**Book Review**

DOROTHY F. OLSHFSKI AND ROBERT B. CUNNINGHAM. *Agendas and Decisions: How State Government Executives and Middle Managers Make and Administer Policy*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2005.

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*Agendas and Decisions* “seeks to inform both theory and practice about how executives and middle managers in a devolved, state-level management system make and administer policy” (p. 115). Theories that every student and scholar of policy and decision making should know make up the theoretical framework of the book’s argument. Stories told by senior executives and middle managers make up the data collected and used in the book. Dorothy F. Olshfski and Robert B. Cunningham set out to build theory from the ground up—stories from the front lines of decision-making. Through stories, the authors argue that the “aim of practice [of the book] is action, not reflection. *Agendas and Decisions* connects reflection to action by theorizing practice through stories” (p. 5).

There are three features that distinguish this book from many other books on decision-making. These make *Agendas and Decisions* a very interesting, informative, and even entertaining read. First, the book uses the administration of Lamar Alexander, the governor of Tennessee from 1979 to 1987, as a case study. Alexander, currently a U.S. senator, was one of the most popular governors in Tennessee history. The authors present a case that Alexander’s was a devolved administration with strong cabinet governance. Olshfski and Cunningham argue that the governor brought with him a management style that gave senior executives and cabinet members full reign in their own departments, but with conditions that they stay within budget, avoid negative press coverage, and avoid conflict or actions that could lead to conflict. There were also exceptions to the delegation of authority over departments: The governor had an aggressive education agenda and maintained much closer control over many education-related decisions.

Second, the book extensively uses stories of executives and middle managers to study decision-making in the Alexander administration. The authors
promise, and deliver, insider perspectives on decision-making through executives, middle managers, staffers, and close observers of the system. Stories ground the discussion on agenda setting and decision-making in the practice of public administration—in the lived experiences of public managers and executives. Olshfski and Cunningham “theorize practice through stories” (p. 4) and in doing so create a very readable book on decision-making in public administration.

Third, the book constantly makes a distinction between the environments in which senior executives work and in which middle managers make decisions. This is an important distinction that is often missed in many texts on decision-making. On almost all accounts, executives face different challenges than do middle managers. Middle managers often operate in a more complicated environment in which they have less authority to act in comparison to executives.

The book is organized around the different components of the rational decision-making model with its multiple but consecutive stages of (a) problem identification, (b) assessment of alternatives and selection of most desirable alternatives, (c) implementation, and (d) evaluation. From the beginning, the authors have no illusions that this model would act to explain the decision-making process, but they still selected it as a framework in which to present the stories and organize the book. I will return to this. However, given their selection, the book is organized in chapters that address decision-making at these different stages. After the introductory chapter, a second chapter describes the traditional decision-making model. Then come four chapters that address problem identification, alternatives assessment, implementation, and evaluation.

In delineating the production model of decision-making, Olshfski and Cunningham argue that the decision environment is governed by cultural and organizational factors. In Tennessee, cultural factors include the need for “country-side” manners in politics at the state and local levels. To be effective, administrative actions have to accommodate these realities. Organizational factors include fear of the unknown that career public servants and middle managers represent. The governor has the luxury of selecting senior executives and cabinet-level officials, but other administration officials have less choice about who they work with—mostly career civil servants who arrive at their positions through a nonpartisan civil service system. The impact of these realities was evident in the Alexander administration. Authority was delegated from executives to middle managers with much hesitation and in a very conservative manner.

The authors use the important concept of density to capture the complexity in which middle managers and public administrators operate. Density refers to the amount of activity and interest in a decision-making environment. Olshfski and Cunningham argue, and the stories corroborate this argument,
that choices in high-density environments are constrained by close supervision, competing views of stakeholders, and the need for collaboration across units that are often outside the control of managers. Density is not a simple concept. There is environmental density that is constant and both internal and external in nature. But there is also issue density that varies from issue to issue and is harder to predict. Density also varies according to the level at which a decision is being made—executives and middle managers operate in environments with varying densities. Issue and environmental density also drive the amount of time and discourse accorded to considering alternatives and selecting one among several alternatives.

