy in their functions (e.g., unemployment application processing during COVID-19); produce unintended results (e.g., US Forest Service timber management policies' impact on wildfires); generate immoral, unethical, unpopular, and/or corrupt practices (e.g., immigrant family separation policy); or are met with significant opposition (e.g., racial profiling by police). Thus, policy failure includes some combination of not meeting goals and/or creating unexpected consequences so that no program can be successful if the unintended negative effects are sufficiently greater than any positive outcome created (Bovens and 't Hart, 1996; Gray, 1998).

Of course, there is also an implication here that failures are avoidable. That implication is important, because with it, we assume that every policy has the potential to be successful; that every policy is capable of moving the needle in the direction that we want it to move. But avoiding policy failure often rests on the shoulders of policy implementers, as they are tasked with interpreting and applying the ideas adopted by policymakers to the complexities of the real world. When they do their job "right," policies achieve their goals as originally envisioned. Doing the job "right," though, sometimes means going off script and reinterpreting ideas to keep up with unexpected or unanticipated challenges. Of course, if implementers do their job "wrong," policies will inevitably fail, because ideas mean little without appropriate action to bring them to life. Simply put, implementation may lead to failure, but often failure involves far more than implementation (Peters, 2015). In contrast, policy success is likely to occur only where policy and implementation are both done well; that is, good ideas that are mobilized by an organized group of professionals that connect the dots between policy and behaviors. As policy failures and success exist on a spectrum (McConnell, 2010), the question is more often "To what extent has policy succeeded or failed?" as opposed to "Has this policy failed or not?"

Following this logic, if policy success or failure is marked by the misalignment of intended goals and expected outcomes (i.e., policy design)

on the one hand, and the reality of policies in practice on the other, then the extent of policy failure or success can be measured by the gap between policy-in-theory and policy-in-practice. While public policy tends to be most associated with laws and legislation, policy is more complex than it. Policy is a body of ideas and practices that govern our societies (Smith & Larimer, 2016). In most cases, policies appear in formal, written statements (i.e., policy-as-written) that communicate a theory of how a phenomenon should play out under foreseen circumstances. That is, policy-as-written represents how a group of policymakers have charted the ideal pathway for specific activities to occur, and for which they have articulated in so many words the guideposts for what should and should not happen in hopes of presenting a well-defined conceptualization of the acceptable way to engage in that activity. But theories are just ideas, and while they may be based in practice, they are not bound to it, nor are practices wholly bound to theories (Bushouse, et al, 2011; Walker et al., 2019).

For instance, a local ordinance governing road safety presents a theory of the safest maximum speed one should drive along a stretch of road (i.e., speed limit). But this does not guarantee compliance, nor do the associated fines or punishments. Rather, what drives the degree of compliance is how the policy-as-written is enforced, so that drivers come to understand the policy as practiced and what behavioral norms they should be following. In other words, policy is articulated as a theory (ideally, in writing), which influences how policy is practiced; policy-in-practice, then, becomes what is recognized as the functionality of the policy theory. For instance, while a speed limit may be 45 miles per hour (mph), for the sake of argument, let us say that it is uncommon for a traffic cop to stop someone for driving 46 mph (1 mph over the theoretical limit), and it is common is for a traffic cop to stop someone at 50 mph (5 mph over the theoretical limit). Over time, drivers are likely to learn that they can drive up to 50 mph without getting a traffic citation. Thus, while the speed limit in theory is 45 mph, it is 50 mph in practice. While 5 mph may seem to be a negligible difference, it is representative of the gap between policy-in-theory and policy-in-practice, and it is the latter that defines how people behave in our society.

