

The Strategic Action Field Framework for Policy Implementation Research

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Drawing upon the theories of social skill and strategic action fields (SAFs), this article presents a SAF Framework for Implementation Research. In the framework, policy implementation systems are conceptualized as multilevel SAFs that form around a public service intervention. Within this context, socially skilled actors leverage diverse sources of authority—including but not limited to political authority—to enable change or stability to a public service intervention. While the framework has underpinnings in field theory, it is able to encompass multiple theoretical perspectives, including complexity theories, organizational theories, economic theories, and theories of human behavior. Importantly, the SAF Framework allows for the integration of results relevant to both management and policy—change in implementation systems, and change in the behavior or conditions of an external target group.

KEY WORDS: public policy, public management, policy implementation

Policymakers and scholars have wrestled with the challenges of policy implementation for more than half a century. These challenges stem from the ambitious aspirations often embedded in public policy, the diffuse governance of intergovernmental relations and service networks, and the tough problems that land in the public arena for resolution. Taking place at the intersection of public management and public policy, implementation often involves changing systems operations and altering conditions of target groups, both of which are difficult endeavors. As prior scholars have recognized, policy implementation operates through a complex system of social and political interactions (deLeon & deLeon, 2002; Goggin, Bowman, Lester, & O'Toole, 1990; May & Jochim, 2013; O'Toole, 1986).¹

In this article, we present a theoretical framework that incorporates this complexity, while narrowing in on specific actions that take place at key sites within the implementation system (Weimer, 2008). We conceptualize these systems as multilevel strategic action fields (SAFs) that form around a public service intervention. Rather than starting with a formal policy (Gormley, 1986; Ingram & Schneider, 1990; Matland, 1995; Mazmanian & Sabatier, 1989; Pressman & Wildavsky, 1984), a policy problem (Elmore, 1980; Hjerm & Porter, 1981), or institutional setting (Berman, 1981; Lipsky, 1980; Milward & Provan, 1998; Selznick, 1949), our approach begins with a public

service intervention—investigating how ideas about creating change in the target population are institutionalized into a set of processes and methods of coordination purposively intended to bring about that change. Interventions can be introduced through formal public policy or through the programmatic initiatives of entities such as evaluation firms, nonprofit organizations, local governments, or private funders. Consequently, we define implementation as deliberate, institutionally sanctioned change to a public service intervention that is legitimated in part by political authority.

In constructing our framework, we draw upon the sociological theories of social skill and SAFs (Fligstein, 1997, 2001; Fligstein & McAdam, 2011, 2012). These theories are concerned with how social structures shape societal outcomes, and the role of human agency in moderating these structures (Bourdieu, 1977; DiMaggio & Powell, 1991; Giddens, 1984; Scott, 1985). In our framework, implementation actors—be they policymakers, public managers, service providers, funders, or direct service staff—work within bounded social settings. They employ social skill to interpret and adjust a public service intervention in ways that build common understanding and reconcile competing sources of authority to enable collective action. Different social dynamics across SAFs lead to variations in how interventions are brought into practice, which, in turn, can contribute to variations in the outcomes in the system and for the target population.

We find this foundation useful because of the significance of both social structures and human agency in determining implementation processes and outcomes. While other policy scholars have emphasized the role of social structures in policy systems (e.g., McGinnis, 2011; V. Ostrom, 1980), our approach differs in its ontological starting point. Unlike rational choice approaches, SAF theory does not presume that social structures are known or fixed (e.g., the “rules of the game”), leveraged by agents in pursuit of their individual interests. Rather, rules and resources are produced, reproduced, and altered by socially skilled actors in relation to collective interests. SAF theory also differs from institutional theories that downplay the role of agency, focusing on pressures to conform to norms (e.g., DiMaggio & Powell, 1991). Instead, SAF theory stresses a fundamental human need for sociability as the root of social interactions.

In the sections that follow, we describe and illustrate a SAF Framework for Implementation Research. First, we provide analytical grounding for the framework in the sociological literature on social systems and SAFs. Next, we present three components of the framework that extend the SAF approach to inform implementation: the public service intervention (focus), multilevel SAFs (scale), and legitimization of authority (driver of change). For each component, we define key elements and offer assumptions central to informing the relationships between elements. While the framework and assumptions are articulated generally, we then illustrate the application of the framework to a particular case, the implementation of matched savings programs. Finally, we conclude by describing areas of inquiry that can be informed by this approach.

Understanding the Complex Social Systems Involved in Implementation

Broadly speaking, social systems are contexts organized by relations among agents, either individuals or groups, which are shaped over time by both exogenous

and endogenous factors and agents' response to them (Bourdieu, 1977; Fligstein, 1997, 2001; Fligstein & McAdam, 2012; Giddens, 1984; Latour, 2005; Martin, 2003). In an ambitious effort to advance understandings of social systems and the role of human agency in determining stability or change, Neil Fligstein and Doug McAdam (2011, 2012) articulate a theory of "SAFs." SAFs are mid-level social orders where collective action takes place around "shared understandings about the purposes of the field, relationships to others in the field, and the rules governing legitimate action in the field" (p. 9). The boundaries of SAFs are emergent, developed by participants as they do shared work, determine their roles and relationships, and craft understanding of their goals and rules of acceptability.²

In our framework, the social system surrounding a given public service intervention both constrains and enables what is possible to change in the course of implementation. For any given public service intervention, there are multiple and often overlapping SAFs. In each, actors try to understand the intervention, work with others to develop processes, and make decisions about which rules of conduct are the most significant. Sometimes the activities undertaken on behalf of the intervention are consistent across fields, shaped by rules or resources that transcend any one field. For example, formal documents that communicate program requirements operate as rules that may be shared between SAFs, or mandated staff training might be required resources introduced across multiple settings. However, the significance of any rule or resource is not predetermined; actors make decisions about the relative importance of different external and internal stimuli when deciding what actions they will undertake. This is in part why implementation systems, when viewed holistically, are complex and so difficult to control in terms of either process or outcomes (Martin, 2003).

