

Role Construction and Conflict Among Policy Implementation Actors: A Study on Policy Adaptation from the Perspective of Role Theory

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Abstract: Public policy implementation is a complex process transforming ideal texts into real-world actions, involving the interaction of multiple factors. Traditional research has predominantly focused on objective dimensions such as policy instruments, implementation environments, and institutional design, relatively neglecting the psychological and behavioral mechanisms of policy implementers, thereby falling into the theoretical dilemma of “de-subjectification.” As agents with agency, policy implementers’ role perceptions, behavioral strategies, and value preferences constitute critical variables influencing policy outcomes. Yet these remain marginalized due to their elusive quantifiability. Originating in social psychology, role theory emphasizes how individuals’ positional identities within social structures shape their behavior, offering systematic conceptual tools for understanding policy implementers’ actions. This paper constructs a typological framework for policy adaptation centered on the analytical thread of “role construction—role conflict—role adjustment”, categorizing policy adaptation into seven ideal types. Using case studies of task force mechanisms in grassroots policy implementation, it dissects the behavioral logic and adaptation strategies of implementers navigating multiple role tensions. The study demonstrates that role theory not only effectively identifies the causes and types of policy adaptation but also provides an actionable analytical pathway for policy implementation research, partially addressing existing research gaps.

Keywords: Role theory; Policy implementation actors; Policy adaptation; Task force mechanism; Grassroots governance

Online publication: September 9, 2025

1. Research origins and problem statement

Policy implementation studies emerged in the 1970s, marked by Pressman and Wildavsky’s *The Implementation of Policy: How Washington’s Best Intentions Fail in Oakland* ^[1]. This work prompted academic recognition of the significant gap between policy texts and implementation outcomes. Over the subsequent decades, research paradigms underwent three generations of evolution ^[2]: The first generation emphasized top-down implementation models, focusing on command-obedience relationships within bureaucratic structures. Scholars like Derthick, Pressman, and Wildavsky, while keenly noting the nonlinear nature of implementation processes, relied

excessively on case studies and lacked theoretical generalizability. Second-generation research shifted toward a bottom-up perspective, emphasizing the discretionary power of frontline officials and policy renegotiation processes. Theories such as Lipsky's "street-level bureaucracy" and Sabatier's policy coalition framework sought to reveal the interactive and adjustment mechanisms within implementation. Third-generation research seeks to integrate these perspectives by introducing concepts of intergovernmental relations and policy networks. Models like Goggin's "Intergovernmental Implementation Model" and Matland's "Ambiguity-Conflict Model" emphasize the dynamic and context-dependent nature of implementation ^[3].

Despite continuous deepening and expansion of research, existing literature still exhibits significant blind spots: most studies excessively focus on objective factors such as institutions, tools, and environments, while relatively neglecting the subjective agency of policy implementers and their psychological behavioral mechanisms. As noted by new public service theorist Denhardt, policy implementation failures often stem not from management techniques or tool selection, but from implementers' cognitive and behavioral patterns ^[4]. However, due to the strong subjectivity and situational dependency of implementers' psychology and behavior, these elements are difficult to directly observe and measure, rendering them a "black box" in policy implementation research and trapping academia in the so-called "measurement dilemma."

Role theory emerged as a branch of symbolic interactionism. Its conceptual framework was developed and disseminated by Blumer, J.L. Moreno (1934), R. Linton (1936), T. Newcomb (1950), and T.R. Sarbin (1954) ^[5]. Social psychologist G.H. Mead first introduced the concept of "role" into social psychology, defining it as the shared behaviors exhibited by different individuals within the same context. R. Linton (1936) defined "role" as the process by which individuals, within their social positions, rationally exercise the rights and fulfill the obligations within their scope, thereby assuming specific roles. H.H. Kelly and J.W. Tibbetts (1959) proposed that a role is a system of expectations regarding the social behavior of individuals in a given social position, as perceived by stakeholders and by the individuals themselves. L. Buyeva (1968) argued that the social psychological analysis of roles should emphasize subjective factors while integrating them with objective factors—namely, the social relationships inherent in roles. She asserted that "social role" is synonymous with "social function" ^[6]. In summary, Role Theory originates from social production practices, emphasizing the crucial value of social relations in shaping human behavioral orientations. It posits that the social attributes inherent in roles profoundly influence the value judgments of behavioral agents and impact action outcomes ^[5]. Its core concepts include role construction, role conflict, role strain, and role overlap. Among these, role construction serves as the fundamental premise for role analysis, providing an operational theoretical framework for examining individual behavior within social structures. Public policy implementers are essentially individuals assuming public roles within specific institutional environments. Their actions are constrained by role norms while also influenced by personal cognition and external expectations. Thus, role theory offers new possibilities for unlocking the "black box" of policy implementation. This paper attempts to introduce this theory into policy implementation research, constructing an explanatory framework for policy adaptation. Using the grassroots task force mechanism as a case study, it tests the theory's explanatory power within the Chinese policy implementation context.

