**The art of translation: Rethinking implementation theory**

**Neta Sher Hadar**a,b

aSapir College; bMandel School for Educational Leadership

**Abstract**

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One of the more profound insights in policy studies reached in the late twentieth century was the idea that no matter how hard we try to impose structure, to delineate causality or to predict outcomes, the implementation process has a life of its own. This understanding remains one of the major sources of frustration for those involved in public policy—scholars and practitioners alike.

Over the years, several scholars have written eulogies for the study of policy implementation. From their point of view, although the topic is certainly worthy of study, the field of research has, by and large, reached a dead end (DeLeon 1999; Hupe 2014). Various attempts to organize or synthesize the many studies conducted have served only to support this conclusion (Barrett 2004; Hupe 2014; Hill and Hupe 2014; Lester and Goggin 1998; O’Toole and Montjoy 1984; Robichau and Lynn 2009; Schofield and Sausman 2004). Despite optimistic attempts to show advancement in this field, in the form of neo-implementation or advanced implementation studies (Hupe 2014; Saetren 2005), implementation seems to still be the missing link in policy studies (Hargrove 1975).

While the literature on implementation is extremely rich, it seems to focus on the unintended consequences of the implementation process. This article wishes to address a gap in the literature, and focus on the implementation act itself, regardless of its consequences on policy. Inspired by Latour’s Action-Network-Theory, this article suggests a different approach to studying implementation; it will argue that there is no such thing as ‘implementation,’ but only an assemblage of infinite interactions through which translation occurs. Based on this premise, studying implementation is, therefore, learning the act of policy translation. As will be argued, this shift in approach holds several advantages, the most prominent of them being the different types of implementation identified, which can enrich the implementation field of study.

This article consists of four sections. The first reflects on the current state of implementation research and elaborates on the implications of the way that research has been conducted up to now. The second section elaborates on an alternative framework for studying implementation; in the third section, which forms the core of this work, this alternative framework is applied to a concrete example. The article ends with a discussion on what we gain from this shift. It should be noted that this article is theoretical in nature, and the example is presented solely for purposes of illustration.

**Implementation: Theoretical background**

**Generally accepted assumptions for researching implementation**

Most would agree that the study of implementation—the process through which policy decisions are transformed into actual practice—has been a significant research topic since 1973, with the publication of Pressman and Wildavsky’s landmark book, *Implementation*. Their study refuted the somewhat naïve assumption that policy decisions would be implemented as long as the echelon in charge of carrying them out possessed the necessary qualifications or resources. Although problems relating to implementation had been on the research and practice agenda long before this date (Saetren 2014), Pressman and Wildavsky’s book inspired many other researchers to start delving into the variables potentially affecting the implementation process. Research in this field has raised four sets of questions that appear to stand between us and the ultimate understanding of implementation:

1. What is policy implementation? Where does it begin? Where does it end? What activities are regarded as implementation? Is it a residual concept? (Barrett 2004; Cohen and March 1986; Hupe and Hill 2016; McGrath 2009; Nakamura and Smallwood 1980; O’Toole 2000). After several years of divergent opinions, it appears that many now agree to the definition of implementation, as being ‘…what develops between the establishment of an apparent intention on the part of government to do something or to stop doing something and the ultimate impact in the world of action’ (O’Toole 2000, 266). However, this definition does not completely differentiate between the act of implementation and other concepts or actions in the policy process.
2. Who are the main actors or what are the main variables that influence the implementation process? Are they the decision makers? Are they the street-level bureaucrats? Mid-level? Are they the clients? What should we focus on? The individuals? Coalitions? Networks? Collaborations? Is it a matter of understanding multi-level governance (Bardach 1996; Barrett and Hill 1984; Carrington 2005; Culpepper 2000; Exworthy and Powell 2004; Ham and Hill 1984; Hill 2003; Hjern and Hull 1982; Hill and Hupe 2013; Hupe 2014; Koontz and Newig 2014; Lundin 2007; May and Winter 2007; Mead 2001; O’Toole 2000; Peters and Pierre 2001; Riccucci 2005; Ryan 1995; Sabatier 1986; Mazmanian and Sabatier 1983; Schofield and Sausman 2004; Shea 2011)? Will the shift in boundaries to encompass a feminist theory perspective enhance our ability to answer this question (Carey, Dickinson, and Olney 2017)? Should we focus on regimes rather than individual policies (May 2015)?
3. How should we evaluate implementation? By its process? By its outputs? By its outcomes? Can we evaluate it at all? Should we focus on what happens between the process and the outputs or outcomes? Between the inputs and outputs or outcomes? Accordingly, is implementation independent of other variables or not (Hupe and Hill 2016; Hill and Hupe 2014; Hupe 2014; Ramesh 2008; Robichau and Lynn 2009; Winter 1999)? Carey, Dickinson, and Olney (2017) framed this question by claiming that implementation research is about comparing the expected against the achieved. Could focusing on the target compliance gap (Weaver 2014) enrich the study of implementation?
4. What is the best way to study implementation? Using the policy cycle model, or the advocacy coalition model, or other innovative theoretical approaches? Should we continue to seek a useful synthesis? Should we conduct more case studies? Should we continue to place our hopes for the future in wide-ranging comparative research based on ever-larger sample data? Should we develop the study based on multi-layer development? (Hasenfeld and Brock 1991; Lundin 2007; McGrath 2009; O’Toole 2000; Ripley and Franklin 1982; Ryan 1995; Schofield and Sausman 2004; Wilkinson, Lowe, and Donaldson 2010). How rigorous and useful should the study be (Saetren 2014)? What is the best perspective from which to look at implementation? Hupe and Hill (2016) offer six perspectives in relation to the policy/implementation nexus: technical, normative, control, institutional and comparative, while pointing to the strength of each angle for research on implementation.

