Intraorganizational Implementation Research: Theory and Method

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ABSTRACT

The article presents a process by which qualitative case study implementation research may be cumulated. Using the concept of the hermeneutic spiral, an iterative process is employed in order to increase understanding of welfare implementation since the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act. This process involves a review of recent welfare reform literature, the use of the knowing organization model (KOM) as a research frame for understanding the existing literature and the application of the KOM to primary data collected from county welfare offices in Pennsylvania.

INTRODUCTION

Implementation theory and research have outgrown the search for a single theory of implementation—an effort that got mired in a top–down, bottom–up debate—and have entered a new era that recognizes multiple theories appropriate to various implementation research questions (O’Toole 2000). Many approaches now coexist to explain diverse implementation issues. For example, field network studies examine how states, local governments, and private organizations respond to sweeping federal policy changes (Lurie 2003), while client-based ethnographic studies can increase awareness of the implications of policy changes to those served by the implementing agencies (Coffield 2002; Edin 2003).

Recently, many implementation studies of welfare reform have been conducted at the organizational level of analysis using an inductive case study approach. The organizational or systems level of analysis is appropriate for many studies of health and social service policy implementation. However, since Lipsky (1980), few scholars of public administration or public policy have proposed a theory of policy implementation that specifically addresses intraorganizational policy implementation. As a result, studies conducted at this level are difficult to cumulate. In their present form, they stand as isolated case studies and offer little to theory development. The purpose of this article is to present a process by which qualitative research concerning policy implementation at the organizational level may be cumulated.

Because much of the research at the intraorganizational level is necessarily interpretative in nature due to the significance of context (Yanow 1996), cumulating knowledge
must take the form of refining and enhancing our understanding of situations rather than
refining and enhancing theory to a level of specificity that allows for prediction of out-
comes. Increasing understanding based on preunderstandings is what Glaser and Strauss
(1967) call the hermeneutic spiral. The hermeneutic spiral is “an iterative process whereby
each stage of our research provides us with knowledge; in other words, we take a different
level of preunderstanding to each stage of the research” (Gummesson 2000, 70). This
article presents an abbreviated example of how this process can be used to enhance our
understanding of welfare policy implementation after the 1996 welfare reforms.

In building the first level of understanding, the existing literature on welfare reform
implementation at the intraorganizational level is reviewed. From this review, a larger
“story” of welfare reform is constructed that serves as a preunderstanding for the second
iteration. The second iteration revisits an approach to implementation theory and research
first offered by Montjoy and O’Toole (1979). In order to study intraorganizational imple-
mentation, the authors developed theoretical concepts and used existing reports as data
to look for evidence of these theoretical concepts. Using a similar approach to explain the
intraorganizational dynamics of welfare policy implementation, Choo’s (1998) theoretical
concepts of the knowing organization model (KOM) of information use guide the ensuing
discussion. The choice of the KOM was informed by the review of literature and acts as a
“research frame” for revisiting the literature in order to enhance the understanding of it
(Stoecker 1991). Understandings developed through the application of the KOM to exist-
ing literature then serve as preunderstandings for the analysis of primary data. Under-
standings developed at this stage can both help inform the agency that was subject of the
research and serve as a preunderstanding for additional research conducted on welfare
reform ad infinitum.

**REVIEWING THE LITERATURE—THE FIRST ITERATION**

Since the 1996 welfare reforms, numerous studies have appeared charting the evolution
of the reform efforts. When examined as a group, these studies present the foundation for
an interesting story of welfare reform implementation.

The Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA)
of 1996 necessitated a significant change in welfare agencies from client-processing to
client-serving agencies. The dominant function of county-level welfare agencies pre-
PRWORA was “eligibility determination” (Hagen and Owens-Manley 2002). Since the
1996 reforms, the official focus of welfare has turned to “work and self-sufficiency.”
Despite the significant change in policy, research indicates that a corresponding change
in behavior at the frontline of welfare implementation is not in evidence (Hagen and

These studies suggest that administrative desires are not always translated into front-
line action. Sandfort (1999) claims that this is a result of social processes occurring within
frontline offices and that managers must be able to draw on systems theories and theories of
organizational learning to effect change in their organizations. Meyers, Glaser, and Mac-
Donald (1998, 20) argue that workers need more information, training, and authority to
fully implement the Work Pays initiative because “workers would need to understand

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1 See Fox (1990, 201–2) for a more in-depth critique of logical positivism-empiricism as epistemology for
implementation research.
policy changes as consistent with a larger change in the mission of the welfare system—and believe that policymaking principals are committed to bringing about this change."

Although organizational culture is easily blamed for policy implementation failures, organizational culture is not as easily changed (Gagliardi 1986; Hatch 1997). In a study of 11 localities in four states, Lurie and Riccucci (2003) concluded that the majority of states made efforts to espouse the new goals of work and self-sufficiency by incorporating these messages in formal statements and visual media. However, true “culture” change in the offices proved more problematic. Rather than efforts to change the existing culture from one primarily focused on accuracy in the reporting of work and self-sufficiency outcome indicators, some states added new organizational structures to deal with these goals, leaving in place eligibility units for cash assistance, food stamps, and Medicaid.

Arguably, a failure to change an organization’s culture (to one more consistent with new policy goals) is actually a failure of leadership, not simply one frontline worker resistance. Bishop (2003) and Meyers and Dillon (1999) find that leadership failure in communicating new goals was one factor that contributed to failures in welfare policy implementation. Additionally, both studies identify a lack of needed structural changes, also related to a lack of leadership, as another contributing factor. Bishop adds that a third reason for failure was a lack of cooperation among parties within the organization due to unresolved differences between caseworkers and case managers.

The studies cited thus far provide a bleak account of the current state of welfare reform implementation. However, through a comparative case study of county welfare reform in Wisconsin, Mead (2001) presents evidence that successful policy implementation can result from an “interactive” process. The interaction in this case was between the counties “leading” welfare reform implementation and the state government. The leading counties took an active role in policy formulation and implementation; the state government followed by instituting changes in state policy that were then implemented in the “lagging” counties. Mead concluded that as long as clear policy goals are articulated from the top levels of administration, the various levels of government can “problem solve in parallel” to ensure implementation success.

Congruence between formal policy goals, agency priorities, and the operative goals of agency managers and frontline staff cannot be assumed (Meyers, Riccucci, and Lurie 2001). Comparing welfare sites in three different states, Meyers, Riccucci, and Lurie determined that when policy goals or organizational systems are complex, goal congruence is problematic; when both are complex, formal and operational goals diverge. This lack of goal congruence also explains why welfare workers themselves cannot reform the welfare system. Meyers and Dillon (1999) conclude from a study of frontline workers in California that failure of policy makers to understand the implementation process has led to a system in which workers cannot cooperate with the intent of welfare reform.

Taken together, these studies tell a story of welfare reform where even when goal conflict at the level of state and local agency administrators is resolved, policy implementation is not guaranteed. Additionally, as Meyers and Dillon (1999, 253) argue, “no matter how much welfare workers in local offices support the intent of welfare reform, necessary changes in the operations and goals of local programs will not happen automatically.” Something happens within the organization that can either halt the process of implementation or speed it on its way. This something must take into account organizational leadership, organizational culture, organizational learning, etc., suggesting that what is needed to
explain the intraorganizational aspect of the implementation process is a theory of organizational behavior.

**ORGANIZATIONAL KNOWING AND WELFARE REFORM—THE SECOND ITERATION**

The KOM brings together a multitude of well-known theories regarding topics such as organizational culture, decision making, and organizational learning to form a consistent explanation of organizational behavior. Because the KOM encompasses the range of theoretical concepts identified by previous welfare implementation researchers, it is an appropriate research frame for the second iteration in the hermeneutic spiral. Following the example of Montjoy and O’Toole (1979), the KOM is used as the theoretical framework in an examination of existing literature for evidence of these theoretical concepts. Use of the KOM framework is not to “test” the KOM but rather to refine and enhance understanding of the existing literature.

