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## Commentary

# What's Policy Got to Do with It? How the Structure-Agency Debate Can Illuminate Policy Implementation

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How does policy influence human behavior? All theories of policy implementation have at their root assumptions about the nature of human action. Some (e.g., principal-agent theories) emphasize autonomous actors making a series of individual choices to maximize their interests. Studies of policy implementation in this vein (e.g., Lane 2013; Loeb and McEwan 2006; Sabatier and Mazmanian 1980) investigate how policy design—often the balance between sanctions and rewards—shapes individual choices and how that, in turn, relates to intended and unintended outcomes. Other theories (e.g., social networks) focus on the ways that individual action is shaped by social interaction and peer effects. Studies that take a network perspective on implementation (e.g., Coburn, Russell, et al. 2012; Frank et al. 2004) investigate how individuals' embeddedness in systems of social relations influences what they learn about policy in the first place and how they respond.

Other theories of implementation (e.g., sensemaking theory, institutional theory) focus on the way that individuals' and groups' interpretations of policy are shaped by cultural ideas available to them in the environment. This approach (e.g., Bridwell-Mitchell 2015; Burch 2007; Coburn 2004; Spillane et al. 2002) investigates how cultural ideas are embedded in social structure, influencing what individuals even think to do as they implement policies in the classroom,

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and how individuals' interpretations of policy may significantly shape enactment. Still other approaches (e.g., some strains of critical theory) focus on the way that power is embedded in policy, shaping how actors respond whether they are aware of it or not. In this account, power is not invoked explicitly but is expressed through "routine, ongoing practices that advantage particular groups without those groups necessarily establishing or maintaining those practices" (Lawrence 2008, 176). In these accounts, individuals may act unwittingly to enact policy that ultimately disadvantages them.

These different approaches to studying policy implementation put forth quite different accounts of the nature of human agency, traversing the terrain from unfettered individual choice through different formulations of conditioned agency to heavily socialized views where action is dictated by the social structure. These assumptions about human agency, in turn, inform what the researcher pays attention to in his or her research design and the inferences he or she draws from data. Yet these assumptions are rarely acknowledged by implementation scholars, much less interrogated.

Rather than making assumptions about the nature of human agency at the root of policy implementation, the articles in this volume take it on as an object of empirical inquiry. They envision policy as one aspect of the larger social structure. Policy is a set of rules, often supported by resources, that attempts to constrain or channel behavior in particular directions through regulative, normative, or cognitive means (Anagnostopoulos and Rutledge 2007; Coburn 2005). Thus, it is an important facet of social structure, or "the patterning of social activities and relations through time and across space . . . incorporating rules, relations and resources reproduced over time" (Scott 2008, 78). Implementing policy depends upon the ability of this aspect of social structure to shape individual and collective action to bring about desired goals. Thus, the question of policy implementation is fundamentally about the relationship between social structure and agency. Agency can be understood as "an actor's ability to have some effect on the social world—altering the rules, relational ties, or distribution of resources" (Scott 2008, 77). The structure-agency question has been central to the discipline of sociology for decades (Giddens 1979; Sewell 1992; Thornton et al. 2008). The articles in this volume bring conceptual tools from the structure-agency debate to investigate and explain educational policy implementation.

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## Representations of the Relationship between Structure and Agency

Taken together, the articles in this volume put forth a vision of human agency that sits somewhere between the poles of the fully atomized actor with unfettered individual choice and the deeply socialized one in which actors unwittingly act to reproduce the social structure. However, each article represents the relationship between structure and agency in somewhat different ways.

First, in her study of school leaders' strategies for attracting students in post-Katrina New Orleans, Huriya Jabbar shows how policy can shape the social structure within which action unfolds. She provides evidence that individual choices are constrained by the individual's location in the social structure; policy shapes individual choice by influencing this social structure. Jabbar explains how policies after Hurricane Katrina reconfigured what had been a typical big-city school district into multiple charter networks, a state-run Recovery School District for underperforming schools, and the original school district, now greatly reduced in size. This policy action created very different market conditions for different schools as they competed for students; these conditions reified existing disparities in race and class. Jabbar shows that a school's location in the market hierarchy and competitive network (constructed from school leaders' perceptions of who they were in competition with) shaped what strategic actions school leaders even considered as they competed for students in the education marketplace. School leaders with different levels of status and competition considered very different strategic actions. Her analysis suggests that not all school leaders had the same choices available to them. Rather, district policy in the post-Katrina era fostered a market hierarchy that shaped the strategic choices that were available to actors in the first place. In this account, individuals have the ability to take strategic action, but within a constrained set of choices.