As previously suggested in this article, there have been numerous reviews of the literature on implementation over the years. As Saetren (2005) stated, the history of the field has become ‘common knowledge’ and is now largely supported empirically (Saetren 2014). Most reviews reveal a shared frustration that there are so many ways to approach the study of implementation, and even more ways to explain the process, and therefore see as an axiom 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; Dickenson 2011; Saetren 2014). Those researchers who have persisted with the study of implementation continue to grapple with three main research goals: framing a sufficiently useful synthesis; producing a shortlist of critical variables; and conducting valuable comparative research studies (DeLeon 2001; Hill and Hupe 2014; Hupe 2014; Matland 1995; O’Toole 2000). These studies can be approached from a wide range of perspectives, for example, by focusing less on policy implementation and more on policy regimes (May 2015), or by looking at how the street-level bureaucrat complies with the policy target. Nonetheless, the approach has always tended to look at the process of implementation between a policy and a result (Hupe 2014; Hupe and Hill 2003). As it stands, these studies all convene into three main streams of implementation studies, as discussed by Hupe (2014): the main implementation studies stream, neo-implementation studies and advanced implementation studies. These efforts are in thrall to one overarching question: what explains the variance in implementation processes and results when considered in the context of different periods of time, different policy realms, and various public bodies (Lester and Goggin 1998)?

Despite the general consensus among researchers that no new paradigm in implementation theory has evolved (Hupe 2014; Saetren 2005; Schofield 2004), the research to date does display a number of broad agreements on specific points: the research subject (something between a decision and an output or outcome); the research goal (reducing the implementation gap); the sources of complexity (the influence of multiple variables); and the main actors involved (the decision makers on the one hand and the implementers on the other).

These generally accepted assumptions have had a marked effect on the way research is conducted. They guide researchers in making decisions about where to look and what to look for when studying implementation. Accordingly, two sets of questions are to be addressed when examining the implementation process in a given situation.

* The first set of questions: What was the decision that started the process? What happened after it? Why is there such a difference between the initial intentions and the results?
* The second set of questions: What variables are prominent? How do they affect the initial policy goal? Are these variables a product of the context? Is there a difference compared with other contexts?

**Types of policy implementation**

A much less common way of looking at implementation research is to classify it into types. The most well-known classification, which tries to capture the implementation flow, is the top-down and the bottom-up classification (Elmore 1980; Lipsky 1977). Hupe and Hill (2003) expanded this categorization by adding the multi-layer perspective ,which Heidbreder (2017) further developed by considering the horizontal and vertical perspectives. Heidbreder posited that these perspectives enable policy makers to think in advance about the different conditions needed for more successful implementation and how to establish the best mechanism for the process. His suggested conceptualization offered four types of implementation: centralization, convergence, agencification and networking.