In order to accommodate the various facets of information use, Choo (1998) differentiates between the functions and the aspects of information use. By deconstructing the sense-making, knowledge-creation, and decision-making functions into their affective, cognitive, and action-based aspects, a matrix of information use can be developed (see table 1). The rows of the matrix correspond to information interpretation, information conversion, and information processing functions while the columns represent the organizational culture, espoused theory, and the theory in use of the organization.

The sense-making function refers specifically to the processes used by organization members to make sense of their environments, their identities, and their actions (Choo 1998). The affective aspect of sense making encompasses the beliefs organizational members bring into the organization as well as those processes “in which groups of people spin webs of meaning around an initial set of sufficiently clear and plausible cues and predispositions by connecting more and more small pieces of information into larger structures of meaning” (ibid., 77). Cognitively, organization members must select among the number of plausible interpretations that can be used to make sense of what is going on. Finally, enactment is the process by which environments are created by organizational members. Choo argues, “The central information problem in organizational sense making is to reduce ambiguity in messages about the environment and to develop shared meanings in order for collective, purposeful action to take place” (ibid., 103). Sense making is a crucial step in the “knowing cycle” because the knowledge created and decisions made by organization members will be directly influenced by the results of the sense-making process.

In welfare agencies, workers at all levels engage in sense making to understand the role of their agencies, their own roles within these agencies, and the roles of other agencies.
within welfare systems and to create an impression of the clients they serve. Research suggests top levels of management and frontline workers may understand the goals of the agency differently (Yanow 1996). In the specific context of welfare agencies, Lurie and Riccucci (2003) find that the closer one gets to the frontline, focus tends toward determining eligibility and benefits and away from the larger goals of work and self-sufficiency. Furthermore, the researchers found that only one out of the 11 sites studied exhibited an exception to this trend in that both staff and management understood that the emphasis was on work, not quality control.

Perceptions of goals may differ not only within an organization but also among organizations within a single welfare system. In a study of leading and lagging welfare implementation efforts by county in Wisconsin, Mead (2001) found that officials in lagging counties had a different sense of the roles of their organizations in achieving policy goals than the leading counties. Although the different outcomes in leading and lagging counties are attributed partially to the difference in perceptions, it is not clear what factors influenced the beliefs, interpretations, and enactments of workers with respect to their understandings of how the organization’s roles and their own roles within the organization relate to broader agency goals.

Welfare workers also engage in sense making when understanding the phenomenon of policy change in general. On this point, the participants in the Lurie and Riccucci study are more explicit. Workers’ responses indicate that based on past experience they do not believe that the reforms will be long lasting or that the system can be changed. The authors conclude, “If the workers themselves do not believe that welfare goals and systems can be changed or transformed, they are unlikely to change their own behavior” (Lurie and Riccucci 2003, 667). In other words, the beliefs that welfare cannot be changed influenced worker interpretations of the reforms and produced inaction that further reinforced their beliefs that the system cannot be changed.

Sandfort (1999) explicitly addresses how the beliefs, interpretations, and enactments of welfare office workers and those working for private contractors act as impediments to interorganizational coordination. The government workers are influenced by civil service rules, an unfavorable impression by the general public, and day-to-day tasks involving detailed policies and paperwork. On the other hand, those working at the contracted firm are influenced by the language of the private sector and their interactions with many actors outside the traditional welfare system. In addition to having formed beliefs about themselves, workers at both agencies have developed unfavorable impressions of the workers in the other agency. Although Sandfort clearly spells out the factors influencing sense making, no specific suggestions are made as to how organizational leaders can influence the process to produce understandings in line with policy goals.