This gap exists for three core reasons, representing the constraints on the theoretical basis of policy. First, policy-as-written is never a perfect articulation of policy-in-theory, so it is often left open to interpretation. To a certain extent, this is a result of the limitations of human language and the ability to convey complex thoughts (Habermas, 1998). As those

who are tasked with turning policy-in-theory into actions rely chiefly on the written policy statements as a formalization of requirements, they are often left to make sense out of ideas that are incomplete on paper. While some may seek further guidance through informal interactions with policymakers or stakeholders, formal policy statements are the primary source from which understanding flows. Of course, this is further complicated by the need to compromise in order to reach agreement, which tends to produce less clarity in order to reduce conflict. Consequently, policy-as-written is rarely free of ambiguity, as policymakers choose to leave controversial issues undefined (Zahariadis, 2003). This places responsibility for making sense out of policy in the hands of implementers. Unsurprisingly, the ideas of policymakers are often misunderstood, misinterpreted, or misapplied as a result.

Second, the real world is often different from the world envisioned when grand policy goals are set out. When policies are designed in theory, assumptions are made about how people behave and the circumstances in which they make decisions. If these assumptions align with the real world, then things play out as assumed and policy works as designed; but if these assumptions misalign, then things go off the rails. For instance, in the 1920s, Congress assumed that people would cease consuming alcohol if it was prohibited, causing alcohol-related crimes (e.g., domestic abuse) to decrease. But, as history often tells us, banning something does not always mean that people stop doing it. While alcohol consumption declined initially, it rose to approximately 70% of pre-prohibition levels by the early 1930s, and while some alcohol-related crimes declined, black markets and criminal undergrounds that fueled organized crime and gangland violence rose (Miron & Zwiebel, 1991; Hall, 2010). These types of unintended consequences are common, and many apocryphal stories exist (e.g., cobra effect) (Chollette & Harrison, 2020). Furthermore, things change and evolve over time. As one person interviewed for this book explained, "laws are written to address a perceived need at the time, but a lot of times it is impossible to project into the future and see how things are going to evolve and craft legislation to address those things . . . so in a lot of ways [we/administrators] are always playing catch up to innovation in the marketplace."

Third, policy tends to take a negative form insofar as it outlines what not to do, rather than a positive form providing guidance on what to do. Particularly in democratic societies where it is implicit that rights and liberties exist unless explicitly stated otherwise, policy is oriented toward

the prohibition of certain types of behavior (Farber, 2007). Certainly, it is easier to identify and describe the types of behaviors that one wants to restrict, while leaving individuals free to pursue other behaviors. As a natural extension of this, policies tend to outline all the things that should not be done so stakeholders can identify where implementers or target populations are failing to meet guidelines. In contrast, policy rarely, if ever, articulates specific expectations for what should be done, as doing so creates implicit restrictions on innovation. For instance, speed limits restrict the speed that vehicles may travel, but generally leave it open to drivers to choose the speed they are comfortable with; but a speed "requirement" would imply that drivers should travel at a specified speed and no others. While this approach provides implementers with discretion to choose how to make policies work, it tends to provide only restrictions, as opposed to guidance.

This leaves policy implementers with the complicated task of translating policy-as-written into policy-in-practice, requiring them to figure out not only what the idea is but also how to turn it into action. At its most basic, this hinges on how individual decisions are made in the process of providing public services. That is, how and why does a traffic cop decide to enforce a speeding infraction? Naturally, there are errors in this process as people interpret policy-as-written differently than intended. No further evidence of this point may be needed beyond the body of US Supreme Court cases that debate the intent of the Framers of the Constitution, as people continue to argue about what words and phrases from a 200-year old document mean (Greenhouse, 2012; Grundfest & Pritchard, 2002). For better or worse, a degree of ambiguity in policy-as-written provides implementers with the opportunity to adjust practices as necessary to meet the constraints of the real world as it evolves (Fowler, 2019b; Matland, 1995). This is particularly important as one thinks about policy applied across diverse target populations. However, the risk is that adjusting practices causes policy not to function as theoretically intended, which contributes to policies failing to achieve their goals.

