**Jamming with implementation research**

If implementation research was music, what kind of music would it be?

This article proposes a methodological exercise to reorganize implementation research. This reorganization reveals a gap in the implementation literature that holds great potential for the future of implementation studies and more importantly for promoting public value. This hidden potential is embedded in our assumptions regarding the field of research: its goal, its research questions and therefore its findings.

The starting point for this research is the understanding that the history of implementation research has become ‘common knowledge’ (Saetren 2005; 2014). In a nutshell, it is customary to say that the study has been a significant research topic since 1973, when Pressman and Wildavsky’s landmark book *Implementation* was first published. Their study refuted the naïve assumption that policy decisions will be implemented if the echelon responsible for it possesses the necessary qualifications or resources. Regardless of the notion that problems of implementation were on the research and practice agenda much before this (Saetren 2014), in Pressman and Wildavsky’s wake, many other researchers began to delve into the variables potentially affecting the implementation process.

In broad terms, three generations of implementation research have been identified: the first offered explanations for why great expectations were dashed in Oakland (Pressman and Wildavsky 1984); the second sought the main factor that influences implementation (top-down theories versus bottom-up theories); and the third attempted to explain the variance in implementation processes and results across different periods of time, policy realms, and public bodies (Lester and Goggin 1998). This third stage resulted in various studies proposing which crucial variables affect the process and offering synthesizing models and other insights gleaned from studying implementation indirectly.

Of the many publications on implementation, most reveal a shared frustration that there are so many ways to approach the study of implementation and even more ways to explain the process; it therefore is taken to be axiomatic that a grand theory of implementation is not within reach, at least not with the available findings and current research tools (Carey, Dickinson, and Olney 2017; Saetren 2014). Those researchers who have not given up on the study of implementation continue to grapple with three main research goals: framing a useful enough synthesis; producing a shortlist of critical variables; and conducting valuable comparative research studies, for example: Deleon 2001; Hill and Hupe 2014; Hupe 2014; Matland 1995; O’Toole 2000. These comparative studies can take a broad perspective, such as studying implementation within a policy regime rather than implementation of a specific policy (May 2015) or looking at what influences the compliance of street-level bureaucrats with the policy targets (Weaver 2014). Taken together, these studies form three main streams of contemporary implementation studies, as described by Hupe (2014): the main implementation studies stream, neo-implementation studies, and advanced implementation studies.

In the methodological exercise proposed here, four musical metaphors – classical music, the blues, rock and roll, and jazz – will help define different approaches to the study of implementation. Hence, this heuristic reveals different epistemological viewpoints on implementation and different perspectives on research goals. The benefit of this exercise is the understanding of what has been argued up to date regarding what research might be conducted in the future, which it is hoped can facilitate breakthroughs in both the research and practice arenas and thereby advance our overall understanding of policy implementation. Thus, this article seeks to reinforce the suggestion that there is still good reason not to succumb to the frustration shared by many scholars after nearly fifty years of study (Hill et al. 2014; Hupe 2014; Saetren 2014). Instead, it takes a positive view of the opportunities presented by the implementation gap, particularly in terms of encouraging and benefiting from the changing course of implementation.

The article begins with an explanation of the methodology used and the use of metaphors to explain existing theories, particularly about the benefits and drawbacks of using a specific interpretative framework. The main body of the article presents the four metaphors for thinking about the implementation gap – classical music, blues, rock, and jazz – and the article concludes with a discussion of the new perspective on implementation research that this analysis provides. The article is theoretical in nature, and further research is needed.

**<H1>Going meta: Looking at implementation theory through metaphors**

When complexity overwhelms us, we humans think in metaphors. ‘Metaphor is pervasive in everyday life, not just in language but in thought and action. Our ordinary conceptual system, in terms of which we think and act, is fundamentally metaphorical in nature’ (Lakoff and Johnson 2003: 4). In the search for knowledge and understanding, and indeed in the scientific process itself, progress is often achieved by the adoption of alternative conceptual models that enable us to think differently about the phenomena we observe. Metaphors not only reflect our thoughts and understandings, they also affect how we talk about the world and how we behave in it. Thus, metaphors are a hugely powerful tool for understanding and changing the world around us.