Although it is important to understand the sense-making process, sense making alone does not result in organizational action. In the knowing cycle, it is the decisions made as a result of the sense-making process that equate to organizational action. Sense making may influence decision making directly or through the process of knowledge creation.

Choo (1998) argues that three types of knowledge exist in organizations—cultural, tacit, and explicit. Cultural knowledge is that knowledge used by individuals to “perceive, explain, evaluate and construct reality” (ibid., 112) and corresponds to the affective aspect of knowledge creation. Tacit knowledge is action-based knowledge; it is the knowledge learned by doing. Explicit knowledge is the knowledge that is codified by the organization in manuals, standard operating procedures, and the like. As such, it is the most easily
Tacit knowledge can be converted into explicit knowledge through socialization, externalization, combination, and internalization (Nonaka and Takeuchi 1995). In other words, organization members interact, share information in the form of stories and metaphors, combine their personal experiences with those of others, and apply what they have learned so that it becomes a part of their tacit knowledge. The task for the organization is to provide an environment in which knowledge can be shared among all members at all levels within the organization.

Of course, if the outcome of the sense-making process is not consistent with organizational goals, the knowledge created and shared by organization members will not be directed toward goal achievement either. Frontline workers who understand their role in the organization as determining eligibility in an accurate and timely fashion are likely to create and share tacit knowledge with one another to accomplish these goals. If eligibility determination is the shared understanding within the organization, knowledge transmitted explicitly through training and policy manuals will also reflect these goals, not the alternative goals of work and self-sufficiently.

Furthermore, the direction of the flow of information within organizations is of importance. Frontline workers are the repositories of much of the “know-how” in social service agencies. This fact is overlooked in all but one of the studies reviewed in this analysis. Only Bishop (2003) is concerned with whether or not information flows from the frontlines to management in her study of welfare implementation in Missouri. She draws on the organizational development model of implementation (Elmore 1978), which states that implementation failure can be attributed to the failure of management to listen to the needs and suggestions of frontline workers and the omission of frontline workers from the policy formulation process. She concludes, “Caseworkers believe that they have been largely ignored in the planning process, and they feel they have not been offered any mechanisms for channeling suggestions or for asking advice during implementation” (Bishop 2003, 616).

Finally, organizational members use their shared understandings and the knowledge they have created to make decisions. Choo (1998) builds on March and Simon (1958) and Simon (1976) in his discussion of organizational decision making as bounded rationality and satisficing. Choo notes that “[s]atisficing is more than a rule about how decisions take place in organizations, it is also a rule about how organizations search for information” (ibid., 167). Therefore, decisions influence and are influenced by the sense-making and knowledge-creation functions. In decision making, organizational members express preferences for decision making (the affective aspect), rely on decision-making routines (the action-based aspect), and follow decision-making rules (the cognitive aspect). The task of the organization is to design and implement “rules and routines to simplify and guide choice behavior so that it is consistent and coordinated, at least at some minimal level” (ibid., 204).

In addition to viewing information use from the perspective of the sense-making, knowledge-creation and decision-making functions, one can also “look” down the columns of the organizational knowing matrix at the affective, cognitive, and action-based aspects of information use. Viewed in this manner, organizational culture is not synonymous with sense making but encompasses the cultural knowledge and decision-making preferences as well as sense-making beliefs. The belief that welfare cannot be changed that exists among California welfare workers (Lurie and Riccucci 2003) may influence the cultural knowledge regarding the roles of workers in these agencies, leading workers to believe that the goals and objectives of the agency have not changed. Given these beliefs and cultural knowledge,
decision-making preferences that emphasize determining eligibility criteria can in turn become institutionalized, creating an organizational culture of stasis.