Of course, this is layered on top of challenges of operationalization. Turning ideas into actions is where the plans of mice and men go awry most often. Regardless of how well thought out a theory is, trade-offs must be made when that theory hits the real world. The same is true for policy; implementers have to make trade-offs as they balance resources and responsibilities. For instance, what are the costs of pulling over a driver who exceeds the speed limit? Is it worth the labor or opportunity

costs to do so if a driver is only exceeding the limit by 1 mph? How fast can a driver go before they endanger public safety? How often are those going only 1 mph over the limit doing so with a wanton disregard for public safety? From a practical standpoint, does it make sense to focus only on drivers who are in excessive violation? Unfortunately, this is a world of limited resources, which requires trade-offs. Typically, this means that all of our interests cannot be served at once. Thus, in the process of translating ideas to actions, some points must be abandoned in order to secure others. Naturally, this causes actions to be less than a perfect manifestation of ideas.

In the 21st century, it is not diagnosing the sources of social ills or coming up with utopian ideas on how the world ought to be that is lacking. The missing pieces are figuring out how to solve the problems that can be solved and addressing the problems that cannot be solved in practical ways that are feasible given the political and economic realities—that is, figuring out how to implement policies to maximize chances at policy success. It is fitting a square peg of policy into a round hole of reality that has become our biggest societal challenge. Even though the peg is not always square nor the hole always round, lawmakers time and time again try to remake the peg in hopes of finding one that fits, but keep falling short. Often, this is because they cannot see the shape of the hole or they believe the hole will conform to the peg. But the real solution to this challenge is to rework the peg until it fits into the hole that exists, whatever the shape may be, because it is often the peg that is more malleable than the hole. Studying policy implementation opens the door to understanding how this process works and how it can be done better. This is why it is fruitful to study policy implementation: good ideas go nowhere without the action to back them up.

Implementation at an Intersection

So, why does existing scholarship not offer better answers? Despite theoretical conflict and different perspectives on where decision-making power lies and the logical pathways used to examine its flow through organizations, scholars have long been in tacit agreement that policy implementation is ultimately a question of who is making decisions and how they are being made (O'Toole, 2000; deLeon & deLeon, 2002; Hill & Hupe, 2014; Fowler, 2019b). That is, most scholars accept the fact that

policymakers shift responsibilities to policy implementers, who are then expected to use their discretion to make choices that best serve the public interest. Of course, implementation scholars have not agreed on everything, and those conflicts can be telling about why existing answers are limited. At least part of the theoretical conflicts here stem from integrating the normative (i.e., what ought to be) and the practical (i.e., what is); that is, some scholars tend to superimpose theory about how things ought to work onto practice, while others tend to develop theory from what they see in practice. Consequently, some disagreement is less about different analytical foci or units of analysis, and more about the vantage point by which implementation is examined. While implementation research has matured both methodologically and theoretically, developments have been incremental and disconnected from a central theoretical debate for years (Winter, 2012; Saetren, 2005, 2014).

In general, this can be attributed to two factors. First, as governance and network theory advanced in explaining public service delivery, policy implementation scholars failed to continue to distinguish it from other research foci, while also propagating prototype theories that failed to gain traction. The result was that implementation theory rolled into emerging areas of inquiry (e.g., public service delivery networks) and lost much of its distinct identity (O'Toole, 2000; Hill & Hupe, 2014; Howlett, 2019). As an offshoot, it became more difficult for scholars in other fields (e.g., education) to draw from implementation theory without engaging in a much broader and more complex academic debate, so these studies became unmoored across fields. Second, while implementation studies advanced scientifically, they stalled in providing guidance to practitioners implementing policies. Of course, this was compounded by the "too many variables" problem and the lack of comprehensive theoretical frameworks, so that the literature was not easily accessible to those looking in from the outside (Goggin, 1986; Meier, 1999; O'Toole, 2000; deLeon & deLeon, 2002). Despite implementation studies becoming disjointed as a sub-field, implementation remains of interest to scholars of both public policy and public administration, even though this has also led to it being perceived in competing ways (Saetren, 2005, 2014).