The beauty of metaphors is that once we have found a metaphor for a concept or phenomenon, we can work with it, develop it, and use it to understand and explain aspects of the abstract concept that would otherwise be difficult to grasp (Lakoff 1992). Lakoff (1992) elaborates on this, referring to the commonly used metaphor of a journey when talking about love. Speaking of a journey allows us to say much about love that would otherwise be difficult – the travelers, the vehicle, the road, the destination, and so on. In this way, metaphors allow us to organize and conceptualize our experiences and thereby help shape our thoughts. Crucially, they not only enable us to describe our world as we experience it but also help us design our efforts to change and reshape that world. This is of course both a strength and a weakness of metaphors: as a conceptual framing device, they can help us understand and alter reality, but (like any framing device) they can also restrict our vision and leave us blinkered to other important perspectives, which may in turn mislead our actions (Bekerman and Zembylas 2018).

Morgan (1997), in his seminal book on metaphors of organizations, presented fascinating insights into the relationship between how organizations function and the metaphors used to describe them. His basic assumption was that every theory in organization and management is based on metaphors that lead us to view, understand, and manage an organization in a unique way, but that each metaphor provides only a partial view. While he embraces this, he claims that the true power of metaphors is their ability to contribute to areas of study: the metaphor helps us grasp the essence of a theory and may highlight aspects that were missed. Yanow (2008) adds to this that metaphors in action actually help reveal the tacit or situated knowledge that is usually so difficult to uncover; bringing it to the surface, using metaphors, then leads to action in response.

When we review the uneven history of implementation research, as it has fallen in and out of fashion, it appears that implementation has suffered from an ‘identity crisis,’ and has often ended up being used as a synonym for every research topic in the policy arena. Or as Hupe and Hill (2016) put it, it seems that implementation is a residual concept.

What is held in common is the idea that the policy process resembles a harmonic concert (Brinkerhoff 1993; McLaughlin, Osborne and Ferlie 2002). Given this, it might be interesting to ask: if implementation was music, what kind of music would it be? Referring to the rules and vocabularies of various genres of music (Boornazian 2017) might help unfold the set of rules and vocabulary used in implementation theory and reveal the different ways in which implementation research can be done. It is important to note that there is no preference for one metaphor over another – they are all needed to get the complete answer as to what implementation research is and should be. In this sense, adding more metaphors is welcomed.

Two disclaimers are important. First, while this research speaks of the state and trend of implementation research, it is aware of the infinite number of studies on this topic. It is my hope that this trend has been captured, even though not all research relevant to this trend could be sighted or accessed. Second, this paper does not address the cultural problem of the classification of music and its connection to the hegemonic culture, nor does it seek to encompass all forms of music. Rather, four musical genres have been selected that suggest useful metaphors for understanding implementation gap research.

**<H2>*Implementation as classical music***

Legend has it that Mozart started playing the piano when he was three years old and was composing by the age of five. As a child he used to amaze his audiences, royalty among them, by playing the piano without seeing the keyboard. Mozart’s gift of music was certainly unique; however, it was far from being magic. This ability is a product of his in-depth knowledge of the music he played and his highly developed skill at playing.

In its narrowest sense, classical music is a term referring to music composed in Europe between the years 1750–1830. However, it also relates more broadly to music composed over a much longer period, from the Egyptian and Greek eras up to the present today. It is therefore more usefully defined by saying it is ‘music of orderly nature, with qualities of clarity and balance, and emphasizing formal beauty rather than emotional expression’ (Kennedy 1996: 148).