SAF theory also introduces a distinct assumption about human agency. Humans seek sociability, engage in meaning making, and construct their own identities through affiliation with others in groups (Fligstein, 1997, 2001; Fligstein & McAdam, 2012). This contrasts with the ontological position of rational choice that underlies many approaches to policy studies, in which people are predominately motivated by self-interest and a desire to both maximize individual gain and minimize the costs of pursuing those interests (Downs, 1957; Neal, 1988). Instead, drawing from symbolic interactionism (Goffman, 1959; Mead, 1934), individuals' agency is directed toward constructing meaning in relation to others (Fligstein, 2001, 2008; Fligstein & McAdam, 2012). While agents have individual interests, these interests are defined and negotiated in relation to others within the system.

Because implementation is fundamentally about change, the theory's conception of stability and change is also particularly relevant. An essential factor in this regard is *social skill* (Fligstein, 1997, 2001, 2008), defined as "the ability [of an actor] to induce cooperation by appealing to and helping to create shared meanings and collective identities" (Fligstein & McAdam, 2012, p. 46). As a central construct in the theory, social skill highlights what actors do to contribute to the "emergence, maintenance, and transformation of social orders" (Fligstein & McAdam, 2012, p. 50). While the social dynamics of coercion, competition, and cooperation all can come into play, socially skilled actors shape these dynamics using skills and tactics they believe are

appropriate both to the context and their desired outcome. Fligstein's articulation of the theory notes several such tactics (Fligstein, 1997, 2001; Fligstein & McAdam, 2012): using formal authority, setting action agendas for others, seizing unexpected opportunities, framing action options in relation to others' interests, brokering agreements as a neutral party, trying multiple solutions, networking with those who are isolated, and telling stories that appeal to others' identities. Using such tactics, socially skilled actors can engage others without necessarily relying upon coercion.

Socially skilled actors use knowledge about field dynamics to influence others to either reproduce the current order or make change. Some work to preserve the status quo to guarantee stability; in fact, actors benefitting from existing dynamics within a particular context are rarely motivated to challenge the status quo (Fligstein & McAdam, 2012, p. 96). Most field members are committed to prevailing conditions. But, if an actor understands or frames change in relation to what already "makes sense" within the setting, social skill can enable the adoption of incremental changes.

External events can trigger more large-scale changes. A new actor to the field, a substantial change in a proximate field, or a large-scale event may affect an entire system. For example, the consequence of hiring a new visionary leader, passage of a new piece of legislation, or an economic crisis often has implications for many fields. But, SAF theory stresses that implications of these exogenous forces are not predictable. Actors with social skill influence how any of these events will be received and integrated into a context. They play an important role in interpreting, framing, and brokering the change.

SAF theory offers some potent analytical insights for the study of policy implementation. It allows for analysis of SAFs at various levels in a system. It directs scholars to look at what actors actually do to support or impede change (Feldman & Orlikowski, 2011). It also illuminates that actors' possible activities are enabled and constrained by the social dynamics within the field, as well as exogenous factors. These insights can be applied to the complex dynamics surrounding policy implementation.

Conceptualizing a New Framework for Implementation Research

SAF theory as articulated by Fligstein and McAdam (2012) does not focus on policy implementation but rather calls attention to the drivers of change in complex social systems.³ For that reason, while it provides a foundation for a new framework, there are important enhancements necessary if we are to take these insights and apply them to the implementation of public service interventions. Our framework also has a narrower focus than other frameworks of the policy process or institutional analysis. We agree with Weimer (2008) that a tighter focus around specific actions (in this case, actions around an intervention) produces research more relevant for policy and practice.

In the section that follows, we define and describe three components that are central to our framework: the public service intervention with variation in processes, coordination, and results; multiple levels of strategic action that frame the scale of analysis, including the actors, resources, and roles at a particular scale; and the activation of diverse sources of authority through social skill that provides the engine for change or

stability in the public service intervention. Through providing a theoretical framework, we aim to offer common elements that can help researchers specify variables and generate questions related to implementation (E. Ostrom, 2007, 2011). Within each component, we provide assumptions that are central to understanding the implementation of any public service intervention. While the framework has underpinnings in field theory, it is able to encompass multiple theoretical perspectives, including complexity theories, organizational theories, economic theories, and theories of human behavior.

Table 1 summarizes the elements of the framework by component and possible sources of variation. It provides a reference to enable scholars to develop specific research questions when applying this framework to particular studies of policy implementation.

Table 1. A Strategic Action Field Framework for Implementation Research

Component	Elements	Examples of Variation
<i>Program Intervention</i>	Processes of change	Degree of complexity as indicated by routinization, number of steps, or predictability; targeted change (e.g., people changing vs. people processing)
	Methods of coordination	Degree of reliance on technical expertise; variation in the sequencing of tasks (e.g., sequential, pooled, interdependent); tools in use with varying coerciveness, directness, automaticity, and visibility
	Change in system operations	Alterations in processes used by agency (e.g., efficiency, accessibility), as well as degree of integration of intervention into everyday practices (normalization)
	Change in target group behavior or conditions	Alterations in target group experiences, as well as degree of change in their behavior or conditions
<i>Scale of Analysis</i>	Policy field (assembly)	Types of structures in use, historical relationships, newness of the field
	Organization (operationalization)	Degree of intervention alignment with other program processes and technologies
	Frontlines (enactment)	Degree of worker discretion; degree of engagement with the target population
<i>Drivers of Change and Stability</i>	Sources of authority	Degree of (perceived) influence from political authority, economic authority, norms, beliefs, and values
	Social skills	Degree of use of tactics such as interpreting, framing, brokering, and bridging
	Exogenous shocks	Degree of stability or instability; changes in funding, legislation, or field actors

Public Service Interventions and Results

The unit of analysis in our framework is one or more SAF that surrounds a particular intervention. A central tenet of SAF theory is that the boundaries of a field are not fixed, but rather “shift depending on the definition of the situation and the issues at stake” (Fligstein & McAdam, 2012, p. 10). For analyzing implementation dynamics, we suggest that the public service intervention defines the issue at stake and provides an understanding (often contested) of the roles carried out by different field actors in response to the issue. This is an important distinction, as the unit of analysis in our approach is not a singular policy domain around a policy problem area (Burstein, 1991; May & Jochim, 2013), but rather the fields activated in response to a particular public service intervention.

It is important to define what we mean by public service intervention. By *intervention*, we mean a complex bundle of processes and methods of coordination intended to transform inputs into outputs (May, 2013; Perrow, 1986). By *public service* intervention, we mean interventions that are intended to benefit the public that are authorized at least in part by political authority (a term that we will describe in more detail below). We use the term public service in the democratic sense to be “in service to the public” (e.g., Denhardt & Denhardt, 2000; Moynihan & Pandey, 2007; Perry, 2000), not limited to “service”-based interventions.