Another kind of classification tries to capture the nature of the implementation flow. Matland’s (1995) well-known synthesizing ambiguity-conflict model is an example of this. According to him, the crucial factors for any implementation process will vary depending on a policy’s level of conflict or ambiguity. He identified four implementation types: administrative, political, experimental and symbolic.

Finally, another way of categorizing implementation is to look at the different contexts that influence it. For example, Bressers and O’Toole (2005) drew a connection between types of constraints and the understanding of managing implementation. Chackerian and Mavima (2001) classified implementation by its interaction with other policy issues, making the interaction with other situations the basis for analysis and offering four types of implementation: synergy, avoidance, tradeoff and avoidance or synergy. Other studies speak of the critical considerations that influence the implementers. Brower et al. (2017) for example looked at the connection between the degree of compliance and behavior, resulting in four types of implementation patterns: oppositional, circumventing, satisfying and facilitative. Howlett (2004) discussed implementation style by tying together the constraints (resources and legitimacy), the nature of the policy targets, and their implications concerning the choice of a policy tool.

These attempts to categorize policy implementation are extremely interesting since they address the inherent complexity of implementation. However, these classifications up to now have been a continuation of the traditional approach to implementation studies. In this respect they continue to view implementation as elaborated above, and they consider that the goal of research is to narrow the implementation gap.

**Implementation types: From process-oriented to translation-oriented**

Bruno Latour (2007) argued for a change in the way social science is studied. His framework—the Actor-Network-Theory (ANT)—combines a broad definition of ‘actors’ studied in research and a different way of assembling categories in social science. Regarding the first point, Latour is known for his proposal to include non-human artifacts as actors in their own right. This approach ‘describes the enactment of materially and discursively heterogeneous relations that produce and reshuffle all kinds of actors including objects, subjects, human beings, machines, animals, “nature,” ideas, organizations, inequalities, scale and sizes, and geographical arrangements’ (Law 2009, 141). In other words, Latour considered all interactions, human and non-human, as important for understanding the subject of interest. As for the second point, Latour claimed that ‘it is possible to trace more study relations and discover more revealing patterns by finding a way to register the links between unstable and shifting frames of reference rather than by trying to keep one frame stable’ (Latour 2007, 24). In a nutshell, he argues that broadening the scope of social interactions to include non-human artifacts while tracing and re-categorizing ‘surprising events’ can enrich our understanding in social sciences. However, as Latour points out, while it relies on critical studies, ANT is not a theory but a framework for thinking about explanations. It is sensitive to ‘the messy practices of relationality and materiality of the world. Along with this sensibility comes a wariness of the large-scale claims common in social theory: these usually seem too simple’ (Law 2009, 142). This framework serves as a starting point to learn about power and structure by considering a broader range of components that collaborate and cooperate in their creation, proliferation and persistence (Martin 2000, 717).

Inspired by this framework, this article suggests approaching implementation from a different angle. Since implementation is an evolutionary process (Majone and Wildavsky 1984) that is difficult to predict, this paper proposes shifting the focus of research to look at interactions in the policy trail; through these interactions translation occurs, and the policy develops (Latour 2013, 41). Studying these translations and defining the various trajectories, as Latour calls them, does not offer new explanations to the classic implementation riddle, ‘why great expectations in Washington were dashed in Oakland’ (Pressman and Wildavsky 1984); nor does it clarify what motivates compliance (Weaver 2015). It simply looks at a policy regime to see what we can learn about the evolution process.

Hence, instead of implementation being studied as an evolutionary process (in an inductive or deductive manner, in any different layer of inquiry or from any chosen field of knowledge), the proposed approach is to look at the interactions throughout the policy regime (as defined by May 2015), without focusing too much on the policy itself. The guiding questions are: What interaction is observed? Between what or whom? What is involved? What is being translated? What has been transformed? What categories can we create for implementation from each interaction?

These interactions ‘translate’ the policy. Although many have discussed the impact translation has on explaining the gap between intention and impact (Barrett 2004), this study wishes to consider translation not as an independent variable that explains implementation but as a dependent variable, hence, as the essence of implementation. This shifts the focus in a different direction, in which one should ask ‘what kind of implementation am I looking at?’ and not only ‘what happened?,’ from the perspective of a researcher; or ‘what didn’t I think of?,’ from the perspective of the practitioner.