One of the key challenges that underly these broader trends is that policy implementation serves as an inflection point where different elemental forces converge. Implementation is where policy shifts from being dominated by political branches of government to the administrative institutions of government. Even where policy is made within the

executive branch, it shifts from actors who are participants in the political world (i.e., elected officials, political appointees) to those who are chiefly administrators (i.e., civil servants). Consequently, implementation has been examined as both a function of policy and a function of administration, causing confusion on where policy implementation resides within a theoretical framework of government. What makes policy implementation a unique node within these broader fields is of particular importance as we parse out how policy implementation exists in comparison to policymaking and/or administrating public agencies. Specifically, at the intersection of policy and administration, implementation is both an extension of defining the public interest and an aspect of maintaining public institutions. Thus, there is often conflict over what the purpose of implementation is, and how it is thought of as a function of government.

In this light, policy implementation serves as a bridge between public policy and public administration, where the tasks of executing policy are both an extension of defining the public interest and a function of maintaining public institutions. Figure I.1 diagrams this relationship where public policy and public administration exist as two overlapping circles, and in the intersecting portion sits policy implementation. To this end, implementation is the mechanism by which the practices of government ensure both the short-term needs and wants of a community and its long-term viability. On the one hand, implementation is central to how public interest manifests in practical functions of government; this means implementation demands change, is inherently political, and flows from
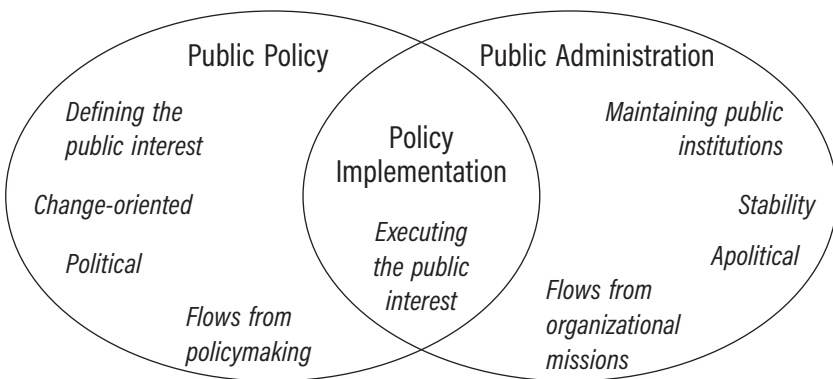

Figure I.1 Venn Diagram of Policy, Administration, and Implementation. *Source:* Author-created image.

policymaking. On the other hand, implementation is also a manifestation of public institutions; this means implementation fuels stability, is grounded in neutral administrative values, and is a function of organizational missions. Of course, this also means there are contradictions at each turn. Implementers are expected to create change but maintain stability, to understand and make value judgments but be neutral, to fuse new policy with existing organizational machinations. Unfortunately, implementation cannot be divorced from either set of demands, and sacrificing one in favor of the other only exposes cracks, that grow every time policies fail, in the foundation of communities and their respective institutions.

Pursuing this further, if one thinks of public policy as being associated with the tasks of defining the public interest, which are inherently political, change-oriented, and focused on how policies are made. While this is most readily represented by the act of passing laws, it also incorporates examining social or community problems, formulating and evaluating ideas on how to improve society, accounting for public opinion and values as well as stakeholder interests, and making choices that represent the interest of communities, among other things, that feed into the process of identifying, understanding, and communicating the public interest in its various forms. Implementation, then, becomes an extension of this, where implementers are working to reflect the public interest in their behaviors and choices during public service delivery. This perspective places implementers as quasi-policymakers who have been delegated responsibilities from officials elected to represent the public.

Importantly, the public interest evolves over time as the state of the world evolves, so one cannot expect the definition of public interest of decades past to continue to apply today. If this were not the case, then the public interest would be well defined by now, and lawmakers would have little to do. Thus, if policy is concerned with defining the public interest, then policy demands change as the public interest is redefined, over and over again. Additionally, the public interest is also inherently political insofar as it is subject to a competition of values, beliefs, morals, and ethics. To say that the public interest, and by extension policy, is political is to say that it is subject to group decisions, rather than a reflection of some objective truth that transcends social construction. While one may search for commonality or unity, there is no universality to how people believe the world ought to be or the wisdom used in determining a proper course of action for bringing it about. Instead, there is a great deal of subjectivity as people debate the virtue in their perspectives on the world (Stone, 2011; Smith & Larimer, 2016).