Whereas Jabbar highlights the structural constraints on individual action, the articles by Sarah Woulfin and Jessica Rigby highlight cultural and normative ones. Drawing on the concept of institutional logics from institutional theory (Scott 2008; Thornton et al. 2008), Woulfin shows how policy can promote these logics: integrated sets of ideas, practices, rules, and roles that can shape the actions of individual actors. In this case, she shows how multiple logics of appropriate reading instruction that were prominent in the environment and promoted by the district put forth contrasting visions of the goals of reading instruction, theory of action for achieving these goals, ideas about teacher and student roles, and ideas about appropriate instructional approaches. She shows how district reading coaches—the staff charged with helping teachers implement these policies—encouraged teachers to enact hybrid approaches that involved ideas and practices from both logics. In Woulfin's account, logics embedded in policy did not dictate coaches' action. Rather, they provided a

feedstock of ideas, approaches, and practices that coaches drew upon and combined in different ways in their work with teachers. In so doing, the coaches mediated policy. Although coaches acted strategically as they combined and recombined elements of the logics, the strategic choices that they worked with were shaped by the logics that were available in the environment and embedded in the social structure.

Rigby extends this idea, demonstrating how logics can become embedded in social networks that reinforce some ideas about appropriate action and not others. She shows how first-year principals in the same district had distinctly different social networks—people that they went to for advice about their leadership practice. By analyzing the content of interaction in these networks, she shows that a given leader's network provided access to some logics of instructional leadership and not others. In this way, she highlights how individuals are embedded not only in formal organizational structures but also in systems of social relations. These systems of social relations can influence what ideas are available to individuals, shaping the cultural ideas they are working with as they construct their leadership practice.

Virginie März, Geert Kelchtermans, and Xavier Dumay illustrate a third way that policy-as-social-structure enables and constrains individual action: by shaping individuals' sense of who they are as professionals. This sense of the professional self is important because it guides individuals' views of the appropriate actions and roles they should take. März, Kelchtermans, and Dumay use longitudinal data to show how a new policy on new teacher mentoring transformed the way that the mentors in one school thought about themselves as professionals and enacted their roles. These new visions of the role of mentors were sustained and, indeed, further institutionalized by the actions of school leaders and mentors themselves, even as the formal policy went away. This account shows how policy can create new roles and patterns of interaction in schools that can then be self-reproducing, echoing research by Dobbin (2009) on the history of human resource professionals in the wake of federal Equal Employment Opportunity Commission legislation. März and colleagues' analysis reminds us that policy does not institutionalize itself; it requires human agency to do so.

Finally, Laura Bray and Jennifer Lin Russell illustrate the way that policy can reach down into schools and shape social interaction in profound ways. By analyzing interactions of parents, students, and school staff in individual education plan (IEP) conferences, they show how the protocol that guided the conference and reflected special education policy structured the roles, focus, and talk in the meetings. In so doing, it granted more power to school personnel to speak and shape the agenda for the meeting, creating highly constrained roles for parents and students. However, parents and students were not without

agency. There were occasions when they disrupted the interaction routine. But these moments were few and far between in Bray and Russell's account. The authors show how policy plays a powerful role not only in shaping action and interaction in schools but also in reproducing power relations among school personnel, parents, and students that the face-to-face meetings were intended to disrupt.

### Lessons for Policy Implementation

By investigating the ways that social structure constrains and enables agency in the implementation process, these articles make several important contributions to our understanding of policy implementation. First, they identify multiple mechanisms by which policy influences individual action and interaction. These mechanisms include but move quite a bit beyond those typically highlighted by scholars (e.g., incentive structures [Boyd et al. 2005; Marsh et al. 2011] and policy instruments [McDonnell and Elmore 1987]). The articles highlight the way that policy influences action by creating structural changes in the system as a whole that constrain and channel strategic choices of individuals in different social locations (Jabbar). They show how policy can put forth new ideas, practices, and categories that are carried through interpersonal social and professional networks (Rigby) and are combined and recombined in the course of individuals' work (Woulfin). Policy can also create conditions for people to rethink who they are and how it is appropriate to act (März et al.). Policy can even reach deep into schools to structure the microprocesses of social interaction in face-to-face settings through the use of meeting protocols and guidelines (Bray and Russell). Thus, these articles highlight a range of mechanisms of policy impact that are rarely acknowledged by policymakers and implementation researchers alike.