The espoused theory of an organization reflects the “official line” and corresponds to the cognitive aspect of information use. Here, the interpretations of the sense-making process and the explicit knowledge and decision-making rules contained in manuals and conveyed in training sessions reflect what is “supposed to happen” in organizations. It is unclear from present studies of welfare organizations how much of the espoused theory corresponds to eligibility determination versus work and self-sufficiency. Lurie and Riccucci (2003) report that signs and posters regarding work and self-sufficiency appeared in some of the welfare offices that they studied. Additionally, many of these sites also changed client-processing procedures to reflect the emphasis on work and self-sufficiency. “Despite the changes in titles and duties of the frontline workers, they received more training in the new rules and procedures than training that would broaden their skills in moving clients toward employment” (ibid., 671). This inconsistency between message projected to welfare recipients and message conveyed to workers reflects the fact that the underlying culture of eligibility determination had not changed with the policy changes. Likewise, the rules also reflected the emphasis on eligibility determination and the client-processing mentality.

Looking down the last column of the KOM matrix, the theory-in-use aspect of information use reflects the enactments of the sense-making process, tacit knowledge held by organization members, and the routines employed by them. These factors reflect the action-based aspects of information use and may differ somewhat or significantly from the cognitive espoused theory of the organization. Although the espoused theory and theory in use can differ significantly (Argyris and Schön 1978), the KOM and the research questions presented in table 2 present a clearer understanding as to why at the organizational level these two may differ. Putting aside the fact that even an individual’s theory in use may differ from his or her espoused theory (Argyris, Putnam, and McLain Smith 1985), when considering the differences at the organizational level, it is the organization’s espoused theory but the individual’s theory in use that are most often discordant. For example, consider the research questions presented for examining the sense-making component of the espoused theory: How do organizational members interpret policy changes? How does the organization convey organizational values? Frontline workers may interpret policy changes differently than other organizational members, particularly management, because of their past experiences. Therefore, the organization may be conveying, to some degree, a value of “work first,” which, because the organization has made no effort to influence the affective aspect of sense making in workers, has not impacted how frontline workers are interpreting the policy change. Since it is the actions of frontline workers more than any others in the organization that represent the theory in use of the organization as a whole, a disconnect between the espoused theory and the theory in use is produced. This divergence can be further widened if what the organization supposedly espouses is not emphasized in training that is provided to workers or the rules that guide decision making.

Although Sandfort (1999) discusses enactments, Lurie and Riccucci (2003) write about tacit knowledge, and Meyers, Glaser, and MacDonald (1998) discuss work routines, not one study of welfare implementation examines the theory in use in welfare organizations as a whole. Likewise, although the studies published to date suggest that the variables in the KOM are important in and of themselves and occasionally in relation to others (see, e.g., Sandfort 1999), there has not been an attempt to consider if and how sense making,
knowledge creation and decision making work together in welfare organizations to produce implemented policy.

APPLICATION OF THE KOM TO PRIMARY DATA—THE THIRD ITERATION

Reviewing the existing welfare reform literature with the KOM as a theoretical framework enhances understanding of the intraorganizational processes of welfare reform implementation. Additionally, this review helps to refine the model for use in the analysis of primary data.

Presented here is evidence for organizational knowing and its relationship to policy implementation in various offices of the Department of Public Welfare (DPW) in Allegheny County, Pennsylvania. In order to increase construct validity, multiple sources of evidence were used (Yin 1994). During a 6-month period in 2000, the researcher visited three district offices, observed 40 worker interviews with clients, attended training sessions with both new eligibility workers and ongoing supervisors, observed monthly district director meetings, and conducted semistructured interviews with department heads. Interviews were conducted with 17 Income Maintenance Case Workers (IMCWs), four supervisors, and nine administrators. Document analysis of training materials and the organization’s mission statement were also employed.