The word ‘translation’ comes from the Latin meaning ‘carried across’. According to the *Oxford Dictionary*, it means ‘the process of translating words or text from one language into another,’ or ‘the conversion of something from one form or medium into another’.[[1]](#footnote-2) Due to the understanding that when carrying out a policy (the known meaning of implementation) it is actually carried across, i.e., it progresses as and how it is carried across the meaning of implementation grows. For example, this opens questions about cultural implementation that reveal how context influences engagements or professional implementation (which investigates what scaling up actually needs and many other important categories).

Latour (2007) posited that ‘there is no society, no social realm, and no social ties, but there exist translations between mediators that may generate traceable associations’ (108). In implementation terms, borrowing from Latour’s argument, there is no such thing as ‘implementation,’ but rather an evolutionary process that develops due to interactions through which the act of translation occurs. Therefore, the approach proposed in this article is to detach implementation research from the *process* that follows an intention or decision from whatever level of government, and to consider implementation to be the numerous points of *interaction* along the policy trail.

The result of this shift in implementation study is the ability to create new and interesting implementation categories. These categories move away from the top-down, bottom-up perspective as well as from the new multi-layer perspective and do not attempt to predict the unfolding of the implementation process. The goal is rather to help us understand the different features that set the evolution of the policy process in motion. This way of inquiry has some crucial implications for ‘implementation,’ first as a concept and second as ‘the missing link in the policy process’ (Hargrove 1975).

**A brief example of the new approach to studying implementation: School anti-violence policy**

According to our new approach elaborated in the previous section, the research question would no longer focus on the implementation *process*, but on the *interactions* in the policy trail; it is through these interactions that translation occurs and that new trajectories that can teach us about implementation are defined.

To illustrate the new approach, two actors—a former school principal and a former high-ranking civil servant—were chosen to describe the implementation of a policy to reduce school violence. The two were interviewed about their involvement in the implementation of the policy over the years. The purpose of the interviews was not to generate findings that would subsequently be subjected to validity tests; it was simply to exemplify the different angles and to suggest some possible conclusions.

**The narratives**

The question put to both interviewees was: ‘What did you do to implement the ministry’s policy against violence in school?’ Throughout the interviews many of the decisions the ministry had taken over the years were raised. Both interviewees knew the ministry’s rules in great depth, but most importantly both quickly departed from the policy implementation narrative to discuss other ‘stories’ that were not part of the anti-violence policy narrative. These stories were not simply anecdotes, nor did they represent a lack of discipline in the storytelling process, but rather they were foundational and insightful. Eventually the original implementation trail merged into other policy trails, making it impossible to distinguish between them. For example, one interviewee spoke about his policy in running a school in times of terror attacks, and the second interviewee spoke about his professional development while working with his peers. They also spoke about their relationship with their staff, their pupils, or the school parents during occasions that had nothing to do with school violence; or they spoke about the subject in relation to other policies, such as the development of their professional identity over the years. As a general rule, there was no clear connection to the supposedly central implementation process.

Both spoke of different timelines as important for understanding ‘implementation’. This was so prominent that at a point no decision in the policy issue, or other policies for that matter, were at the center. The narrative jumped between the past, present and future as though their importance was only their impact on the character telling the story. For example, both elaborated on their professional opinion formed from the various roles they had performed. At times allusions to past events were based on future interpretations. For example, the school principal has become a principal trainer, and he elaborated on the responsibility and its articulation according to his experience. While explaining it he gave examples from his own work, leaving the listener unable to know if it was an interpretation in retrospect or not.

Last, the narrative evolved through the various interactions they have had over the years, some related to the issues and some not. Without being asked, the first interviewee spontaneously combined in his story interactions with: himself, his spouse, his staff, parents, children, inspectors, the director general’s circular, the neighborhood of the school, the shop owners around the school, the concept in question (‘violence’), the litter on the ground, and many other aspects. The other interviewee jumped between different angles of the anti-violence policy he was part of, making the policy maker and implementer one, all subject to the different interactions that occurred to him along the way. In his narrative the interactions with non-human artifacts, such as the director general’s circular or evaluation reports, were extremely important in understanding the developments in the policy. While the interviewees mentioned an important number of interactions, it is interesting to note that many of them were not directly connected to the implementation of the policy in question. For example, the interviewer caught dialogs that the interviewee had with himself, or in his mind, with actors he did not actually speak to in the specific situation he was describing (but was sure he knew what they would say or do). For example, the principal described the inner space design he applied in his school. While doing so he wondered if when the ministry articulates the director general’s circular they consider school design as having a significant role in preventing violence.