Second, these articles uncover the microprocesses of institutionalization at the heart of policy implementation. Implementation scholars have argued that the process of policy implementation is, at root, a process of institutionalization (Honig 2006). In this view, implementation can be measured by the degree that it alters the rules, roles, and patterns of interaction in a social setting and how that, in turn, influences valued outcomes. The articles in this volume show that process of institutionalization is rooted in a recursive relationship between social structure and human agency. They show how individual actions, constrained by existing social structures, also serve to change or reinforce those structures. For example, März and her colleagues not only show how the new mentoring policy influenced how mentor teachers thought of themselves as professionals, they also show how the actions mentors and school leaders took, guided by these new understandings, remade the roles and responsibilities of new teacher mentors and

led to greater formalization in what had, up to that point, been an informal role. Thus, they show how the new mentoring policy prompted changes in school rules, roles, and relationships that were institutionalized as part of the social structure of the school. But policy implementation does not always lead to change in the social structure. Indeed, Bray and Russell illustrate how federal special education policy in the form of a protocol that followed federal regulations, rather than interrupting the typical roles of parents and students in the IEP conference, reinforced them. In this account, the existing social structure was reproduced by human action—in this case, the interaction that unfolded in the IEP routine—despite efforts to alter that structure. By focusing on the recursive relationship between structure and agency, these articles provide insight into how local action on the ground can become sedimented into social structure. They also remind us that implementation is a process, not an event. It unfolds in fits and starts over time, across multiple levels of the system, sometimes long after the initiation of the policy (as is the case in the articles by Jabbar and by Bray and Russell) and even after the policy goes away (as in the case in März and her colleagues' article). They further highlight the importance of broadening the focus of implementation studies beyond how policy influences individual actions to studies of how these actions accumulate into changes in the social structure as well.

Third, these articles highlight the multifaceted role of power in the implementation process. By virtue of their focus on agency, the articles highlight individuals' power to make strategic choices and to disrupt, mediate, combine, and interpret in the implementation process. But, by foregrounding how social structure constrains and enables these actions, they also highlight the way that power is institutionalized in the social structure. This is because constraints on agency are not evenly distributed. Individual agency is constrained and enabled in different ways and to different degrees among individuals in different locations in the social structure. For example, Jabbar shows that school leaders in different schools can be positioned differently in the market hierarchy and social structure of competition, shaping the options that they even consider for strategic action. Articles by Rigby and Woulfin show how individuals in the same role (school leaders in Rigby's case, district coaches in Woulfin's) have different access to information, ideas, and approaches that they use to construct their practices by virtue of their positions in social structure. Bray and Russell show how parents and students have very different opportunities to raise questions and contribute to IEP conferences than do professional educators. This state of affairs leads to different opportunities to influence the educational services that students receive.

Thus, these articles show how existing relations of power—shaped by history, politics, institutionalized roles, and positions in social networks—enable and constrain the roles one can play in the implementation process. This analysis

may provide an explanation for why policy can sometimes reinforce existing structures of inequality rather than interrupt them, even when the policy is designed to address this inequality, as was (arguably) the case in the choice policies in Jabbar's article and special education regulations in Bray and Russell's. These articles also provide insight into the possibility for interrupting existing power relations (e.g., disruption highlighted by Bray and Russell or strategic combining and recombining in Woulfin) but remind us that these avenues of possibility are conditioned by social location in a system of power relations.

### Questions for Future Research

The articles in this volume also raise a series of questions that can productively inform future research in this arena. First, we have long known that policy implementation unfolds at multiple levels of the educational system (Cohen and Spillane 1993). These articles, with their focus on different levels of the system, illustrate how the strategic choices, mediation, interpretation, and disruption that are central to implementation processes are happening at each of these different levels, likely simultaneously. However, perhaps because researchers—including those included in this volume—tend to focus on these processes at a single level of the system at a time, we continue to lack guidance on how processes at different levels of the system mutually implicate one another.<sup>1</sup> For example, Jabbar's article provides insight into implementation at the level of the city, as actions of school principals shape the social structure of competitive networks in the city as a whole. But how do these dynamics inform implementation processes within a given school? In other words, what is the relationship between field-level implementation processes and school- and classroom-level ones? Similarly, when do microlevel implementation processes such as those described by März and her colleagues and Bray and Russell impact dynamics or policy implementation in school districts or the larger field? We need more multilevel studies that investigate how processes unfolding at one level implicate other levels, and how that influences social structure as a whole. The field would especially benefit from studies that not only look at how these processes at higher levels of the system implicate lower ones but also attend to the opposite relationship.