2. Conceptualization of policy adaptation and explanatory framework under role theory

Public policy implementation is a process of translating textual forms into action outcomes within a specific

discourse system. Policy adaptation represents deviant implementation behaviors resulting from intense conflicts among the will of the implementing agent, organizational will, and public will ^[7-9]. It may manifest as passive evasion and distortion or as active adjustment and innovation, carrying neutral theoretical implications. Role theory situates individuals within social relational networks, using role-related concepts to reveal the motivations and constraints behind behavior, thereby offering a new theoretical perspective for policy adaptation research.

2.1. Construction level: Role construction and policy adaptation

Role construction refers to the process by which individuals develop role perceptions, emotional commitments, and behavioral patterns within specific social relationships. Policy implementers' role construction exhibits publicness, plurality, and embeddedness: publicness requires alignment with the public interest; plurality manifests as implementers frequently responding to diverse stakeholders' expectations; embeddedness signifies roles deeply rooted in organizational networks and institutional environments. Specifically, role construction operates through the following mechanisms:

- (1) Role selection: Implementers form their role perceptions and behavioral strategies by observing and drawing from the behavioral patterns of similar roles (e.g., implementers in other regions or departments), a process steeped in empiricism.
- (2) Role performance: Based on external expectations and personal interpretations, implementers exhibit role behaviors during actual execution. This serves both as an outcome of role internalization and a means of role adjustment.
- (3) Role embedding: Actors locate their position within organizational networks, integrate resources, and communicate information to achieve effective alignment between their roles and the environment.

Through these mechanisms, policy implementers gradually develop stable role identification and behavioral tendencies, providing the psychological and behavioral foundation for policy adaptation.

2.2. Conflict layer: Role conflict and policy adaptation

Role conflict serves as the primary catalyst for policy adaptation. Based on its origins, it can be categorized into intra-role conflict and inter-role conflict:

- (1) Intra-role conflict: Psychological contradictions arising from inconsistent internal/external expectations or insufficient resources/capabilities within a single role. Specifically: First, "role failure" due to discrepancies between ideal and actual roles, where implementers cannot meet role requirements; Second, "role overload" caused by shortages of time, material, or capability resources, where responsibilities exceed resource capacity.
- (2) Inter-role conflict: This refers to conflicting expectations and behavioral contradictions faced by the same actor when assuming multiple roles. Specific manifestations include: First, "role strain", which is psychological pressure and behavioral conflict arising from overlapping roles and responsibilities; Second, "role ambiguity", where insufficient information or unclear expectations lead to confusion in role perception; Third, "role overload", where excessive external expectations or overwhelming tasks exceed an individual's capacity.

Role conflict occurs not only at the individual level but can also extend to the organizational level, explaining meso-level phenomena such as inter-governmental conflicts, departmental self-interest, and central-local relations.

2.3. Interaction level: Role interaction and policy adaptation

Role interaction is a dynamic process of adjusting between role expectations and role perception. Policy implementers must continually balance discrepancies between superior directives, public expectations, organizational objectives, and their own cognitive frameworks. When role expectations (society's or other actors' behavioral demands on implementers) diverge from role perception (implementers' understanding and grasp of their own roles), implementers often alleviate tensions through policy adaptation. For instance, policy beneficiaries may expect implementers to "advocate for the people", while implementers themselves prioritize "bureaucratic advancement." This gap between expectations and perception forms the psychological basis for adaptive behavior.

2.4. Output layer: Seven types of policy deviation and theoretical framework

Based on the core concepts of role theory, this paper constructs seven ideal types of policy adaptation (Table 1), each corresponding to specific causes, participating actors, and stages of occurrence:

Table 1. Types of policy adaptation and their characteristics

Type of policy deviation	Conceptual definition	Nature	Actors involved	Triggering key variables
Role Transition Type	Adaptive behavior resulting from the continuation of past behavioral patterns due to role succession or job changes	Neutral	Former role holder	Institutional/ Organizational Culture/ Tradition
Role Conflict Type	Adaptive behavior involving proactive policy adjustments to pursue personal or organizational interests	Malicious	Stakeholders	Personal interests/ organizational interests
Role Failure Type	Unintended adaptation triggered by role failure due to cognitive biases or capability gaps	Malicious	None	Performer's cognition/ capability
Role-load type	Adaptive coping behaviors are adopted due to limited time or material resources	Neutral	Implementation Hierarchy	Time/Material Resources
Role Strain Type	Adaptive behavior arising from role conflicts due to multiple roles and unclear authority/responsibilities	Neutral	Superiors and Subordinates	Role Authority and Responsibility
Role Expectation Type	Adaptive behaviors undertaken to respond to the expectations and pressures of external entities (superiors, the public, etc.)	Neutral	External Expectation Holders	External Expectations
Role Ambiguity Type	Unconscious adaptation due to information bottlenecks or ambiguous understanding	Malignant	Inter-departmental and external environment	Policy Information Flow Level

To enhance the operability of the analysis, this paper further constructs a four-tier analytical model: "Access Set—Variable Set—Problem Set—Interaction Set." The Access Set defines the embedded relationship between actors and roles; the Variable Set extracts seven key variables (such as interests, resources, expectations, etc.); The problem set identifies adaptation types based on variable combinations; the interaction set employs Kahn's "overlapping role group model" to reveal the interactive structure of role networks, providing an organizational context for adaptation analysis.