In summary, the narratives built were interesting due to three features: other policies were revealed to be as important as the policy studied; the timing of the policy was irrelevant to understanding implementation; and the number of interactions, human and non-human, helped reveal the act of translation in the policy process, hence what happens in implementation.

**Initial findings: Types of implementation**

Looking closely at the interactions, different types of implementation can be discerned. These are defined by the type of interaction, the facets of the interaction, the content of the interaction and the reaction to it. Hence they exemplify what influences the act of translation which is, as we argue here, the very essence of implementation.

*Routine implementation*

Many interactions are technical, repetitive and ‘regular’. They represent the core boundaries of a specific role and consist of the routine work of the specific implementer. The boundaries of this type of implementation form the basis of what Simon (1960) called programed decisions. Such decisions (and associated actions) are known only to the implementer, even though this knowledge can be partly tacit (Polanyi [1966] 2009). Max Weber considered this situation when he analyzed bureaucratic organizations. In his thinking, the optimum organization is similar to a machine, and the organizational literature is replete with many theorists referring to this administrative feature (Morgan 1997). Whatever name we choose, this implementation type encompasses decisions and actions that are natural and that represent a habit for the professional. In our example, the interviewees elaborated on the school routine after a violent incident; on the consultation forums and pedagogical forums that exist in their school; on the actions taken when they receive a director general’s circular and so on.

It is important to notice that routine does not reflect acceptance, or lack of it, of any policy but rather specifies the actions that are standard practice for the implementer—that person’s reactions, standard operating procedures, self-defense mechanisms and so on—in routine engagements. For example, one interviewee described how he read reports, reacted to data and what actions he took after. Studying the routine interactions revealed actors that are not always considered in designing or implementing policy, students being the most obvious example. They seemed to influence the implementers more than the policy itself. These actors were relevant when they were present and when they were not present. For example, both interviewees suggested that students knew how the interviewee would respond to a routine action and knew what they would need to do to comply, even if they disagreed with it.

Furthermore, looking at routine reflects the evolution in the actor’s behavior. Routine has its effect on people, and defining these routines reveals the implementer’s personal ‘geological layers’ (attitude, deviation, etc.). As one interviewee said: ‘You can’t always implement all of them (the director general’s circular – \*\*\*). You choose the places you want to focus on.’

In sum, this implementation layer characterizes interactions where the implementer is carrying out routine work, within the boundaries of his or her role. This routine is not technical in nature. Decisions or actions are taken naturally and are sometimes known only to the implementer. This implementation type could help identify new categories of professional behavior and new groups of actors that have hitherto gone unnoticed.

*Professional dialogical implementation*

Interactions, by their nature, are dialogical. Professional dialogs can uncover different understandings of an issue or different attitudes toward it (in terms of knowledge and values).

At the beginning of the interview, both interviewees asserted their position on the issue very clearly. One interviewee said, ‘We treat violence as a disciplinary issue…’ The other interviewee said, ‘Violence is not the issue but a symptom.’ Obviously, these different viewpoints would pave different paths and would engage the implementers in different interactions, translating differently.

In our interviews, much of the discussion around professional dialogical implementation reflected agreements—and mostly disagreements—among professionals and/or professions. These were about knowledge and values. Regarding knowledge, one of the interviewees disagreed with the ministry’s anti-violence policy that was based on the ‘zero tolerance for violence’ program. According to him, ‘I am pro discretion. …this discretion needs to be professional. Our profession is education and this discretion is relevant for other things that go on in school.’ Moreover, with both interviewees there seemed to be disagreement regarding what is at the heart of the issue: the individual and his needs or the organization and the entire community. Regarding values, the interviewees revealed what they considered as right and wrong, and provided some insight into the values that influence their reactions and translation in each interaction. Speaking about a vandalism incident in school, one interviewee said, ‘I feel that it was a complete loss of faith… Someone thinks that if no one saw what he did there is no reward or punishment, there is no accountability for things. I think this is horrible.’ The same interviewee also said he believed everything should be transparent: ‘Another thing that is important to me is not to hide anything, not to be ashamed to say anything…to put things on the table.’ This was in conflict with the approach of his staff and his peers; and he described it as being rather surprising to them. The second interviewee said that he was not a supporter of accepting a child to school on a probationary basis: ‘There is no such thing. If we’ve checked everything out and decided to accept you, you are ours.’