Second, several articles highlight how constraints on agency may differ depending upon an individual's location in the social system. But when can policy interrupt existing power relations, and when does it simply reinforce them? These articles and others (e.g., Spillane et al. 2011) provide examples of instances in which rules, roles, and authority relations are, in fact, reconstructed in the implementation processes. But, as a field, we continue to have limited

understanding of when and under what conditions this occurs. At the micro-level, when can the sorts of disruption that Bray and Russell document result in shifts in the modal roles and interaction patterns in IEP conferences, or the kinds of services that students receive as a result? When can actors like the coaches in Woulfin's study creatively combine logics from the environment and mediate policy in ways that reshape teacher and student roles in classrooms, and when do they reinforce existing structures? This question is especially urgent given that educational policy often seeks to reshape social structure as a mechanism to bring about positive outcomes for students. The question is, When and under what conditions is it able to do so?

Third, how does the nature of the broader policy environment matter for how implementation processes unfold? Some institutional theorists outside of education have argued that the relationship between structure and agency may differ depending upon the degree to which a particular role, practice, logic, or approach is institutionalized in the broader environment (Fligstein 2001; Goodrick and Salancik 1996; Powell 1991). When rules, roles, and logics are deeply institutionalized, action and interaction tends to follow more standard scripts as they are supported by shared understanding of the nature of the work and how it should unfold. It is when practices, rules, or roles are not institutionalized in the environment or when they are contested that you see more negotiation, hybridization, and variability in practice across settings. The fact that there are multiple salient logics of instructional leadership in Rigby's study and multiple logics of reading instruction in Woulfin's suggests that the logics at play are not deeply institutionalized or that institutionalized logics are facing serious challenges from new ones.

By contrast, the IEP conferences in Bray and Russell's article have had a long history. The practice, and its concomitant roles, are deeply institutionalized in the environment. If the level of institutionalization in the broader environment matters, you would expect to see more scripted behavior and less variability in IEP conferences within and across schools and more creative and variable hybridization of ideas and approaches in implementation of reading policy and instructional leadership. That is exactly what we see here. However, because all the articles in this volume focus on a single policy, it is impossible to investigate the role of the level of institutionalization in the broader environment in the policy implementation process. This suggests the need for policy implementation studies that compare policies that operate in environments with varying degrees of institutionalization in a common set of schools or school districts. All of this suggests the need for policy implementation studies that compare policies that differ in their level of institutionalization in the environment in a common set of schools or school districts. Studies of these types have the potential to provide insight into the nature of the implementation challenges



facing a given initiative and may help explain variability in patterns of agency and constraint across implementation processes.

## Final Thoughts

In other work (Coburn, Hill, et al., forthcoming), my colleagues and I have argued that the field of policy implementation suffers from the propensity to learn the same lessons over and over again. Leadership matters. Teachers' learning communities matter. Teacher quality matters. If we are to move the field forward, it is important to dig beneath what are now truisms to uncover the underlying mechanisms by which these factors matter. Theories of the relationship between structure and agency may be one vehicle for doing just that. The strength of this approach is that there is an especially good match between what these theories seek to explain (dynamics of stability and change; relationship between individuals, organizations, and social structure) and the phenomenon of policy implementation. Most policies in education seek to foster change in organizations (schools and school systems) by shaping or channeling individual behavior in particular directions. As instruments of government, they act as an important part of the social structure. Theories of structure and agency provide conceptual tools for understanding when and how aspects of social structure (in this case policy) influence individual action and interaction and how that, in turn, reinforces or alters rules, roles, and relationships in schools and school systems. That is, they provide a way to uncover the microprocess by which social structure influences action, and how action, in turn, influences institutionalization. In so doing, theories of structure and agency promise to get at underlying processes that might illuminate the following: why do leaders respond the way that they do when faced with new policies? Or, how can policy interrupt business as usual on the ground in ways that create new possibilities for change? Or, when and under what conditions are policies able to spur changes that interrupt existing relations of power, authority, and inequality? These are central questions in the policy implementation literature. The articles in this volume provide a solid start at using theories of structure and agency to address them. In so doing, they point us in a promising direction to take the field of policy implementation to the next level.

## Note

1. Many of the articles in this volume are interested in multiple levels of the system. However, they typically investigate how superordinate levels of the system implicate a single level rather than how processes at multiple levels of the system implicate one another.

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