According to the rational model of decision-making, problem identification is the first step in the policy process. This stage is the one stage in decision-making that arguably adheres to the policy–administration dichotomy. Issues are often viewed as more a policy domain than an administrative one. Position, politics, and perspective affect how problems are identified. The following story told to Olshfski and Cunningham by a middle manager best describes how position affects problem identification:

I was working as a warden and it had come to my attention that the prison hospital needed a particular piece of equipment. We desperately needed this piece of equipment. I wrote an eight-page memo detailing all the reasons why we had to have this thing. I couldn’t see how they could turn us down at the central office; this was critical to the operations of the medical facility. Well, I wrote the memo on a Thursday, and that Friday I got a promotion and I was moved to the central office. I moved on Tuesday. On Wednesday, I received my own memo. I had to turn myself down. (p. 30)

Depending on position in the hierarchy, and the extent to which power is devolved, decision makers could initiate issues (executives) or transmit issues (middle managers).

The traditional assumption around implementation is that executives decide while middle managers implement decisions. Olshfski and Cunningham found that while that is true, executives are often thinking about implementation as they make decisions. The authors describe implementation for middle managers compared to implementation for executives—and in two different control (with and without) environments for each level. When implementing under control by executives, middle managers tend to be less motivated. When implementing without control, middle managers network, build teams, confront issues, and talk, which becomes the primary middle manager implementation tool. Executives’ involvement in implementation often features high-profile issues where their authority is unquestioned and their role is primarily to secure support for policies both within and outside the organization.
Evaluation is the last stage of the rational decision-making model framework used in *Agendas and Decisions*. Middle managers tended to view success without always using numbers: “not all cases involved counting things, and often the success was so obvious to the manager that no hard data were provided . . . their personal evaluation of the effectiveness of their activities was rated on a scale that was less statistics-based and more emotion-based” (p. 103). Executives used various tools to demonstrate the effectiveness of programs but were generally unconcerned about the demonstration of effectiveness, especially when they felt that outcomes were acceptable.

The authors conclude that the production model fails to explain decision-making as practiced by senior executives and middle managers. Decision-making does not conform to a rigidly sequenced pattern:

In our interviews, when a respondent seemed to omit a decision stage, we would probe. This led to the discovery that managers did not view the overall process as we anticipated: they did not see distinct stages, and they did not follow a common pattern in addressing problems. (p. 15)

It is easy to anticipate that the rational decision model does not work as theorized. There are defenders of the viability of this model, and there is no scarcity in critiques of the model either. One would have to question the significance of another book that concludes that the model is of little value to practitioners. However, *Agendas and Decisions* does more than critique the rational decision model. One would be hard pressed to find an MPA graduate who is not familiar with this model. We continue to teach this model in most of our policy courses. Olshfski and Cunningham provide an opportunity to teach the model while rooting it in practice. It is a good way to think about policy, to conceptualize the policy process, but make no mistake about it, public administrators make decisions in a much more eclectic way. The stories, representing the practice of public administration, are bigger than any one decision-making model: “Managers ‘loop’ and ‘craft’ as they move back and forth among the stages of the model seeking an effective, implementable decision or implementation strategy” (p. 116).

In critiquing the book, I would like to point to four issues. First, the authors focus on the Tennessee government during an 8-year period that could have been better contextualized in the period in which Lamar Alexander governed. This reviewer wishes that the authors had better linked the Alexander administration to public administration in the 1980s and the New Right movement’s focus on managerialist practices. One could argue that Alexander’s devolved administration resembled many of these practices. The authors state that the “Alexander administration provides a model of state-level, devolved management that appears to have worked effectively” (p. 115). Compared to what? Would administrators in nondevolved state-level governments behave differently? Is it not typical for governors to devolve responsibility to senior
executives in policy areas outside governors’ agendas? These answers could widen the Agendas and Decisions net over the decision-making literature.

Second, the perspective of the rank and file, or the nonmanagement administrators, seems to not be as well represented in the book. Although one could argue that administrators in ranks lower than middle managers are less involved in decision-making, no one would argue that front-line administrators are not key to the implementation stage of decisions. Olshfski and Cunningham leave the reader wondering about the view at these levels in this particular administration, and in this particular devolutionary environment.

Third, the stories seem too constrained by the rational decision-making framework. The authors use story excerpts as data and the rational decision-making model as the framework. One wonders what would have happened if we let stories told by executives and administrators guide the framework of the book instead of the other way around. In other words, was there room for the stories to form their own grounded theory?

These critiques, however, should not undermine the importance of this book. The approach used by Olshfski and Cunningham caters to a much larger audience of public administration faculty and students who continue to teach and learn the rational model but wish to better ground the model in the practice of public administration. The book skillfully accomplishes that purpose. I look forward to using this book in public policy and public administration introductory and advanced classes. The book is very accessible to students at all levels. Students will learn about the rational policy model, learn about where practice fits within this model, learn about density in decision-making, and learn how middle managers and executives operate in different environments.

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