Studying the implementer’s interactions regarding disagreements reveals three interesting features. The first reflects personal doubts, such as the interviewee that said, ‘Violence as a disciplinary matter and not as a disciplinary issue. I do not even know what to call it… We usually relate discipline to the place between teacher and student. Violence is not categorized in this place… I can’t even remember what definition it’s under in the circular. As a disciplinary matter or school regularities.’

The second feature comprises imaginary interactions that are based on a history of disputes, such as the interviewee that said, ‘Many parents were mad at me, asking, “Why did you send home a child that only cursed?” My answer was that they should say thank you that I sent home a child that cursed.’ The other interviewee said he ‘knows that there are many things that children don’t tell’. As he elaborated, he found out a few years later when the children finally shared it with him.

The third feature is completely imaginary; a result of an interaction between the implementer and his image of other actors and artifacts in his mind. For example, one of the interviewees said he ‘didn’t have any training about dealing with violence in school…this is what years in school taught me’. As a result, the interviewee concluded that you need to ‘understand that the deeper question is climate, and school climate is a question for the school staff and not a question of rules, regulation and circulars’.

To sum up, this type of implementation encompasses interactions concerning the different attitudes and approaches to the issue at hand. These diverse professional dialogs can highlight different professional groups that can be defined. For example, while we tend to speak about school leaders as one homogenous group, studying implementation can reveal that there are in fact different types of leaders, such as creative, novice, experienced and so on.

*Epistemological implementation*

Much has been said about the effects of different epistemologies and/or ontologies on decision-making (Tverskey and Kahneman 1974; Kahneman 2011; Leonard and Thaler 2008). Implementation is sensitive to this as well. As one interviewee said in a ‘moment of truth’: his entire implementation strategy was ‘totally intuition—trial and error’.

In implementation, this influence has several expressions. For example, implementation is sensitive to prior events, what is known as anchoring. One interviewee said that he truly understood the feeling of the student that suffers from violence after a time when the violence was aimed at him. The other interviewee raised a prior prejudice toward school managers (understanding that prejudice can have positive as well as negative content). He said, ‘School principals that are in this job, the base for their work is the love for humans and the intention to do well. They aren’t technocrats looking for promotion or power.’ This is known as representativeness.

Explanations are given in light of prior assumptions and knowledge: one interviewee connected the violence issue to the concept of ‘responsibility’. At one point he noted, ‘All the school managers are responsible for all the children, in the city or in the country.’ All his decisions and actions were perceived from this standpoint.

The narratives revealed elements of the ‘signature pedagogy’ Schulman (2005) refers to, in that they are linked to how the interviewees were educated for their profession. One interviewee referred to an article he had read ‘on the connection between violence and light’. The other interviewee referred to his practice of reading and analyzing data to enable him to take a hands-on approach to events in school.

This opens the door for manipulations in implementation interactions and power relations. One interviewee mentioned a measure he took after a series of vandalism cases. He understood that a radical stand was needed, and so he announced that cameras would be placed around school, leaving no area unmonitored. He described the interactions with the students, who tried to guess where he had put the cameras and failed to realize that he had only *said* he would install them. His announcement was enough to dissuade the offenders.

In summary, each interaction has two levels of translation—the one actually happening and the one perceived by the two sides interacting. Learning from these may shed light on the different predispositions and diversions of implementers, enabling us to reflect on practices and myths in implementation regimes.

*Argumentative (Flagship) implementation*

Interactions, by their nature, are interpretive; each interaction is built on social constructs and on power relations that characterize the context. Implementation is also subject to this framework, and studying the interactions reveals much about social constructs and discourse. In this implementation type, we can discern the implementers’ notions about society and context.

For example, one of the interviewees elaborated on how his interaction with the school structure was reflected in his interactions with students and staff. Instead of creating a role of a school monitor/discipliner, he located his office ‘in a place where I see what’s going on’. This decision determined the relationships between him and other actors, as well as among the actors themselves. For example, for the students the principal was constantly present. For the secretaries it meant much more work, which according to him ‘they didn’t like it that they had to come to me’. For him it meant that he did not have a secretary who ‘screened’ whoever wanted to meet with him, making him a very accessible principal. Both interviewees emphasized the place of the parents as crucial for their actions. In fact, the parents and the children were the most prominent characters in the implementation process, as they determined and influenced the policy more than the actual ‘official policy’.