The defining qualities of classical music performance involve a clearly-defined melody with a linear structure and harmonic logic described in musical notation, performed by a group of skilled and formally trained musicians who are overseen by a leader (the conductor) with ultimate authority (see Hohstadt n.d.).

If implementation were to be studied as classical music, what would implementation research be?

Implementation, in this perception, is the execution of a well-designed policy. Research would focus on designing a better policy to control the process better and on studying the mistakes along the implementation process so that future designs would learn from them and incorporate their lessons. This perception holds that once a policy is determined the goals and the means (the scorecard and the musicians) will come to life as intended.

This metaphor describes the top-down researchers in the study of the policy process. This covers implementation from three distinct angles. The first is research up to the 1980s, when implementation was not considered interesting and all we needed for policies to be implemented was a better administration, sufficiently skilled to follow the notation and perform accordingly. As Hupe (1993: 30) wrote, ‘When the belief in rational actors was still widespread in social science, in theory things were relatively simple. Policy was made at the top and implemented at the bottom.’ The second angle is that of the classic top-downers, of the second generation, that acknowledged the complexity of the implementation process but claimed that the key to a better process is in the policy design. Hence, once we have a scoresheet and a professional musician plays it as intended, implementation will succeed (Barnard 1958; Dunsire 1978; Gulick and Urwick 1937; Hogwood and Gunn 1984; March and Simon 1958; Ripley and Franklin 1982, Kaufman 1960; O’Toole 1989; Ryan 1995; Sabatier 1986; Sharkansky 1978; Simo 1965; Younis and Davidson 1990). The third perspective is a new and interesting field of research, called ‘implementation science’, inspired by the possibility of trying to manage the implementation from the policy design; this field of research is currently being developed (Nilsen 2015). For the most part, like classical music, this approach is still very much alive in practice.

In conclusion, research that views implementation like classical music aspires to see a policy carried out as intended by the composer, hence, the policy maker. All that is needed is a scoresheet, a professional orchestra that works constantly on improving its skills and mastering its technical ability. Although some concerns have been raised that implementation might not be a simple, linear process, this line of research in public administration is optimistic, just as in the years of the Renaissance.

**<H2>*Implementation as traditional blues music***

Ma Rainey, known as the ‘mother of blues’, is quoted in August Wilson’s (1985) play *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom* as saying, ‘You don’t sing to feel better. You sing cause that’s a way of understanding life.’ This is the essence of the blues.

According to the *Oxford Dictionary of Music*, blues is ‘slow jazz song of lamentation, generally for an unhappy love affair’ (Kennedy, 1996: 83). Others speak of the blues more broadly as an expression of life’s difficulties, in particular, the discrimination and suffering experienced by African-Americans. ‘Its roots were in various forms of African-American slave songs such as field hollers, work songs, spirituals, and country string ballads’ (PBS 2003). It was ‘rural music that captured the suffering, anguish—and hopes—of 300 years of slavery and tenant farming’ in the American South (PBS 2003), although it subsequently moved northwards as African-Americans migrated to cities, and an eclectic form of the blues developed. It was thus a way for African-Americans to give voice to their pain, with singers and their audiences coming together to bond.

If implementation were to be studied as blues music, what would implementation research be?

Implementation, in this perception, is the expression of the pain and frustrations of the reality of the implementation process, hence the one that does not achieve results as intended by the policy. This implementation research seeks a dialogue with the wider environment to air and share these frustrations.

Most implementation researchers have felt the pain of the implementation process, since it mostly goes wrong. However, it is the first generation of implementation research that most resembles this metaphor. The dashing of expectations in Oakland left its mark on the development of implementation studies. The notion that one should be surprised not when implementation fails but when it succeeds (Pressman and Wildavsky 1984) is very reminiscent of the blues.