In organizational settings, scholars sometimes refer to this complex bundle as “organizational technology” (e.g., Daft, 2010; Miles, Snow, Meyer, & Coleman, 1978; Orlikowski, 1992; Scott, 2008). Of relevance to our framework, organizational theorists have proposed a structuration model of technology (DeSanctis & Poole, 1994; Orlikowski, 1992, 2000; Sandfort, 2003), following the structuration theory of Giddens (1984). The structuration model of technology acknowledges the dual nature of technology, as both an independent force that impacts organizational structures and processes, and as a dependent outcome that is shaped and adapted by human agents engaged in the process of carrying out work. Similarly, in our approach, while the public service intervention has independent attributes that influence implementation dynamics, we also recognize that it is the product of the SAFs within which it is embedded.

Building from the construct of organizational technology, we delineate two elements of public service interventions that shape and are shaped by SAFs: (i) the processes of change that link inputs and outputs to produce anticipated outcomes; and (ii) the materials, technical skills, and structures that are needed to coordinate the work performed. Other policy implementation scholars have called attention to these two elements, but they typically categorize them as attributes of a policy or domain that exist *a priori* rather than attributes of an intervention that evolve with and from strategic action within a field.

First, for any intervention, there are varying logics about how to create change in the target population. To the extent that there are fewer required steps to transform inputs into outputs (e.g., fewer links in the causal chain), scholars have asserted that

policies are more likely to be implemented “successfully,” or in line with the designer’s intent (Matland, 1995; Mazmanian & Sabatier, 1989; Pressman & Wildavsky, 1984). Some public policy domains, such as utilities, transportation infrastructure, and national security, deploy routine logics and technology where raw materials can be seen, measured, and analyzed and outcomes similarly measured. Other policy domains such as social services or economic development are often less routine and vary depending on the attributes of the individuals or communities targeted by the policies, particularly when people are the primary raw materials and the goal is to change behaviors rather than process individuals through a system (Hasenfeld, 1983; Sandfort, 2010).

However, even in more “routine” policy areas, complexity in the causal logic can be introduced through implementation actors. For example, some municipal utility programs not only collect payments (a simple causal logic) but also seek to increase the conservation behaviors of consumers (Cromwell et al., 2011). According to our framework, the relative complexity of municipal collection practices in one locality compared with another is the result of differences in the SAF, due in part to varying knowledge and interpretations offered within the field by implementation actors. Organizational research documents that even in “simple” interventions, social forces, human interpretation, and actions add complexity in how the intervention is actually instituted (Orlikowski, 1992; Stafford & Wilson, 2015; Wajcman, 2006). Each public service intervention—simple or complex—is shaped by a collective understanding about a causal logic within the SAF in which it is embedded. This is a subtle, yet important distinction from prior policy implementation frameworks. The complexity of the means-end chain is not necessarily endemic to the policy domain or problem trying to be addressed, but rather is reflective of the understandings in the SAFs around a particular intervention.

The second element of public service interventions includes the raw materials, technical skills, and structures that coordinate work to transform inputs into outputs (methods of coordination). Prior implementation scholars have referred to the varying ability of the policy to “structure” implementation (Matland, 1995; Mazmanian & Sabatier, 1989). More recently, variation in coordination has been conceptualized as stemming from different “tools of governance,” defined as “an identifiable method through which collective action is structured to address a policy problem” (Salamon, 2002, p. 19). Different policy tools—such as grants, contracts, regulations, vouchers, and tax expenditures—have distinct characteristics, including varying degrees of coerciveness, directness, automaticity, and visibility (Salamon, 2002). Taken prescriptively, policy tools should be designed and selected *a priori* to fit the policy problem to be addressed and maximize outcomes such as effectiveness, efficiency, and equity. However, in reality, there are trade-offs between outcomes, and particular tools are often selected for political or institutional reasons rather than economic or substantive rationales.

In our framework, the methods of coordination in use for an intervention evolve from the dynamics within the SAF—which may or may not be the rationally best

methods to fit the problem. Even within the same policy domain, state and local actors make adjustments to the “tool” to fit their circumstances (Sandfort, Selden, & Sowa, 2008; Whitford, 2013). Organizational scholars have long recognized that while certain structures are better suited for particular tasks or environments (e.g., contingency theory), what is observed in practice is often the structures that are perceived of as legitimate by actors within the field (DiMaggio & Powell, 1991; Fligstein, 1985; Scott, 2008).

Attempts to make changes to public service interventions often entail changes to the intervention’s processes and/or methods of coordination. Changes that are successful are those that are institutionally sanctioned by the SAFs within which the intervention is embedded. Over time, processes and coordinating structures become institutionalized, no longer seen as “new” but part of the way work is accomplished. This is the primary focus of implementation science research; exploring the factors that lead to the successful integration of new evidence-based interventions into standard operating procedures (Damschroder et al., 2009; Durlak & DuPre, 2008; May 2013; May et al., 2009). While this is one important outcome of implementation, there are other results that are important for the implementation of public service interventions. For example, in carrying out public services, other public values such as efficiency and transparency in using public investments or the quality and equity in the distribution of resources to groups targeted by the policy are also important (Lynn, Heinrich, & Hill, 2000; Robichau & Lynn, 2009).

Ultimately, the success of a public service intervention depends upon the extent to which the intervention achieves the desired change in an external target group. A well-integrated, institutionalized change that leads to poor outcomes for the target group is akin to neatly arranged deck chairs on a sinking ship. However, only focusing on target population outcomes often reduces the significance of what it takes to alter an intervention—viewing system elements as levers that can be raised or lowered to produce better outcomes. Implementation scholars have critiqued policy analysts and program evaluators for ignoring or oversimplifying the processes of change often necessary to improve target group results (Nilsen, Ståhl, Roback, & Cairney, 2013; O’Toole, 1986; Robichau & Lynn, 2009). Our application of the SAF framework provides an approach to incorporate these multidimensional results in implementation research.

Assumption #1: The starting point for implementation research is a public service intervention around which collective action occurs, which may result in change to the system and an external (target) group.