This implementation type also touched upon social discourse and power relations among different groups in society. For example, one interviewee raised the dilemma of empowering children through more flexible pedagogy, whilst knowing it to be a platform that could enable violence. How do we create a balance between the two? The other interviewee criticized the attitude toward at-risk youth. He said, ‘The unbearable ease with which principals kick kids out of schools is a fundamental problem that needs to be taken care of.’ He created a policy that ‘a principal that won’t expel students will benefit’. This policy was an attempt to confront the generally accepted policy of excluding and ignoring the weakest students, mostly involved in school violence.

Another example of argumentative implementation was the influence the school environment had on policies designed by the interviewee, such as policies on violence outside the school or on terror attacks. This made the translation sensitive to context (environment, timing and personalities).

To summarize, interactions can tell us a lot about power relations, and can reveal what orders implementers are seeking to preserve and what they are acting to change. Studying this implementation type provides insight into social orders and might shed light on policy issues that otherwise would go unnoticed.

**Conclusion: What have we gained?**

Myles Horton and Paulo Freire documented their conversations on education and social change in the book *We Make the Road by Walking* (edited by Bell, Gaventa, and Peters 1990). In their introduction they explain that this phrase is ‘an adaptation of a proverb by the Spanish poet Antonio Machado, in which one line reads “se hace camino al andar,” or “you make the way as you go”’ (6).

Inspired by ANT, this article suggested studying ‘implementation’ from the ‘road’ by focusing on the various interactions (human and non-human) in a policy regime and on the translation that occurs in this interaction between the implementer and the policy subject. This shift results in the accumulation of new trajectories that contribute to the study of implementation, by considering it in terms of its essence and what affects it.

The approach proposed in his article offers several advantages, as summarized below:

* **In terms of the future**: It is generally considered that implementation is doomed to fail because the implementation gap is a given. However, opening up research to the more positive aspects of this gap gives hope for future research possibilities.
* **In terms of the essence of implementation as a concept:** This course of inquiry detaches implementation from rank or context and can finally seal the cap on the questions: who is the implementer? and who is the decision maker?; it supports the idea that implementation does not necessarily require a decision in order for it to occur; and it finally implies that implementation has an essence of its own and is not just a residual concept. Moreover, this shift makes the policy narrative richer as it incorporates other overlapping policy issues; it is open to the influence of various actors (human and non-human); and it is indifferent to the policy timing.
* **In terms of the research process**: Initially this approach invites ethnographic methodologies, which actually observe and record the interactions (Latour 1987; Martin 2000). Practically, it accommodates many kinds of methodologies, depending on the epistemological method of each researcher: from methodologies that observe the different interactions to learn about the translation in real time (as ethnography) to methodologies that learn about the interactions in retrospect (as in narrative analysis or quantitative large N methods).
* **In terms of the research outcomes:** The most significant gain from this process relates to the new implementation types that it identified. Instead of inquiring into what influences the implementation gap, this article looked into what happens within implementation. Four implementation types were identified: routine implementation, professional dialogical implementation, epistemological implementation and argumentative (flagship) implementation. These can teach us about the meaning of various factors (professionalism, human reactions to situations, human filtering and framing, and social constructs) in implementing—hence, in translating policy. Moreover, within these types new implementation categories could be distinguished. For example, within the argumentative implementation type, new categories could be formed, such as implementation circles (who’s in or out), professionals vs. administration and so on. Other types and categories will most likely emerge from further research.

[Paul Auster](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Paul_Auster) is quoted as saying, ‘Translators are the shadow heroes of literature, the often-forgotten instruments that make it possible for different cultures to talk to one another, who have enabled us to understand that we all, from every part of the world, live in one world.’ Implementers have traditionally been at the bottom of the ladder of all those involved in the theory and practice of policy. Seeing implementers as translators, as professional translators, who act under uncertainty and ever-changing conditions, puts them in the spotlight where they are no longer shadow heroes. They enable our understanding and, in policy, they create reality as we know it.

This article aimed to contribute to implementation studies by proposing a shift in the way we perceive and therefore study implementation. While the actual research is still to come, this article has nonetheless offered a theoretical indication for research on implementation. Further studies, including empirical evidence, are necessary to understand the interactions and the basic elements that implementation comprises. The hope is that these studies will prove that the eulogies written for implementation studies over the years have been premature.

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