It was this first generation of researchers who raised the tragedy of the ‘implementation gap’ between intended policy and results. Their contribution was mostly to lament the complexity of the implementation process (Bardach 1996; DeLeon 2001). These researchers gave voice to the pain many experienced but did not bring to the surface. They helped lay the foundations of implementation research that remain valid today, including the idea of implementation as evolution: that as soon as you start implementing, you change the policy (Majone and Wildavsky 1979). In contrast with the prevailing administrative thought at the time, these researchers highlighted, among other things, the political process of implementation (Alison 1971; Bardach 1977; Derthick 1972; Neustadt 1960), and noted the complexity of joint action, the toughest obstacle for implementation (Pressman and Wildavsky, 1984). Their cry led others to label them as pessimists (Bardach 1977; Goggin 1986; Lester, Bowman, Goggin, and O’Toole 1986; Linder and Peters 1987; Ryan 1995). Ever since, this issue frames implementation studies, and, as previously mentioned, most implementation research falls into the metaphorical category of the blues.

In conclusion, research that views implementation as the blues focuses on the difficulties involved in executing a defined policy and achieving the desired results, and thus places the implementation gap at center stage, in all its glory. The intention of such research is to give voice to the pain of implementation, a voice that is important if we are to truly understand the implementation problem.

**<H2>*Implementation as rock music***

<EXT>‘We thought we were all individual, scattered hippies,’ said David Crosby of Woodstock…. ‘When we got there, we said, ‘Wait a minute, this is a lot bigger than we thought.’ We flew in there by helicopter and saw the New York State Thruway at a dead stop for twenty miles and a gigantic crowd of at least half a million people. You couldn’t really wrap your mind around how many people were there. It had never happened before, and it was sort of like having aliens land.’ (*Rolling Stone*, 2004) </EXT>

Much has been written about rock music, even more than about implementation. While many people celebrate rock, whether as creators in one of its many genres, or as consumers, there is no single version of its history and no single conceptualization of its form (Stilwell 2004; Open Culture 2014). Without embarking on the fool’s quest of trying to present a brief history of rock and roll or distilling its DNA into a few short paragraphs, we can still highlight a few common features of rock in very broad strokes. First, rock music is a combination of several genres of music, and therefore comprises several kinds. Second, a key feature of rock is a unique, rough sound known as ‘distortion’. Distortion is a process that changes the electronic signal or sound wave that produces the music as heard by the listener. Its origins were serendipitous, resulting from an amplifier that was damaged (presumably in transit to a concert), but soon after musicians were looking for a way to create it; eventually, it came to be seen as the essence and signature of rock music (National Public Radio 2014). Last, and most importantly, rock music symbolizes rebellion, the desire and willingness to challenge every convention and break every boundary. Rock and roll music is a result of and a catalyst for social change (D’Anjou 2003). In its rawest form, it represented an ‘inversion of the race, class, and gender order’ (Martin 1995), while also challenging preconceptions about musical forms and performance.

If implementation were to be studied as rock music, what would implementation research be?

Implementation, in this perception, is a multidisciplinary study coming from various research epistemologies; it involves looking for the unique ‘distortion’ sound—the unique variable that contributes to narrowing the ‘implementation gap’, and it is rebellious in the sense that it is willing to challenge conventional administrative and policy norms.

Many implementation researchers are these rebels (predominantly from the second and third generation of implementation scholars). They have dedicated themselves to finding what makes the unique distortion sound of implementation, hence what causes the difference between the intentions or goals of policy and the real-world impact or outcome, thus, the ‘implementation gap’ (see, for example: Andrews, Beynon, and Genc 2017; Ansell, Sørensen, and Torfing 2017; Hill 2003; Hill and Hupe 2014; Hupe and Buffat 2014; Hupe and Saetren 2014; Hupe, Hill, and Nangia 2014; May and Winter 2007; Meier and O’Toole 2006; Moynihan 2004; Nielsen 2006; Peters 2014; Tummers and Bekkers 2014).