Multilevel Systems

Part of the analytical complexity of implementation comes from the reality that SAFs rarely exist in isolation but are nested within and related to others. Departments within large organizations can each operate as distinct fields, sharing some

similarities but possessing unique power, resources, or dominant cultural interpretations. Similarly, fields can span organizations. Fligstein and McAdam (2012) explicitly note that SAFs are both vertically nested and often hierarchically connected to other fields. These vertical and horizontal ties introduce resource dependencies and different sources of authority.

There are often numerous fields engaged around any particular public service intervention. We follow the lead of other scholars and embrace a heuristic understanding of these systems as multilevel (M. Hill & Hupe, 2014; Kiser & Ostrom, 1982; Lynn et al., 2000; E. Ostrom, 2007; Robichau and Lynn, 2009). Such multiple governance frameworks direct analytical attention to distinct responsibilities in constitution, direction, and operation played at different levels in a system (M. Hill & Hupe, 2014). In our framework, the public service intervention is shaped by decisions made at different levels of strategic action. Each level operates as its own SAF, in which actors possess varying power, play particular roles, and share a broad interpretive frame that guides action within the field at that level. Similar to other multilevel frameworks, rules in use at a higher level may constrain and enable the rules and action at a nested lower level (E. Ostrom, Cox, & Schlager, 2014). In our framework, we differentiate policy fields, organization, and frontline levels within these systems.

Policy fields are bounded networks among organizations carrying out a substantive policy or program in particular places (Stone & Sandfort, 2009).⁴ In any geographic area, there is a potential pool of organizations including public agencies, industry or other advocacy groups, philanthropic funders, membership associations, and service providers, which might participate in implementation because of their expertise or interests. Resources and understandings flow between agencies through horizontal networks or top-down intergovernmental relationships. In our conceptualization, policy fields are the macrolevel SAF within an implementation system.

At this level of action, decisions are made that affect the assembly of the public service intervention. Ideas are considered that inform the logic about how to create change in the target population, identifying processes that are feasible or desirable. It is often at this level that evidence-based practices and results of policy analyses are disseminated and debated. Resources may be mobilized when there is a perceived gap between current field capacity and desired outcomes. For example, field actors may secure additional funding for training around a generally accepted best practice. At this level, the tools to coordinate joint action and the delivery of an intervention are also negotiated, such as choices to structure delivery through direct grants or competitive contracts, or as vouchers provided directly to the target population.

Operational decisions about the intervention are made at the *organizational level*. Organizations are the mezzo level of implementation systems—the institutional link between the policy field and frontlines of the implementation system, and actors within organizations make important decisions that cross levels. At the overlap with the policy field level, actors within organizations take action to authorize key aspects of the processes and coordinate the intervention. The ideals shaped in the policy field about elements such as performance criteria or

accountability rules need to be reconciled and integrated into the SAF dynamics within implementing organizations. Sometimes, state or regional public agencies provide authoritative guidance; however, private foundations, nongovernmental organizations, and even direct providers can take such actions to reconcile field-level parameters and operational realities.

At the overlap with the frontlines of the system, organizations operationalize how the intervention will be carried out on a day-to-day basis. They develop procedures for engaging program participants, ensuring standards of care or quality, and documenting activities involved in carrying out the intervention. The current practices and expertise within the service organization directly shape how a public service intervention is operationalized. If the organization's current practices align with the intervention's logic of change, requisite technical skills and structures, implementation is easier. A corollary of this is that organizational actors often make changes to the intervention to increase alignment with their existing assumptions and systems. Making changes to the intervention that do not align with current practices often requires new knowledge, resources, and willingness to be generated from within the organization or the larger policy field.

The final level in our framework is the *frontlines*, where the implementation system interacts directly with the target group, be they students, energy consumers, or citizens. Sometimes, the frontlines involve face-to-face interactions between staff members and the target group. Other times, the system and target group interact through virtual means, such as online registration or call centers. The frontlines are where the public service intervention is enacted for and with target group members, who are often, themselves, "key problem solvers" in determining successful outcomes for the policy change (Cohen & Moffit, 2009). It is the microlevel of the implementation system.

As SAFs, the frontlines are shaped by the larger organizational context within which they operate. In fact, frontlines are sometimes subsumed into the operational level of governance. However, for public service interventions, we think it is important to recognize the distinct field dynamics that emerge between frontline workers and target population participants. Frontline workers share ideas, assess options, and commiserate about the inadequacies of directives to respond to particular situations (Maynard-Moody & Musheno, 2003; Sandfort, 1999). While theories about street-level bureaucracy suggest generalizable constraints within frontline public systems (Lipsky, 1980; Maynard-Moody & Portillo, 2010), conceptualizing these implementation sites as SAFs suggests that such constraints can be mediated by the structures and social skills demonstrated by actors within that field or proximate fields. With regard to intervention processes, frontline workers often hold constructions of the target population and beliefs about the efficacy of a particular intervention that influence the degree to which they engage with the intervention or simply follow procedures formulaically (Soss, 2005). While this distinction is more important for interventions focusing on changing individual behavior, research documents differences in outcomes by frontline workers even in more routine interventions.

Taken together, the three levels of action are not dissimilar to other policy and governance frameworks. However, our framework places emphasis on the field dynamics at each level that affect the public service intervention.

Assumption #2: SAFs at multiple levels of a complex implementation system constrain and enable action around the public service intervention, thereby causing variation in enacted practices.

Activating Legitimate Authority to Shape Implementation Practice

Implementation scholars have long recognized the importance of formal and informal rules and resources that govern participant interactions (Kiser & Ostrom, 1982; E. Ostrom, 2007; Sabatier & Jenkins-Smith, 1993; Weible, Sabatier, & McQueen, 2009). However, rules and resources do not operate as absolutes. To be followed, they have to be backed by authority, which derives from the perceived legitimacy of the entity or person issuing the directive (Blau & Scott, 1962; Fligstein, 2001). Further, there are multiple, often conflicting sources of authority in any field. Elinor Ostrom's (2011) notion of "polycentricity" reflects this notion, as she highlights that authorities from different jurisdictions (what we could call "fields") interact to shape the rules and norms that guide behavior. Within the SAF framework offered here, it is the role of actors with social skill to activate, resolve, and interpret signals from diverse sources of authority to create collective understanding for action around the public service intervention.

