Acknowledgments

This book is an effort to explain why government organizations and programs vary on goal ambiguity and performance and why ambiguous goals have a negative effect on performance. The order of chapters in this book indicates how the ideas have evolved: explaining the concept and nature (e.g. importance, paradox) of goal ambiguity (Chapter 1), systematically reviewing general assertions and conceptual and theoretical arguments about goal ambiguity (Chapter 2) and empirical studies on goal ambiguity (Chapter 3), developing new concepts and measures of program goal ambiguity (Chapter 4), quantitatively analyzing predictors of program goal ambiguity (Chapter 5), political insulation structures as moderators between program management capacity and goal ambiguity (Chapter 6), and the negative relationship between program goal ambiguity and performance (Chapter 7), suggesting and empirically validating a conceptual framework for analysis of program goal ambiguity in government organizations by integrating the arguments and findings of the three preceding chapters (Chapter 8), applying the conceptual framework to different contexts (Chapter 9), and suggesting generalizable propositions (Chapter 10). These ideas have also evolved through my study of goal ambiguity over the past eleven years or so. In 2006, as a doctoral student, I began to work on goal ambiguity in public organizations.

Recently, Professor Hal G. Rainey and I proposed a comprehensive conceptual framework for analysis of goal ambiguity in public organizations (which is presented at Appendix A), which includes many propositions, in the Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory. The full framework is complex, consisting of three frameworks to focus on environmental components, executive and organizational components, and subunit and individual-level components, respectively. An important motive of this book was to suggest another conceptual framework for analyzing goal ambiguity, along with empirical validations of it, and generalizable propositions, which are independent of Rainey and Jung’s (2015) conceptual framework and propositions, as discussed in Chapters 8, 9, and 10. Since Rainey (1993) published an article titled “Toward a theory of goal ambiguity in public organizations” based on scholars’ assertions from their experiences and case observations, he, his colleagues,
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and other scholars have strenuously researched for establishing empirical goal ambiguity theory in public administration, as cited in this book. Yet they have not demonstrated or found any empirical evidence of causal relationships of goal ambiguity. Some reasons for this might be that the purpose and work of government organizations are different from each other and that their goals and performance objectives usually are not often changed over several years or in an administration. Nonetheless, since the middle of the 2000s, empirical efforts to verify theoretical arguments and case observations of prominent scholars in political science, public administration, and public policy have been growing. As a result, we can observe the accumulation of corroborated relationships between goal ambiguity and some variables (e.g. size, job satisfaction, organizational commitment, performance) from diverse regression and path analyses, but not yet reaching the verification of causalities. Such processes imply a way to inductively establish a theory through empirical regularities. Rainey and I used empirical goal ambiguity theory rather than goal ambiguity theory. Here the term theory may be similar to Lindblom’s (1959) conception of theory which refers to the attempt to find generalizable propositions. We know that some scholars are not happy with the use of the term theory yet, and we have directly experienced the criticism in the review process for journal publications. Researchers still have a long way to go toward the establishment of empirical goal ambiguity theory.

It is challenging and will take a long time to verify and accumulate causalities related to goal ambiguity. It seems like a Sisyphean journey. Maybe just taking quantum steps by making an individual empirical effort to push the same stone back up the same mountain. There may not be immediate, noticeable results and compensations. However, if the mountain is big enough for us to keep going up and finding something small but meaningful, I would like to encourage myself and younger researchers (in particular, non-native English people like me who want to or have to write in English) to endure the pain and sometimes despair but with an optimistic outlook. I hope that this book will be a meaningful signpost, which stimulates more empirical studies with rigorous research design and promising ideas.

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