These researchers come from different fields of research and mostly come from different ontological and epistemological traditions, creating a very diverse research field. They study implementation from various angles, asking different sets of questions. They rebel against conventional research norms and Weberian administrative norms, collaborating between disciplines and combining areas of interest. They create social change as they are questioning the role of the different actors (decision-makers, street-level or mid-level bureaucrats, clients) in different forms of interactions (individuals, coalitions, networks, collaborations) and in multi-levels of governance (see: Ansell et al., 2017; Bardach 1996; Barrett and Hill, 1984; Carrington 2005; Culpepper 2000; Exworthy and Powell 2004; Ham and Hill 1984; Hill 2003; Hill and Hupe 2013; Hjern and Hull, 1982; Hupe, 2014; Koontz and Newig 2014; May and Winter 2007; Mazmanian and Sabatier 1983; Mead 2001; O’Toole 2000; Peters and Pierre 2001; Riccucci 2005; Ryan 1995; Sabatier 1986; Schofield and Sausman 2004; Shea 2011). They even offer to look at the organization upside down, establishing the bottom-up approach (Barrett and Hill 1984; Elmore 1980; Hill 1993; Lipsky 1977).

These researchers use various approaches to search for a useful synthesis of theories, while conducting more case studies. They continue to place their hopes for the future in wide-ranging comparative research based on ever-larger sample data or adopting a multi-layer approach (Hasenfeld and Brock 1991; Lunden 2007; McGrath 2009; O’Toole 2000; Ripley and Franklin 1982; Ryan 1995; Scofield and Sausman 2004; Wilkinson et al. 2010). This approach is revolutionary because it almost normatively ignores the legitimate role of the official public representatives and it eliminates clear criteria for policy failure (Ryan 1995; Marsh and Rhodes 1992; Hogwood and Gunn 1984; Sabatier 1986). Studying the implementation gap using the concept of ‘compliance’ gives another twist to the plot in the efforts to understand the factors behind it (Weave, 2014).

In terms of the search for a unique source of ‘distortion’, the goal was defined by Lester and Goggin (1998) as finding the variance in implementation processes and results across different periods of time, policy realms, and public bodies. Hupe and Saetren (2014) translated this into four nexuses of implementation research: the number of variables, the relationship between theory and practice, the multi-layer problem, and the policy/politics nexus.

Over the years, it has become apparent that the implementation gap cannot be narrowed by producing endless lists of variables that affect implementation. The proposal made by Meier (1999: 6) that every ‘scholar who adds a new variable or a new interaction should be required to eliminate two existing variables’ captured the frustration. Nonetheless, using the rock music metaphor, though the research has experimented with distortion, it has yet to find what causes it and how to control it. This is the holy grail for these scholars.

In summary, implementation research as a rock and roll metaphor wishes to tear down boundaries and challenge existing rules, since they are considered an obstacle to creativity and social change. Implementation research wants to create a revolution in the work of government and in the world of practice by addressing the process. Implementation theory wants to eliminate the gap between goals and outcomes; to do so, it uses every tool it can think of and breaks every assumption along the way to find what causes distortion and thus narrows the implementation gap.

**<H2>*Implementation as jazz***

Mike Hobart (2015), the jazz critic of the Financial Times, has this to say about jazz: ‘It poses questions about order and chaos and structure and chance…. Yet the way that jazz musicians improvise remains a mystery to many people, even though improvisation is the basis of human conversation. No one sits down for a pint in the pub with a friend and reads from a script.’

Jazz is ‘a term, which came into general use… for a type of music which developed in the Southern States of America in the late 19th century and came into prominence at the turn of the century in New Orleans’ (Kennedy 1996: 371). Over more than a century, it has evolved and developed branches of its own to encompass numerous diverse musical sub-types and therefore it is difficult to pin down. Nonetheless, there are several widely accepted features that describe jazz as a whole.

The first, and most prominent, is improvisation; it grapples ‘with the unforeseen, works without a prior stipulation, works with the unexpected’ (Weick 1998: 544; Hadida et al. 2015). It involves much more than ‘acting in the moment’, but rather is rooted in routine and practice as well as hard-won experience and understanding (Zack 2000). Moreover, it demands a sophisticated conversation with the music being played, with other music familiar to the players, and with other people (Barrett and Peplowsky 1998).