We identify four sources of authority that are common in public implementation systems. First, public service interventions draw upon some source of "political authority." Political authority defines what is legally permissible, establishes mandated processes, stipulates which public institutions are vested with legal responsibilities, and delineates hierarchical governance relationships between fields. This type of authority may involve negotiations between branches of government, as implementation activities may be beholden to both legislative oversight and administrative regulations. It may also involve the courts to interpret what is permissible for a given intervention. Political authority is also demonstrated when citizen preferences are reflected through deliberative processes (Denhardt & Denhardt, 2000); however, the extent to which such processes are legitimate varies by field.

There are other important sources of authority that can legitimate interactions around a public service intervention. In the last 40 years, economic authority that derives from market conditions is particularly potent in policy implementation (Bozeman, 2007; Dahl & Lindblom, 1953; Salamon, 2002). Economic authority stems from competition and reliance on market mechanisms to coordinate action. When public agencies incentivize behavior through contracts with performance criteria or use vouchers that tap market mechanisms, they draw upon this form of authority to develop rules for interaction. Within implementation systems, economic authority is often quite visible, creating incentives tied to specific processes or outcomes. Yet, signals often conflict, and consequences are not inevitable but shaped by actors within a particular context.

Unlike the mandates imposed through political authority or the incentives introduced through economic authority, there are other informal sources of authority

(Khademian, 2002). Norms associated with professional expertise may be a particularly potent form of authority in particular fields. Expressed through professional codes, evidence-based practices, or industry standards, norms can create binding expectations of what needs to be considered during implementation activities. They are demonstrated when powerful field actors issue white papers or offer training programs, or when social scientists attempt to entreat others to take up their research-based intervention. Heather C. Hill (2003) refers to these influences as “implementation resources,” vesting authority in nonstate actors to frame viable interventions and desirable results. Implementation resources communicate the norms and best practices relevant to a core intervention, attempting to narrow the range of appropriate responses to the task at hand. Rather than coercive pressures that stem from formal authority, the terminology “norms” implies that the ideas are often promulgated through imitation, referred to as mimetic isomorphism (DiMaggio & Powell, 1991). While this normative pressure might exist, it is not guaranteed to shape the core intervention in any particular context.

A final source of authority is the beliefs and values shared by individuals and groups. Scholars document how shared beliefs and values reduce uncertainty, operating as a cognitive framework that provides a means of sensemaking, often in light of what is understood about the past (Khademian, 2002; Weick, 1995; Yanow, 1996). For example, moral categorizations of both workers and the target population may shape how an intervention is implemented (Mettler, 2007; Schneider & Ingram, 1997; Soss, 2005). Shared beliefs about the efficacy of an intervention may shape whether or not actors integrate new activities into daily practices (Damschroder et al., 2009; May & Finch, 2009).

The four sources of authority described here are meant to be illustrative; the manifestations of authority depend upon the definitions within a particular situation, consistent with other applications of complex systems theory.⁵

Assumption #3: Within each setting, there are various potential sources of authority that can provide field actors with a rationale for the practices they enact.

The significance of any particular authority source depends on how it is interpreted within a particular context. In some contexts, a mandate associated with a funding source is understood to provide cause for staff to abandon professional norms about service quality. In another context, that same mandate motivates managers to seek supplemental funding or develop an advocacy strategy to push back against the directive. Rather than having objective significance, authority sources are better thought of as latent; they can either be activated or squandered by field actors to motivate collective action (Feldman & Quick, 2009). Actors involved in implementation at any level in a system are actively engaged in cocreating the conditions within the SAFs where implementation activities get carried out.

So what are the mechanisms for this cocreation? How are authority sources activated or squandered? Our framework stresses the significance of social skill as

providing an explanation for why change or stability surrounds the implementation of a particular intervention (May, 2013). Building upon the assumptions about human sociability discussed earlier, social skill acts as a “lubricant.” Fligstein and McAdam write (2012, p. 178) “Rules and resources exist and are building blocks. But without the social skill of people who interpret these rules and mobilize these resources, the rules and resources do not matter all that much.” Said another way, legitimate authority is not externally determined. Rather it is endogenous to a particular field within the implementation system.

Socially skilled actors implicitly recognize their own agency when deciding how to respond to what others might understand to be compulsory. They recognize that often, competing claims to authority are alive within a field. Because people have different vantage points about what should occur during implementation, they often inconsistently respond to competing legitimacy claims. In these situations, socially skilled actors use their understanding of people in the context to develop an agreement about a plausible way forward. They influence others’ understanding by offering their interpretation of events, frame action options, and set an action agenda by engaging others and appealing to their interests. They can act as a neutral party and broker agreements between people who share distinct understandings of the tasks at hand.

Socially skilled actors can also serve as boundary spanners, bringing ideas and authority from one level of the system (e.g., the frontlines) to other levels in the system (e.g., the policy field) or transferring ideas and authority between proximate fields (e.g., two organizations within the same policy field). Direct experience at the operational levels of the system may provide legitimacy in policy field discussions. And, the ability to interpret signals from the policy field for organizational actors may provide a source of legitimacy in operational discussions. Socially skilled implementers may bring resources and authority from other contexts to help reconcile competing authority claims within their field of action.

There are also instances where exogenous shocks alter the sources of authority salient within an implementation system. Perhaps, there is an economic crisis or another event that fundamentally changes peoples’ understanding of the intent or desired outcomes for an intervention. Our framework stresses that the consequences of even large shocks are not inevitable. Implementation requires reconciling controversies and brokering understandings about the logic of change and the coordination required to carry out an intervention. This is a social process that is generalizable across SAFs, those at the policy field, organizational, and frontline levels in an implementation system. It is also dynamic, requiring effort to either maintain the status quo or make changes consistent with the new authority claim. This leads us to the fourth assumption of our framework:

Assumption #4: Field actors utilize social skill to re-frame what is perceived to be legitimate practice for public service interventions, leveraging existing authority sources in new ways, facilitating the creation of additional sources of authority, or capitalizing on exogenous shocks to create new authority for action.

