

Connecting Micro, Mezzo, and Macro Processes in Collaborative Policy Implementation

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“In public administration as governance, it is essential that we do not diminish our institutions to such an extent that we lose our capacity to support the development of sound public policy, as well as our ability to effectively implement that policy.”

- H. George Frederickson, *The Spirit of Public Administration*, 1997

The practice of public administration is rooted in the reality that we need organizations to collaborate within and across sectors to implement public policy. This has always been the case but we have seen renewed focus on collaboration as a way to address “wicked problems” in recent decades. As a field, I would like to see stronger connections between various strands of PA literature and among micro, mezzo, and macro elements of collaboration. I think these connections will enable us to develop better frameworks, theories, and models to support sound policy development and collaborative policy implementation that is responsive to citizen demands. It may also move us away from over emphasizing cost efficiency and fraud detection and reduction at the expense of other public values.

Building Bridges among Research Silos

PA scholarship has treated collaboration from a number of vantage points; contracting, collaborative governance, networks, and co-production are just a few. With limited exception, this research has been developed in silos. While these strands tend to focus on different elements of collaboration with varying emphasis on micro, mezzo, and macro processes that shape collaboration, they are all concerned with collaborative behavior to implement public policy. Similarities abound. For example, Emerson and Nabatchi (2015) define collaborative governance as “the processes and structures of public policy decision making and management that engage people across the boundaries of public agencies, levels of government, and/or the public, private, and civic spheres to carry out a public purpose that could not otherwise be accomplished.” If I did not know this definition was developed specifically for collaborative governance, I might also apply it to contracts or public service delivery networks, yet contracting and network literature have developed their own definitions and there is little citation across these silos. Silos prevents us from having important discussions about how to move the field

forward and diminishes our ability to be relevant to the practice of public administration. How can we get busy administrators to take us seriously if we are continuously recreating the wheel with new terms and phrases to describe similar phenomena?

We should also strive to make greater connections between micro, mezzo, and macro level elements of collaboration. By micro elements, I mean individual actor attributes that might influence collaborative behavior. For example, does government have contract management capacity? Does a collaborator have the capacity to uphold their end of the collaboration? By mezzo elements, I mean characteristics of the collaboration or exchange. For example, are collaborators faithful stewards or agents to be monitored? Do collaborators respond to certain incentives over others? How does power influence collaboration? By macro elements, I mean the larger structure in which collaboration is embedded. For example, how does one collaborative relationship affect another collaborative relationship, particularly if we are all working toward the same goals?

There is a tremendous opportunity to move PA literature out of silos using this framework. For example, contracting literature tends to focus on micro and mezzo elements while collaborative governance and network literature tends to focus more on macro elements. How can we bring together insights from these strands of literature to better understand collaborative policy implementation? For example, does the macro structure of collaboration influence individual collaborative relationships?

(Re?)Connecting Research and Practice to Public Administration Values

“The pure concept of efficiency proposed by Gulick, as the basic ‘good’ of administrative study, is a mirage. For is not the ultimate question, ‘efficient for what’? Is not efficiency for efficiency’s sake meaningless? Is efficiency not necessarily measured in terms of other values? [...] the descriptive or objective notion of efficiency is valid and useful, but only within a framework of consciously held values.”

- Dwight Waldo, *The Administrative State*, 1967, pp. 202-3

It is also vital we connect these micros, mezzo, and macro processes to larger societal and institutional concerns. We should acknowledge that collaboration is not just a technical problem to be solved but it also carries the weight of social and political issues as we design and evaluate collaborative policy implementation. How can we account for public values as we consider collaborators, structure collaborative relations, and design systems? How can we reframe efficiency so that it “operates in the interstices of a values system” (Waldo 1967, pp 202) rather than being the only end we are seeking? How should we decide which public values are most important for a particular policy? For example, what does it mean to use for-profit contractors to deliver detention services? What does it mean to structure a system so that the collapse of a single actor would endanger policy implementation? What does it mean that systems are principally designed to detect and prevent fraud rather than to promote equity, inclusion, and social justice? These are questions we should be grappling with as PA scholars.

To ground this in reality, we might consider the federal government's recent move to separate migrant children from their parents and have them detained by third parties. As PA scholars, how should we evaluate the success of this recently tweaked collaborative policy implementation? Should we focus on characteristics of government and contractors and whether they follow specific rules in separating and detaining children? Should we focus on the contract relationship and whether contractors are efficient in their work? Should we focus on the landscape of contractors producing this service on behalf of the federal government? Should we take a step back and consider the wider political, psychological, and social ramifications of detaining children apart from their parents? Does this version of policy implementation honor the values and standards of public administration or the policy that it came from? How do these elements fit together to provide a holistic picture of policy implementation? What are the implications for administrators?