Of course, this means that policy entails an intensive process with multiple decision points in order to narrow down and define the public interest. To this end, early policy scholars (e.g., Lasswell, 2018 [original edition 1936]) developed the policy stages heuristic to help explain the types of decisions being made. In almost all incarnations, policy stages set policy adoption up as an inflection point whereby the pre-adoption goal is to come to a consensus on what the public interest is and the post-adoption goal is to act on that choice (Smith & Larimer, 2016). From this perspective, one can view policy as existing in two intertwined phases: one focused on defining ideas (policymaking) and the other on defining actions (policy implementation). Prior to adoption, choices are made to refine understandings and options in a complex and chaotic world so that decision points can be narrowed. This typically leads policy adoption to entail binary choices (i.e., yea or nay) by a centralized body of policymakers (e.g., legislature). Thus, choices made pre-adoption flow into adoption. That is, policy-as-written is a formal articulation of how policymakers have defined public interests insofar as they reflect what the public wants and/or needs pertaining to narrow issues, and in coming to that determination, policymakers are likely to collect a plethora of information on the problems, solutions, and politics to understand how choices may or may not align with the public interest.

Thus, implementation as an extension of the policy process is then concerned with defining the public interest in action and deed, where policymakers have done so in ideas and words. Post-adoption, the public interest has been conceptualized, so the goal shifts to acting to manifest the public interest during public service delivery. Additionally, choices become decentralized as implementers make decisions based on the situations they face in applying policies to the real world. While decisions may start out narrow in implementation (i.e., focused choices and few policy actors involved), they become more complex as they flow away from policy adoption (i.e., open-ended options and an indiscrete group with decision-making power). This ultimately means that decisions during implementation take on a different character than those during policymaking. If one thinks of policy implementation as an extension of the policy process, then implementation is how the public interest is defined in action as implementers make choices in a complex array of situations. By virtue of this, implementation is change-oriented and political, and flows from policymaking, as opposed to being a mechanism for maintaining stability.

In contrast to public policy, if one thinks of public administration as associated with the tasks of maintaining public institutions. That is,

activities that ensure the institutions of democracy are alive and well. These activities are inherently apolitical, stable, and focused on principles of governance. Implementers, then, become agents of institutions, who are responsible for ensuring their viability. Public institutions are those that are open to the whole of communities and by virtue of that openness impact how people engage in the ordinary activities of life, particularly those of political life. This, of course, means that institutions transcend any particular organization, law, or elected or appointed official. Rather, institutions are made up of a collection of these, and by extension, influence the norms of political, social, and/or economic society over the long term. The importance of institutions, particularly in a democracy, is to ensure that communities adhere to principles of good governance that exist independently of any specific policy or political debate. In other words, institutions persist where individuals and ideas come and go in order to protect the longevity of a community's way of life. By extension, administrative agencies serve as a reflection of the authorities and responsibilities of political institutions, designed to compartmentalize functions within specialized missions.

While administrative agencies engage in budgeting, hiring, and a range of other activities that are common to administrative operations, these are support functions that serve to indirectly advance agency missions that implicitly reflect their institutional responsibilities. For instance, the US Department of Agriculture's Food and Nutrition Service approaches the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) as a function of managing the food supply, whereas it would likely be implemented differently if it were treated as a component of welfare policy managed by the Department of Health and Human Services (Gritter, 2015). This means that policy carries the baggage of the organization that is implementing it, so that it is seen as just another function of the same mission, regardless of its original purpose. Implementation in this context becomes an exercise in trying to fit new policy directives into existing processes and practices. Doing so not only helps further the agency's core mission that buttresses the overarching institutions, but also ensures long-term stability. Institutions by their very nature are meant to create stability in political, social, and economic life by embedding a set of norms in people's routine interactions with government, the marketplace, and each other.