The rubrics in tables 2 and 3 were used to collect the data. Tape recording was prohibited by the agency, so all notes were taken during the interviews and observations. Notes were retyped and augmented on a daily basis. Notes and documents collected were

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Table 2
Sample Questions for Researchers Conducting Welfare Implementation Research Using the Knowing Organization Framework

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Information Functions</th>
<th>Affective (Organizational Culture)</th>
<th>Cognitive (Espoused Theory)</th>
<th>Action (Theory-In-Use)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sense Making</td>
<td>What do organizational members believe the goal of the agency is/should be?</td>
<td>How do organizational members interpret policy changes?</td>
<td>How do workers enact their beliefs?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Knowledge Creation</td>
<td>What knowledge is held in common by organizational members?</td>
<td>What knowledge is contained in the policies and procedures of the organization?</td>
<td>How do organizational members fulfill job responsibilities?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Decision Making</td>
<td>Do workers express a preference for discretion in decision making?</td>
<td>What rules exist within the organization to guide decision making?</td>
<td>What routines do organizational members employ to aid in decision making?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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2 As suggested in the introduction, this article presents an abbreviated illustration of the advocated research process. The abridged nature of this example is most apparent in this section. A more detailed examination of these data is presented in “Organizational Knowing in Welfare Agencies” (Mischen 2002).
analyzed using Yin’s (1994) strategy of pattern matching. Table 4 details the results one would expect if DPW were to be considered a knowing organization. Blocks of text were coded as sense making, knowledge creation, or decision making. These categories were then analyzed for common themes.

**Table 3**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Information Functions</th>
<th>Aspects of Information Use</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Affective (Organizational Culture)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sense Making</td>
<td>Worker interviews</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Knowledge Creation</td>
<td>Worker interviews</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Decision Making</td>
<td>Worker interviews</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Sense Making**

The stated mission of the DPW is to “Promote, improve and sustain the quality of family life; Break the cycle of dependency; Promote respect for employees; Protect and serve Pennsylvania’s most vulnerable citizens; and Manage our resources effectively.” When asked about the mission statement and whether or not it was an accurate representation of agency activity, some IMCWs responded that it “sounded like what went on in the organization” and others thought that it was a “joke,” but all were familiar with it. When probed further, those who initially dismissed the mission statement as inaccurate recanted when asked to provide examples of how and why it did not reflect “what went on in the organization.” Some faulted the 1996 PRWORA itself as inconsistent with agency goals, whereas others believed that management did not respect employees. However, most commented that the statement was more reflective of agency goals since PRWORA than before, when the mission statement was actually written. Although some IMCWs took issue with the organization’s implementation of the mission statement, none of the interviewed workers expressed disagreement with the goals stated. They felt that they did their best to enact the mission, given organizational and policy constraints.

In order to understand the high degree of agreement between actual agency goals as reflected in the mission statement and what IMCWs believe the agency goals should be, one must understand the acculturation process at DPW. Training, office culture, and employee evaluation all work to affect the beliefs of IMCWs so that workers’ views of the clients and the role these workers play in the agency also coincide with agency goals.

Training at DPW is extensive. New hires receive 6 months of initial training, termed the Income Maintenance Standard Training Program, during which workers are trained not only in policies and procedures but also in the role of the organization in implementing welfare
policy, the agency expectations of IMCWs, and how the agency views welfare clients. Before policy and procedure training begins, new hires participate in a training module entitled “What is Welfare?” According to the Trainer’s Guide, a resource for those conducting the training sessions, the purpose of this session is to provide a “common base of understanding” of what welfare means. One of the explicit objectives of this module is to identify values, beliefs, norms, and expectations of the organizational culture. Likewise, DPW’s orientation toward welfare clients is clearly spelled out in training manuals: “Most people on welfare want to work, and must work or participate in a training program in order to receive their benefits. But many times, welfare clients don’t have the necessary skills to qualify for jobs.” Trainers also remind trainees that welfare recipients are “citizens” and that benefits are made available to clients through a “Governmental body that represents all of its people” (PA Department of Public Welfare. Division of Staff Development. 2000).