According to Breliner (1994), himself a jazz musician, ‘improvisation involves reworking precomposed material and designs in relation to unanticipated ideas conceived, shaped, and transformed under the special conditions of performance, thereby adding unique features to every creation’ (Wieck, 1998: 241). How much of a performance should be improvised? The answer depends on the genre of jazz as well as the personal choice of the musicians. In the immortal words of Miles Davis: ‘Don’t worry about making mistakes, because there aren’t any’ (Barrett & Peplowsky, 1998).

The second feature of jazz is the special use of syncopation. ‘Syncopation is a device that composers use to vary the position of the stress on notes, thus avoiding the use of regular rhythm’ (Kennedy, 1996: 718). Syncopation is part of every kind of music, but is used to the extreme in jazz, and is described as a surprise ‘upbeat’ (Thelonious Monk Institute of Jazz, n.d.). If rock and roll was considered rebellious in its lyrics and behavior, jazz is rebellious in how the music itself is played. Here the individual musician decides what to do with the melody, never playing the same composition twice. Jazz musicians must thus be highly technically accomplished, have a wide repertoire of known music, and be able to compose on the spot –the decision of when to syncopate is later what creates improvisation. They need to listen carefully, understand instinctively what works in any given situation, and have a highly developed capacity for collaboration (Klemm 2014).

Finally, jazz is a social kind of music that is democratic by nature. In the words of one guide to playing jazz,

In jazz, everyone makes individual contributions to the collective musical goal and everyone has personal responsibility.… Like democracy, jazz is about balancing tradition and innovation, individualism and collectivism, past and future, stability and change, conventionality and progress. Also, like an ideal democracy, jazz doesn’t care who you are; all that matters is how you play. What matters is what you contribute, what you have to say, not what you look like or where you come from.… Jazz is egalitarian that way, just like an ideal democracy. (Boornazian 2017)

If implementation were to be studied as Jazz music, what would implementation research be?

Implementation, in this perception, is the art and craft of the professional (Wieck 1998). It would be intrigued with the changes in the course of implementation, not because it deviates from the policy but because it is interesting in itself, in its essence, in its process, in its dialogue with context and different actors. It would study how syncopation comes to be, and how all this promotes public value within a policy regime.

Currently, a well-formed approach to implementation research in this vein does not exist. However, some early shoots are already visible, including the interpretive approaches that are now raising important questions about the history of the research field; the interest in the process of implementation itself, rather than its outcomes (Carey et al., 2017); the growing literature on collaborative governance and implementation, emphasizing its contribution to policy design (Ansell et al., 2017; Emerson, Nabatchi, and Balogh 2012; Sørensen and Torfing 2009; Koontz and Newig 2014), which resonates with the democratic nature of jazz; and last, the attempt to understand implementation in terms of complex systems, which sees the policy as just one input (Moulton and Sandfort 2017). However, like other initial forays in this vein, much of this new work remains committed to the notion of the implementation gap as an unwanted deficiency.

Going back to the quote at the beginning, implementation is to public administration as jazz is to classical music. To paraphrase Hobart: **Implementation** poses questions about order and chaos and structure and chance. Yet the way that **implementers** improvise remains a mystery to many people, even though improvisation is the basis of human conversation. No one **in public administration sits down for a meeting with a colleague** and reads from a script.

The logic that will lead to studying implementation as jazz is only in its nascent stages and cannot yet be considered a genre. But developing this genre, namely, perceiving implementation as jazz music, holds great promise for implementation studies because it offers a new twist: it emphasizes the act of implementation rather than the process of implementation, allowing to place the implementer at the center of the stage and focus on his thoughts and actions within the process. This shift in focus highlights individual capabilities (such as improvisations and dialogs) along a policy regime constantly designing and determining public value. This approach celebrates the implementation gap rather than being frustrated from it.