In general, administrative institutions push back against change and favor upholding status quos that are proven to be acceptable over time, in order to avoid the risks of alienating parts of the community. Public

organizations are notoriously risk averse and bureaucracies are designed to reduce uncertainty by creating predictability pathways for decision-making. When risk is taken on, it tends to be costly, as administrators expend resources to avoid negative outcomes (Williamson, 1999; Brown & Potoski, 2005). This leaves the most common rationalization of behavior as "well, that's the way we've always done it." But this logic also buttresses administrators' roles as conservators of institutional forms, missions, and values that would not be easily reestablished if lost. This conservator role is in contrast to that of entrepreneurs, where administrative self-promotion, risk-taking, advocacy for radical change, and anti-traditionalist attitudes often conflict with democratic theory. In essence, preserving existing institutions is equally as important as building new ones, if not more so, and new is not always better, when new means altering the fabric of institutions. This places administrators as the custodians of shared values from which institutions are built, so that they cannot be easily corrupted (Terry, 1990, 1998, 2003; Terry & Levin, 1998).

At times, this puts administrators at odds with the public and policymakers, who want to see immediate change as issues catch their attention. Although one could argue that all choices are political in a democracy and administrators are political actors as much as anyone, bureaucrats remain neutral in order to preserve confidence in their ability to dutifully and faithfully execute the law. That is, it would be problematic to task someone who overtly lobbied against a policy with its success. While administrators may be asked to offer expertise on policy from time to time, they are expected to be guided by professional responsibility, organizational hierarchies, and the law, over personal politics (i.e., ideology, partisanship), when it comes to its execution (Levitan, 1942; Stewart, 1985; Overeem, 2005; Svara, 1998, 2001; Triantafillou, 2015). This is particularly notable for street-level bureaucrats who deal directly with the public and are distanced from the arenas where policy choices are made. In contrast to the inherently political nature of policy, administration sets a standard of unbiased, rational choices, even though it may not be fully feasible in practice.

Implementation as a component of maintaining public institutions is concerned with how policy fits into the existing organizational schemes proven to uphold the core values and principles of good governance. By doing so, implementation is inherently biased toward stability, rather than change, as administrators search for alternatives that produce the least risk, which often results in implementation of new policies following

guidelines and practices already established within organizational rules and culture. Thus, policy-in-practice tends to reflect organizational missions and visions as much as the public interest. Further, implementation becomes less of an exercise in political decision-making and more of an exercise in finding the "best" way to go about the work of the people, so that operations efficiently and effectively achieve their goals. Implementation as administration takes the long view on how to execute the public interest, by favoring established ways of operating that are manifestations of institutional principles over the dynamic want for change that results from political processes. By virtue of this, implementation is stable and apolitical, and flows from institutions, as opposed to being a mechanism for change or a reflection of political choices.

So, how does this affect the practical functions of implementation? Implementation is about how status quos are constructed and deconstructed. There is an ebb and flow here, where on some occasions policy dominates how implementation is approached and on other occasions administration does. When administration dominates, implementation is concerned with upholding the status quo, so behavioral norms embedded in organizations become the framework for putting policy into practice. Administration is a powerful force tied to core public institutions and fortified by patterns of social, political, and economic life that have prevailed over the long term. Business-as-usual is held on to tightly, so it is not an easy task to break away from these status quos. But, at certain opportune times, policy dominates, and implementation becomes about change, where implementers look to policymakers for guidance and choices become political. Of course, those changes then become the new status quo, and embed themselves in organizations to influence how the next policy is implemented (Fowler, 2019b; Fowler & Vallett, 2021). Consequently, both policymakers and administrators are keenly interested in policy implementation, intertwining their responsibilities, and leading to conflict, competition, and cooperation as they navigate where one ends and the other begins.