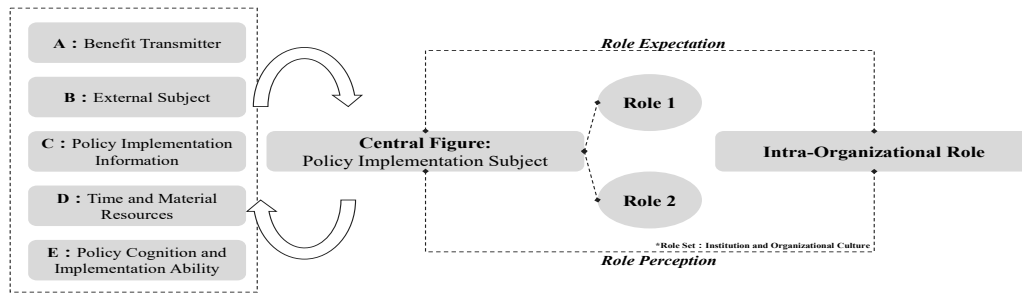


Figure 1. Theoretical framework

3. Reinterpreting the case: Policy adaptation in task force mechanisms

Task force mechanisms represent a distinctive organizational form in China's grassroots policy implementation. Designed as temporary, cross-departmental, and cross-level structures, they aim to break through bureaucratic barriers and enhance policy execution efficiency. Drawing on Ding Huang and Wei Shaohua's (2024) case study of the task force for G Village's photovoltaic power generation project, this paper applies the role theory framework to analyze its policy adaptation behaviors ^[10].

The G Village photovoltaic project was a key initiative for rural revitalization in C Town, involving multiple tasks such as power array construction, land coordination, and benefit compensation. During implementation, C Town established a task force under the guidance of the district command center, comprising members from different departments who held multiple roles. The case involved three significant policy adaptations:

First Adaptation (Role Change & Role Strain Type): The task force leader, concurrently serving as C Town's mayor, faced role strain from balancing daily town management duties with project advancement. To alleviate pressure, the task force conducted a study tour to Lu'an, Anhui (Role Selection), adapting local implementation plans based on external experiences (Role Playing). This demonstrated proactive adaptation amid role inheritance and strain, exhibiting a neutral nature with variables involving organizational tradition and role authority.

Second Adaptation (Role Failure Type): When tea farmers protested against solar panel installations, the task force faced role overload due to limited authority and could not make direct decisions, leading to role failure. To prevent escalation, the task force escalated the issue to the district command center (risk transfer). Higher authorities intervened and adjusted policies for stability maintenance. This adaptation was detrimental, driven by insufficient executive authority and resource misallocation.

Third Adaptation (Role Expectation Type): Driven by both higher-level stability expectations and tea farmers' interests, the task force reached a compensation agreement through informal negotiations (e.g., tea tree relocation, profit sharing), unifying role expectations with implementation. This adaptation is neutral, occurring during policy re-decision-making, with external expectation input as the variable.

Case analysis demonstrates that the role theory framework systematically reveals the underlying mechanisms of policy adaptation, highlighting implementers' behavioral adjustment strategies under multiple role pressures. This provides valuable insights for understanding policy implementation in the Chinese context.

4. Conclusions and outlook

This paper introduces role theory to construct a theoretical framework for analyzing policy implementers' behavior,

categorizing policy adaptation into seven types, and validating its explanatory power through task force case studies. The research demonstrates that policy implementers are not passive recipients of institutional constraints but active agents who proactively seek strategic equilibrium through role construction, conflict, and interaction. Role theory, equipped with operational conceptual tools, partially resolves the “measurement dilemma” in analyzing implementers’ behavior, offering a new theoretical pathway for policy implementation studies.

The value of this study manifests in three key aspects: First, it unifies the analytical perspective on policy adaptation, avoiding fragmentation from multiple theoretical frameworks. Second, it emphasizes the full lifecycle nature and behavioral continuity of policy implementation, overcoming the limitations of static analysis. Third, it re-centers the implementing actors in research, offering feasible solutions for measuring their behavior.

However, this study retains certain limitations: First, role theory cannot fully cover all policy adaptation scenarios, particularly when explaining irrational behaviors. Second, practical policy implementation involves information black boxes and multiple interfering factors, necessitating further refinement of the model’s application. Finally, the case selection remains relatively narrow; future research could expand to different policy domains and organizational contexts. Subsequent research could deepen the integration of role theory with other disciplines (such as organizational behavior and game theory) to enhance the model’s universality and predictive power, thereby further enriching the “toolkit” for public policy analysis.

Disclosure statement

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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