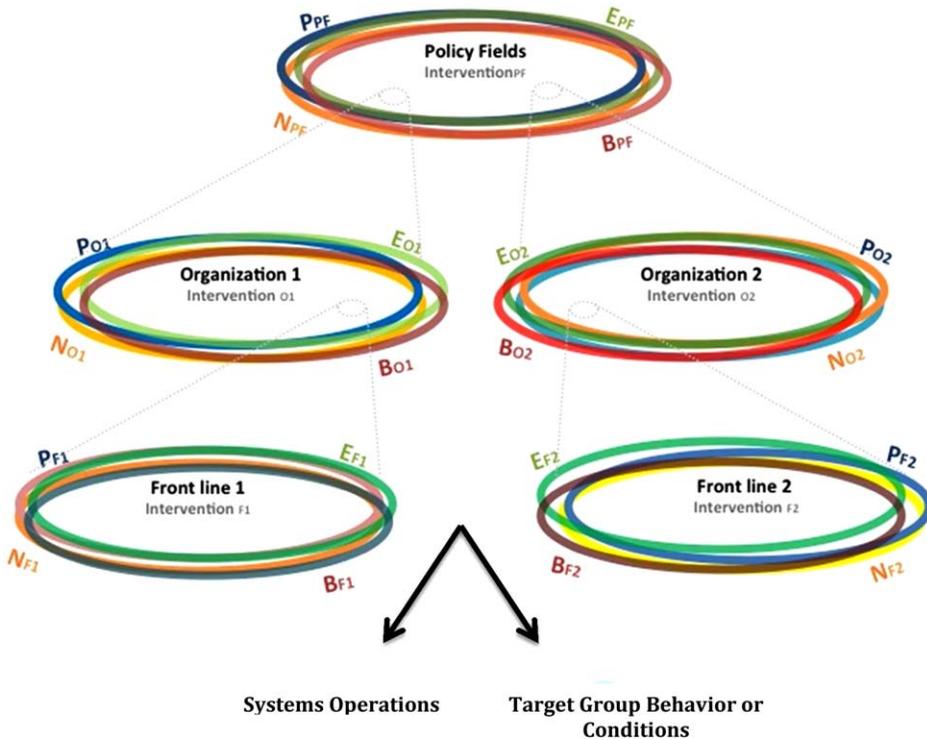


Figure 1. Framework of Strategic Action Fields in Complex Implementation Systems

Key: P, political authority at different levels in the system; E, economic authority at different levels in the system; N, norms at different levels in the system; B, beliefs and values (mechanisms of culture), at different levels in the system.

Putting It All Together

The three components of the framework offer a way to conceptualize change and stability to a public service intervention as it occurs in a multilevel implementation system. Figure 1 provides an illustration of this framework. SAFs operate at the policy field, organization, and frontline levels, with the public service intervention as the core. The SAFs at each level are the units of analysis for implementation research. At each level, sources of authority activated by socially skilled actors create boundaries around the legitimate actions that are deemed possible in relation to the intervention, but the boundaries themselves are dynamic.

Actions taken around the public service intervention shape both the logic of change adopted and the materials and structures employed to coordinate activities, and this has causal significance in determining what results. As we have noted, there are dual results of implementation activities: changes to system operations, and changes to the behavior or conditions of an external target group. These changes can be observed as objects of scholarly inquiry. And as more is uncovered about whether and under what conditions awareness of results helps anchor socially skilled action in implementation systems, such findings can help improve implementation of

public service interventions across policy domains and settings. To better illustrate how this application can occur, we briefly consider an illustrative case.

Applying the Framework: An Illustrative Case

Thus far, we have presented the SAF framework independent of context to allow it to be generalizable to a variety of public service interventions. However, to demonstrate how the framework can be applied to formulate research questions, it is useful to illustrate its application in a specific case; in this instance, the Individual Development Account (IDA) matched savings program. We provide brief background about the case, and then apply the three components of the framework to the case, highlighting how the elements and assumptions of the framework are realized in the case, and how these elements can help structure research questions.

Case Background

As income-support programs fell out of favor in the United States during the 1990s, scholars began to realize that poverty was not merely caused by lack of earnings but also by limited assets (McKernan & Sherraden, 2008; Shapiro & Wolff, 2001; Sherraden, 1991, 2000). Because most policies encouraging asset development operate through the tax system, there was growing bipartisan concern that the regressive nature of asset-based policies would have negative consequences for lower income populations (Sherraden, 2000).⁶ Like most social problems, many interventions have been enacted at the national, state, and local levels to boost household assets, ranging from changes to means-tested criteria for public benefit programs, to goal directed savings incentives, to financial education programs. The IDA program is one example.

IDAs are a public service intervention designed to offer program participants a financial match (often more than 1:1) for savings deposited with a financial institution. After a minimum amount of time, the asset can be used to defray costs associated with higher education, home purchase, or the start-up of a small business. While federal and state legislation provides some direct support for IDAs,⁷ national surveys of program operators suggest that nearly half of the programs also receive funding from private sources (Corporation for Enterprise Development [CFED], 2014). Policy researchers at the CFED, a national nonprofit organization supporting the program, estimate that over 1,100 sites have operated IDAs, opening over 100,000 accounts for income-eligible participants (CFED, 2014).

Focus: Public Service Intervention

Applying the SAF framework to the IDA case, we begin by unpacking the public service intervention and the potential for variation. Certain aspects are relatively clear: matched savings accounts (*the intervention*) are made available to qualified low and moderate income households (*the target population*) with the purpose of facilitating

asset development through home purchase, business start-up, or higher education (*change in target group behavior*). However, other aspects of the intervention are open for debate. For example, programs differ in the amount of match provided to induce participants to save money, ranging from 1:1, 2:1, 3:1, 6:1, or even 7:1. The *processes of creating change* differ in the additional services or “steps” required, beyond the matched savings account, including additional education and counseling, restrictions on eligible withdrawals, and penalties for ineligible withdrawals. *Methods of coordination* differ in their automaticity—some programs rely heavily on the existing infrastructure of financial institutions to coordinate savings and withdrawals, while others rely on nonprofit partners to collect deposits or manage withdrawals in partnership with financial institutions. Researchers have documented that these variations in the IDA intervention can impact both program viability and participant outcomes (Grinstein-Weiss et al., 2013; Mills et al., 2008; Schreiner, Clancy, & Sherraden, 2002).