The beliefs of workers in the district offices echo the same themes presented in training. When asked directly what they view as their role at DPW, answers were very similar: “I’m here because the clients need me” and “Help the client. Get clients off welfare and keep them off” reflect the commitment of service felt among the IMCWs. Whereas some workers see themselves as cogs in a bureaucratic machine, many others commented on how the work they are doing since welfare reform is more like social work. The move to managing a caseload, which enables workers to develop relationships with clients, was the factor most cited by both management and staff as contributing to this change.

Workers enact these beliefs by aligning themselves with clients. Hence, clients form an important reference group for the workers. IMCWs also relate to clients through storytelling about themselves as well as other client situations. In a number of worker-client interviews, IMCWs shared personal information with clients in order to make them feel comfortable about being in the office and asking for help. In no observed interview were clients belittled or berated. It was evident that a culture of respect for the client was present in the organization.

In addition to acting out their beliefs concerning clients during interviews, IMCWs also enact their beliefs regarding their own roles within the agency. The return to case management reflects the beliefs and interpretations of these roles. Case management implies a new relationship between worker and client, with corresponding frustrations. However, workers seemed intent on living up to their roles, evidenced by one worker who desperately searched through manuals for a “loophole” in the policy that would allow her to “help” the client and keep her from ending up in “Western Psych,” the state psychiatric hospital.

### Table 4

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Aspect of Information Use</th>
<th>Expected Results</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sense Making</td>
<td>Agreement with respect to view of the client view of the IMCW view of the organization</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Knowledge Creation</td>
<td>Conversion of knowledge from tacit to explicit Informed by common understandings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Decision Making</td>
<td>Preference for discretion Rules and routines guide but not limit discretion</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Overall, there was a general agreement between workers’ views of clients, their roles within the agency, and the role of the organization and the organization’s view of these elements. It appears that agency efforts to influence the sense-making process of workers are successful. Workers have a beneficent view of clients and believe that their role in the agency is to help the client and that the role of the agency is to get clients off welfare in order to end the cycle of dependency.

**Knowledge Creation**

Despite the copious explicit knowledge that exists within DPW in the forms of manuals and that is conveyed through extensive training sessions, IMCWs, by and large, feel that it takes 2 years of doing the job before one feels comfortable with it. This illustrates the importance of tacit knowledge in frontline work. As one worker said, 80% of what he learned about the job he learned by doing the job even though training was extensive.

That tacit knowledge is a critical part of the knowing and doing that goes on within organizations is in itself not news. Workers figure out how to do their jobs by doing them. The key aspect of the organizational learning literature, however, is the ability of organizations to capture this tacit knowledge and convert it into explicit knowledge. This occurs at DPW in one of two ways.

First, some of the tacit-to-explicit knowledge creation takes place laterally within the organization through the sharing of experiences in working groups. An important factor influencing socialization and the sharing of experiences is the average tenure of employees. Most IMCWs have more than 10 years of experience with the agency. Consequently, new workers are a minority and are expected to fit in rather than lead. Through the sharing of stories, metaphors, and analogies, workers are able to externalize their knowledge. At DPW, it is uncommon for a worker to guard information.

The second way tacit knowledge is converted to explicit knowledge is when DPW asks workers to implement the policy before it is written. The most conspicuous example of this behavior was during the initial implementation of the 1996 reforms. In what became part of the cultural knowledge shared about that period of time, a select group of workers were asked to figure out how to implement the objectives of welfare reform before the policy was written. Their tacit knowledge was converted into explicit policy.

In both types of knowledge conversion, the knowledge that is produced is informed by the beliefs, interpretations, and enactments of the sense-making process. Since that process was influenced by DPW, the knowledge that is created continues to reinforce the values of the agency.

**Decision Making**

Resolving conflicts in policy or deciding which policy is applicable, and the manner in which to apply it, relies not only on information and knowledge creation but also on the decision-making practices within the organization. IMCWs expressed a preference for discretion in decision making, DPW outlines numerous rules for how to apply policy, and workers routinely use discretion in their decision making.