As such, both policy and administration as fields of study claim ownership of implementation, to a certain extent, but neither places it at the center of the research agenda. For instance, policy scholars tend to examine policy implementation as a natural extension of policymaking and whether policy-in-practice is representative of public interest (e.g., Liang, 2018; Manna & Moffit, 2021); in contrast, administration scholars tend to examine implementation as it pertains to the process of managing institutions by putting implementation into the context of broader issues,

such as performance or public engagement (e.g., Long & Franklin, 2005; Henderson, 2013). As a result, neither side sees the full picture of implementation as a push and pull of both policy and administrative forces, so it is treated as a peripheral issue by both. Taking the broad view of implementation, whereby it sits at an intersection, shines a light on why implementation plays out through the construction and deconstruction of status quos in behavioral norms, as "how it has always been done" gives way to change.

Using the Multiple Streams Framework to Examine Implementation

Until the mid-20th century, many scholars believed policy implementation unworthy of study, as it either happened so automatically that it did not warrant investigation or so complexly that it was impossible to study (Pressman & Wildavsky, 1984; O'Toole, 2000). To a certain extent, both are true. There is a bias toward status quos and repetitive behavior that occurs within the administrative branches of government, as well as within society as a whole, that makes policy implementation appear to be mechanized. Underlying this, though, is a complex array of cognitive, social, and institutional processes that shape how people respond to new or existing policies in any given situation. Key to this is understanding that the unit of analysis for policy implementation is decisions, specifically how decisions are made under ambiguous circumstances (Simon, 1997). That is, decisions made by an indiscrete group of policy actors (i.e., implementers) across institutions who must decide how a policy works when the written rules do not provide clear guidance, in the face of competing incentives, and with a high degree of uncertainty about what outcomes are likely to occur (Fowler, 2019b). Thus, a theory of policy implementation is a theory of how implementers make decisions when fitting the proverbial square peg of policy into the round hole that is the reality.

To this end, the multiple streams framework (MSF) provides a theoretical foundation of how policies are implemented by accounting for how status quos for policy-in-practice are built and then dismantled over time. While MSF has most often been used to explain why policies are adopted, this logic can be extended to also understand how an indiscrete group of policy actors make a series of decisions in the process of turning adopted policies into policy-in-practice. Specifically, MSF provides a structure to

analyze how policy implementers sort through ambiguous situations when constructing policy-in-practice, or how the decisions they make lead to behavioral norms that are not always connected to policy-in-theory. Further, MSF can also help us understand why new policies are sometimes met with resistance to change and maintenance of status quos, while other times new policy leads to behavioral adjustments. As a model of decision-making under ambiguous circumstances, MSF is well suited to sorting through the key challenges of policy implementation: interpreting policy-as-written and plotting action steps grounded in the underlying policy-in-theory. But it can also further our understanding of the theoretical linkages that tie policy implementation to democratic governance, through the causal pathway that begins with the public interest and ends with social change. Thus, our theory also serves to address the missing links between policy implementation and the democratic foundations of government by parsing out how implementers make choices that both define the public interest and maintain public institutions.

From this perspective, rather than a well-oiled machine, policy implementation occurs within organized anarchies, characterized by ambiguity, so that who pays attention to what and when is the most important determinant of decision-making (Fowler, 2019b; Zahariadis, 2007). The key word here is "ambiguity." Ambiguity exists where circumstances can be interpreted in different ways, so that any two people may come to different but reasonable conclusions about the same situation. Often these ways of interpreting the same circumstances are competing, but not necessarily mutually exclusive (Herweg, Zahariadis, & Zohlnhöfer, 2018). While many like to view institutions and organizations as well-defined hierarchies or markets, in reality, complex sets of regulations create competing incentives layered upon each other over time, that push and pull policy actors in different directions (Cohen, March, & Olsen, 1972). It is, then, typically unclear what information is important, who possesses authority, and/or what the goal is. As a result, most policy actors are trying to make sense out of a world that is only partially comprehensible (Zahariadis, 2007), and are subsequently engaging in competition and/or collaboration in order to gain sufficient power so that others accept their preferred interpretation of these circumstances.

Within these organizations, three types of information become crucial for decision-making. First, problems, or conditions that are undesirable or differing from the ideal and that have attention from stakeholders. Where is the line drawn between an acceptable amount of air pollution or gun