In our framework, these elements of variation become the focus of research investigations, comprising dependent and/or independent variables to be explained and explored. Questions can be framed to understand variation in the different attributes of the intervention. Under what conditions are certain processes (e.g., higher or lower match rates) employed? Which conditions give rise to the adoption of certain methods of coordination, such as more or less automatic payment structures or reliance on a particular nonprofit network as service providers? Questions can also be framed to investigate results, including how the matched savings program is integrated into a policy field or organization, or the consequences of program components on participant savings or financial literacy. In this way, attributes of the intervention are dependent variables that are affected by the SAF, but are also independent variables that influence participant outcomes. Interpretive research using qualitative methods would likely focus on understanding how an intervention develops, focusing attention on it as a dependent variable. Quantitative, quasi-experimental designs could be employed to disentangle the effects of the system and the resulting intervention on target population outcomes.

Scale: Multilevel SAFs

The second component of the framework calls attention to the multilevel SAFs that surround an intervention. Like many policy areas, the selection of IDA processes (such as the match rate) are often not based on empirical evaluations of which savings-match rate yields the most desirable outcome. Rather, implementers make this decision based on what they consider legitimate or feasible within the context at the policy field, organization, and frontlines of the system.

In the IDA case, the constellation of actors in the *policy field* and the methods employed to facilitate coordination vary substantially by state. For example, about one-third of the states have a centralized network structure with a public agency disbursing funds to local nonprofit organizations (CFED, 2014).⁸ In some states, nonprofit-led working groups hold regular meetings and disseminate best practices to facilitate coordination. In other states, no formal state-wide coordination or

funding structures exist, and individual programs seek funding directly from field organizations, foundations, or individual donors. These distinctions in field actors, resource distributions, and their collective decision processes reflect differences in what is understood to be a legitimate resolution of options when assembling the intervention in a particular place.

Even when states have a central agency authorizing or coordinating the program, there is considerable variation at the *organizational level* that can affect IDA interventions. The core mission and focus of the central organizations often varies, with some housed in state housing and community development agencies, others in state human service agencies, and still others in nonstate community development corporations or community action agencies (CFED, 2014). Similarly, there is considerable variation in the service providers offering IDA programs. For example, in Oregon, the 10 agencies operating IDA programs include refugee and minority group organizations, community development agencies, and a housing developer. Differences in missions and routine technologies employed by the organizations (e.g., providing public benefits or educating citizens) lead to variations in adaptations of the IDA intervention to fit the ongoing work of the organization; for example, housing organizations might be more likely to emphasize the homeownership goals of the IDA program than other goals.

The enactment of the program at the *frontline level* can substantially influence how the program is experienced by the target population and subsequently what results. For example, frontline workers may adopt their own internal processes for approving or denying savings withdrawal requests from participants; some may require in-person consultations, while others may approve requests taken over the phone or by email. These variations may be due to coping strategies to deal with heavy workloads, lessons learned from professional trainings, or long-held beliefs about the target group.

This component of the framework calls attention to the scale of analysis. Researchers may be particularly interested in actions taking place around the intervention at a particular level. For example, researchers may compare states as distinct policy fields, identifying how differing historical relationships, resources, and social skills of actors influence the resulting IDA intervention. At another scale of analysis, researchers might compare the primary mission of service organizations (e.g., housing, employment assistance, poverty alleviation) and explore how this influences the integration of the program processes into day-to-day operations. At yet another scale, a researcher might focus on frontline conditions and explore how workers at this level use particular resources to inform their own work with clients. Research can also explicitly investigate the nested levels of systems through multilevel modeling. Regardless of the scale of analysis, researchers should acknowledge how the constraints and decisions of the proximate fields shape the implementation options at other levels, with an awareness of the complete implementation system.

Stability and Change: Authority and Social Skill

The final component of the framework explicates field elements that contribute to the stability of and change of the intervention—namely, the activation of diverse

sources of authority through social skill. In the IDA case, all four sources of authority are activated at different times and scales of analysis. In terms of *political authority*, some states passed laws that, among other things, specified the match rate and revenue sources. And, government agencies often oversaw the development of rules to guide IDA implementation. When political support for grant funding was low, socially skilled actors often leveraged more politically palatable *economic* incentives through individual and corporate tax credits to supplement revenue for IDA programs (Portland State, 2013).

Aside from more formal sources of authority, the initial spread of the IDA program reflects the influence that shared *norms* can have within an implementation system. The Center for Social Development (CSD) at Washington University, where IDA's were first conceptualized, is a leading source of technical assistance and evaluation in the county. Socially skilled actors within CSD framed strategies and equipped state-level actors with tools to bring their programs to scale, leading to some degree of standardization of programs across fields. Conversely, differing *beliefs* about the causes of participant poverty and their ability to save contributes to variation in the intervention across sites. Where lack of savings is perceived to be due to poor budgeting or financial knowledge, an emphasis on financial education is emphasized. When the lack of savings is seen as caused by lack of income, a greater emphasis may be placed on job training and income support programs.

Researchers can analyze drivers of change and stability as independent variables that may contribute to variations in the intervention. In practice, socially skilled actors at various levels mobilize authority sources to either introduce or block change. To what extent are regulations or normative pressures (e.g., from CSD) activated to introduce new practices or prevent change to existing interventions? These drivers can also be analyzed as dependent variables that are shaped by field dynamics. Researchers particularly interested in the social process of SAFs might explore how and under what conditions particular social skills are applied. This likely requires a more in-depth, qualitative approach.

Using the Strategic Action Framework for Implementation Research

Through the illustrative case, we show how the SAF framework could be applied to inform investigations around a particular intervention. It suggests ways the framework can give rise to new directions for social science research and new possibilities to inform practice (O'Toole, 2004). While the context often drives the specific research questions of interest, the SAF framework is well equipped to frame general areas of inquiry.

First, the SAF framework provides a new way to make sense of the variation observed in a particular intervention across sites of implementation. Why do we see an intervention being adopted in different ways across settings (e.g., states, counties, local organizations) in order to create the "same" desired change in the behaviors or conditions of the target group? The framework offered here would direct researchers to document the existing social structures (rules and resources in use) in the implementation system, and the strategies used by socially skilled actors to introduce

change or reinforce the status quo, including the mobilization of particular sources of authority or exogenous shocks to the system.⁹

Second, a concern of great practical significance is the overall capability of implementation systems to deliver desired change. For example, a new “evidence-based practice” regarding an intervention has been identified, but it is unclear the extent to which implementation sites are ready and able to adopt the new practice. How do historical and current conditions within the SAF influence the time it takes to integrate new or modified interventions into standard operating procedures? What characteristics of a SAF influence the likelihood that actors will consult research-based evidence regarding the intervention? Our framework directs researchers to consider current processes of creating change and methods of coordination in use at various levels of the implementation system, and the extent to which the new practices deviate from the existing practices. Further, latent sources of authority that may be mobilized to legitimate (or thwart) new practices may be identified.