**<H1>Discussion: What have we gained?**

This article has offered a methodological exercise to reorganize implementation research. By using metaphors from the music world, this exercise exposed the different assumptions and conceptual frameworks in implementation research.

Four music metaphors were offered to reframe research in terms of its goals and outcomes. The first, implementation research as classical music, relates to researchers that perceive the policy design as a key to better control of the implementation process. The second, implementation as blues music, relates to researchers that perceive the voice given to express the pain of those who bear the frustration of implementation as a key to a better understanding of implementation research. The third, implementation research as rock music, relates to researchers that perceive the variance throughout the implementation process as the key to narrowing the implementation gap. The fourth, implementation as Jazz music, relates to researchers that perceive the act of implementation as the key to studying how public value within a policy regime is built.

All four metaphors helped articulate four important approaches to the study of implementation, but the missing metaphor deserves special attention. This metaphor revealed a gap in the literature that has not yet been addressed and holds great potential for the state of implementation research.

In terms of research goals, this new angle puts the act of implementation at center stage, regardless of the policy process. Its aim is not to learn if there is change in the policy, or what controls the process, or what causes the change. Rather, its aim is to study what implementers do when they implement.

In terms of the research subject (the dependent variable), this new angle focuses on understanding the actual actions of the implementers, unfolding the dialogue they conduct when they interact with other implementers, with other policies, with various artifacts, and with themselves. The research questions will be, for example: What are the implementation actions? What are the places where the implementer has a personal touch? How did this personal touch evolve? What inspired or coerced it? Who or what affects the implementer the most? How does the implementer engage with his or her context? How does the implementer affect others and other things? According to this approach, the secret to successful implementation lies in highly localized and specific thoughts and actions of single actors at the most detailed level.

In terms of the research outcomes: implementation research of this kind can result in a categorization of different types of implementation – not from the policy perspective but from the implementers’ action perspective. For example, it can define professions, reveal assumptions and values, enlighten what creates diversion, define professions’ inaction and so on. This line of research defines ‘masters’ in the art and craft of implementation. Implementation research as jazz can offer a new understanding of the profession of implementation, as an undertaking that involves reflective practices and engaging in dialogue. This dialogue is not only related to the policy it is supposedly implementing, but also to every layer of their memory, every actor involved in the past or in the present, every policy they are familiar with, every action they have taken or observed, and so on. According to this logic, the professionalism of the ‘implementers’ is a function of their accumulated experience, competence, and mastery of the basics, which allows them to address new situations in a novel and creative way (Wieck, 549). For these reasons, this line of research can contribute to defining what implementers do.

In terms of implementation research character: this line of research will stop being about problems and start being a well-deserved celebration– a celebration of voice, dialogue and profession. In accordance with this, all changes in the policy are welcomed – since there are no mistakes. Consequently, implementation would focus on what it means to be a competent and responsible professional who is able to respond creatively to new situations, in such a way as to promote the public value of the policy regime (as defined by May, 2015). It would give real weight to reflection in action as described by Schon (1987) and used by others to narrow the theory/action gap (Yanow and Tsoukas 2009). In this kind of research, the complexity of joint action is not a source of frustration, but rather a chance to learn about dialogue, collaboration, and the interactions between various actors. Moreover, this line of research is connected to a cultural expression (Sharkansly and Zalmanovich 2000), and thus might teach us much about the influence of context on implementation. Implementation research has a great deal to gain by challenging the questions we ask in research and in practice.

If implementation research was music, what kind of music would it be?

Jazz is but one genre from which one can learn new features of implementation (Kamoche, Cunha and Cunha 2003). Hopefully, shifting our gaze to these interactions (from the wide repertoire) will allow us to put aside the musical scores and notations of policy and instead look closely at people (at all people) and how they jam together – which is the very essence of implementation.

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