The cognitive aspect of decision making refers to the rules espoused by the organization. These “rules” determine not only who is eligible, the programs for which clients are eligible, and the amount for which the client is eligible but also the process for
determining eligibility. Workers and clients are governed by rules that outline the responsibility of each party for supplying information and deadlines for the determination of eligibility as well as the provision of information. Overall, the rules governing policy are contained in three-ring binders—one each for cash and food stamps and two for medical.

The affective aspects of decision making, which reflect the impact of decision making on organizational culture, are decision-making preferences. All the worker-client interviews could be described as rational- or process-oriented decision making (Choo 1998). Interviews that were straightforward and guided by rules and routines were placed in the “rational” category. Those in which multiple options and alternative solutions could be found were placed in the “process” category. Of the 40 interviews, 16 were classified as rational and 24 as process. Overall, the decision-making process of the frontline workers was classified as process oriented.

This conclusion is drawn for the following reason: Of the 40 interviews, half were intake interviews and half were continuing eligibility. For intake interviews, IMCWs have the application that guides the interview process. Therefore, the interviews start out following an actual routine. During the interview, the client may present information that requires the IMCW to deviate from that routine. When this happens, the interview becomes more process oriented. During the continuing eligibility interviews, of which 18 of the 20 were IMCW initiated, a reapplication form guides the proceedings. Therefore, they also begin with the routine of reviewing the form and responding to the information provided by clients. If all the necessary information is provided in the application and the client fits neatly into an eligibility category, the interaction may conclude without deviation from the “routine.”

However, clients often come in with circumstances that do not fit neatly into the application, with conflicting information on the application, or with information missing from the application. In these cases, the IMCW must be able to elicit the necessary information from clients. At this point, there are numerous possible outcomes to the interview depending on the questions asked and the answers provided. Because the IMCW does not know upon entering the interview what will emerge from the interview, all interactions with clients must be approached with a process-oriented perspective. All interviews have at least two possible outcomes—they may be routine or not.

In sum, workers expressed their preference for discretion in decision making, and practices at DPW seem to be in line with these preferences. Despite the numerous necessary regulations, workers are able to construct their own processing routines but diverge from them when discretion is appropriate.

UNDERSTANDINGS AND PREUNDERSTANDINGS

Rather than “summarize and conclude” this article, offered here are some understandings of welfare policy implementation gathered from this research that may function as preunderstandings for future research.

Looking at the Allegheny County example and using the KOM as a guide, it appears that DPW has been successful at affecting the sense making of workers within the agency. Training seems to be one way that DPW is able to influence workers beliefs. The level of familiarity with the mission statement that clearly outlined the goals of the agency is another factor. Additionally, DPW enables tacit-to-explicit knowledge conversion through socialization as well as makes a conscious effort to capitalize on worker knowledge.
Finally, DPW allows workers to use this knowledge by allowing some degree of discretion in decision making. What is generated from these decisions and actions is a network of meaning, learning, and doing.

The larger lesson learned from this limited example is that the implementation decisions that agencies make at the state and county levels matter. The picture presented by Allegheny County is different in many important ways from the case studies presented earlier in this article even though they are implementing a common policy.

These differences inspire more questions than answers. Some questions of interest to those implementing welfare policies: Does organizational knowing translate to implementation success? How does an organization change to become a knowing organization?

Other questions are more epistemological in nature and relate to the process that I just presented. How reliable are the data collected when time and context are so important? How important is reliability as a criterion for “good” implementation research at the organizational level of analysis? How does the selection of the research frame influence the results? Whose interpretations are valid in interpretive research? Should we reconceptualize validity in implementation research?

Finally, as a discipline, we need to know how research is being used and what types of research is most useful. What is the purpose of a grand theory of implementation that does not inform practice? This article not only contributes some insight into welfare policy implementation but also revitalizes a larger discussion about why and how we conduct implementation research.

REFERENCES


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