Third, this theoretical framework emphasizes the importance of individual agency to affect implementation results. The exertion of social skill as a means for reconciling inherent ambiguities of policy implementation is rather unique to the SAF framework. For this reason, there are many unanswered questions about the use of social skill that can be addressed by further inquiry. What factors in the SAF affect the types of skills exerted by actors to frame problems, shape understandings, and direct others’ actions in implementing public service interventions? Does this skill set depend upon the level in the system, familiarity with the sources of authority that are conventionally recognized, or the significance of exogenous shocks? When actors move across fields, how do they analyze new settings and adjust their skills and knowledge of relevant authority sources? Does intervention complexity shape which authority sources are relevant?

The nature of these questions implies that research informed by this framework will likely employ mixed methods (Small, 2011). Investigators should design their studies in relation to their questions, context, and data availability. Data can come in different formats—survey responses, field notes, administrative data, audio files, or transcriptions. The means of collecting this data also vary, from email to mail surveys, single to group observation, single source or merged administrative records, focus groups, or interviews. Triangulation of data types and collection methods improves validity and enables more confidence in drawing conclusions from the analysis. And, the analysis procedures—the means of making sense of the information—are similarly varied. Hierarchical linear modeling, agent-based modeling, or inductive coding with analytical memoing all might be appropriate analytical procedures.

Because of the pragmatic concerns of implementation research, it is also quite possible that fruitful investigations can be developed collaboratively with practitioners, as is often the case in organizational science (e.g., Luscher & Lewis, 2008; Van de Ven, 2007). Given the significance paid to localized knowledge of a SAF in this framework, studies that combine the desire to deepen knowledge about implementation with the applied aim to explain variation in practice—including the

integration of public service interventions into systems and changes in target group conditions—will be particularly fruitful.

Conclusions

Because policy and program implementation happens in complex systems, a number of knotty theoretical and practical problems have hindered the development of scientific knowledge. The SAF Framework for Implementation Research provides an approach to move inquiry forward. Rather than broadly describing policy processes, institutional design or public management, our framework narrows in on the actions and results that surround a particular public service intervention. While the theory of SAFs is often applied to understand field evolution and development more broadly, our framework unpacks the field dynamics around the processes and coordination of an intervention. Such a focus is particularly well suited for making sense of the variations observed in implementation across settings, assessing readiness for replication of evidence-based interventions, and leveraging the roles of skillful actors in implementation improvement.

Additionally, this framework conceptualizes formal policy in a slightly different way than other approaches to policy implementation. In our approach, formal policies are only one source of political authority that shapes implementation dynamics alongside other sources of authority. Actors within the field interpret the signals from these authority sources to legitimate field interactions. Sometimes, formal policy is the impetus that leads actors to initiate or alter a public service intervention, as envisioned by a linear logic of governance model (Robichau & Lynn, 2009). However, other times, signals from multiple sources of authority conflict during implementation of a particular intervention, creating controversies that need to be resolved within the implementation system. No one source of authority is completely deterministic, but rather various sources are interpreted and framed by socially skilled actors to legitimate certain decision options for the collective.

Finally, whereas much of prior implementation research has focused on identifying universal constraints, this framework acknowledges there are unique circumstances present when implementing an intervention in a particular context. Importantly, though, it moves beyond the particularities of context to describe a generalizable social process. Both social structures and human agency are at play in shaping implementation dynamics and results. These dynamics can be observed and analyzed across the various settings and the multiple scales present in an implementation system. Importantly, the SAF Framework allows scholars to focus on the results relevant to both management and policy—change in implementation systems, and change the behavior or conditions of an external target group.

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Notes

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1. There is also a stream of complexity theory in public policy that documents policy processes taking place within complex systems (Anderies & Janssen, 2013; Colander & Kupers, 2014).
2. There are a relatively large number of peer review articles published since 2010 that utilize this theory (see e.g., Abrutyn, 2012; Ozen & Ozen, 2011). However, virtually all focus applications to societal-level systems rather than the operational-level application taken here, which focuses on dynamics within and between SAFs in pursuit of an institutionally sanctioned change.
3. For example, in their book, Fligstein and McAdam (2012) apply SAF theory to help explain how changes to the mortgage finance system in the United States contributed to the economic crisis of 2008. Their focus is on creation and disruption of SAFs at an abstract level, looking at how the mortgage-lending crisis destabilized proximate fields. While certainly relevant to public policy, this account does not provide insight into the more detailed activities involved in policy implementation. In our application, we would narrow in on a specific intervention, such as mortgages originated to lower income households, and seek to understand how specific dimensions of the intervention, such as the terms of the mortgage and underwriting processes, are shaped by the dynamics within the field and subsequently impact outcomes.
4. This construct resembles the idea of political scientists who focused on local “policy subsystems” (Milward & Wamsley, 1984) or “localized implementation structures” (Hjern & Porter, 1981). Yet, because of our training in organizational science and institutional theory, we prefer the terminology of “policy field” with its distinct theoretical foundation.
5. Others note that in studying complex systems, it is often preferable to articulate general mechanisms that can be more precisely specified in particular contexts (Colander & Kupers, 2014). This theory benefits from constructs that are loosely framed, so that more specific definition can be undertaken in specific applications, as we will illustrate below with our IDA example.
6. Policy that operates through the tax system is more regressive than social insurance or other means-tested policies because low-income people do not have sufficient income to benefit as dramatically from reductions in tax liability or tax credits unless they are made refundable.
7. The Assets for Independence Act of 1998 provides direct federal funding to support IDAs, and other programs including the Community Service Block Grant, Office of Refugee Resettlement financing, and Temporary Assistance for Needy Families, created other federal funding alternatives during the 1990s.
8. At one time, 43 state governments had enacted legislation or administered such programs, although only 15 states had state-led programs operating in 2013 (CFED, 2014).

9. An example of such a study is Taylor, Rees, and Damm's (2014) account of implementation of a U.K. work policy at the macro level.

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