1. Introduction

Across different levels of government as well as across countries, many organizations have put organizational and program goals on their websites and in their annual performance reports; the practice has become virtually ubiquitous. Historically, the importance of stating organizational and program performance goals, measures, and targets has been emphasized under public management reforms, for example, in the United States, management by objectives (MBO) in the 1970s, the Government Performance and Results Act (GPRA) in the 1990s, and the Program Assessment Rating Tool (PART) in the 2000s. In the public sector, goal setting is not only a starting point of management but also connected to contemporary governance. This link of goal setting to governance has generated one of the most important and fundamental conditions and challenges of public work: goal ambiguity (as opposed to goal clarity). Based on their observations about the goals of public organizations, policies, and programs, political scientists, public management and policy scholars, and economists have asserted that organizational goals of public organizations are more ambiguous than those of business firms and that this goal ambiguity has important (mainly negative) consequences for public organizations and their employees (e.g. Allison 1983; Barnard 1938; Buchanan 1974; Dahl and Lindblom 1953; Downs 1967; Heinrich 1999; Lowi 1979; Lynn 1981; Matland 1995; Perry and Porter 1982; Rainey 1993; Ripley and Franklin 1982; Wildavsky 1979; Wilson 1989).

From the long list of prominent scholars and their assertions and arguments reviewed in the next chapter, it is clear that goal ambiguity has been a long-lasting and important topic of study in public management. Before examining the literature on and providing empirical evidence of predictors and consequences (criterion variables) of goal ambiguity in the following chapters, it is useful to conceptually understand goal ambiguity, which is the main concept in this book.
GOAL AND AMBIGUITY

As the term goal ambiguity is a compound of the words goal and ambiguity, it may be helpful to explain (organizational) goal and ambiguity separately, before discussing goal ambiguity.

The Concept and Importance of Goal

Individuals’ behavior is almost always purposeful and goal-oriented; in organizations, it is or is expected to be particularly so. In this respect, an organization is viewed as a system of conscious cooperation among or a coalition of individuals with different personal goals (Barnard 1938; Cyert and March 1963), to achieve common goals collectively.1 Regardless of the sectors (e.g. public, private, nonprofit), the scope of organizational cooperation or coalition can be very broad. As an example, we can note that a public organization or a government agency involves the cooperation or coalition of such members as managers, lower-level employees, formal political authorities (e.g. elected officials, legislators, oversight agencies), clientele, interest groups, contracting companies, and so forth. Therefore, the concept of goal to define such scope is imperative to the management of organizations and organization theory.

A goal is defined as the object or the aim of an action to attain a wanted result (or a target) within a specified time limit (Latham 2004, p. 126). This definition suggests key components of a goal—target and timeline. One of the underlying premises in behavioral sciences or organization theory is that organizational goals regulate and guide the activities of the organization members, providing or becoming critical standards for what should be done. Furthermore, goals serve as the criteria for the delegation of authority—that is, assigning individuals’ responsibilities—in organizations (Barnard 1938).

Philosophically defined, organizational goals are or are constituted by oughts, which are “ethical statements mixed with factual elements” (Simon 1997, p. 69). For instance, “Our agency ought to provide a new public service to the citizens in the jurisdiction” means that in fact the demands for the new service have been made, and if we do not provide the service
at a satisfactory level, we will not accomplish our primary goal or mission to improve the citizens’ wellbeing. As such, goals are intended to build and reinforce an organization’s legitimacy. That is, goals are value premises that serve as crucial information and criteria for an organization’s and its members’ important decisions (Simon 1964). Thus, when an individual’s goals are congruent with organizational goals, the individual’s loyalty to the organization will be fostered through the enhancement of his or her identification with the organization (Downs 1967; Kristof 1996).

From the cognitive and behavioral viewpoints, goals as conscious purposes and intentions influence human behavior by having an immediate effect on satisfaction and motivation in organizational contexts (Ryan 1970), upon which, Barnard (1938) asserted, organizations and their success rest. The reason is that if there is no organization goal or no clear organization goal, individuals with disparate personal goals cannot know what satisfactions can be anticipated and what specific efforts will be required in their organization. That is, individuals’ willingness to work cooperatively cannot develop without a goal (Barnard 1938). Furthermore, from the perspective of public-private sector distinction, public service motivation (PSM), defined as “an individual’s predisposition to respond to motives grounded primarily or uniquely in public institutions and organizations” (Perry and Wise 1990, p. 368), involves an individual’s rational or affective attachment to the main goals or the mission of an organization. Similarly, Anthony Downs (1967, p. 84) considered “desire to serve the public interest” and “commitment to a specific program of action” as important goals, which can motivate public officials. As such, goals function as an important motivator for organization members.

Such goals are not static but rather continuously changing, due to the changing demands from the inside and outside of an organization. In this connection, Cyert and March (1963) viewed goals as the product of a continuous bargaining-learning process. These two authors suggested the following three main processes of forming organization goals: first, through the bargaining process, participants fix the composition and general terms of the cooperative efforts or the coalition; second, through the internal process of control, they make organization goals more stable and elaborate; third, through the process of adaptation to learning from experience, they change the common agreements in accordance with environmental changes. Organizational goals should continue to go through such adjustment processes, to serve effectively the aforementioned functions—regulating and guiding members’ activities, and enhancing organizational identification, loyalty, satisfaction, and motivation. Besides, organizational goals need to be systematically arranged in hierarchies, which is called goal structure or goal hierarchy.
The Structure of Organizational Goals

Every organization has its own goal hierarchy. Barnard (1938) asserted that building an effective goal hierarchy, in which general goals can be defined specifically and concretely by lower-level goals, is a key aspect of effective and long-lasting organizations. Different levels of the goal hierarchy are in the means-ends relation: a lower goal is a means for a higher goal. Some major scholars in the analysis of organization goals divided the goal hierarchy into official and operative goals (Perrow 1961) and into non-operational goals, operational goals, and operational subgoals (March and Simon 1993).

Official goals are formal statements of the general purposes of the organization (Perrow 1961), such as non-operational goals and mission statements. These goals are general and ambiguous, like “protecting the life and property of the people in the municipality.” At lower levels, operational or operative4 goals indicate the relatively immediate ends sought through the actual operations (Perrow 1961). These goals are more specific, like “reducing the total fire loss in terms of casualties and property,” which people would call goals to distinguish from mission above and objectives below. For these goals, people can measure the degree to which particular activities contribute (March and Simon 1993). At the next lower levels, (operational) subgoals are arranged as the means for the higher operational goals. Based on some set of subgoals, individual programs of action are divided in the organization, and each program carries out a more or less independent set of activities without reference to the other programs (March and Simon 1993). Examples, following the above example of operational goal (i.e. reduction in fire loss), are objectives regarding how well and effectively to build and inspect fire protection systems (in fire inspection program) and how quickly to rescue people from a fire (in rescue program). The number of levels and the name of each level of the goal hierarchy vary across different organizations.

In accordance with a goal hierarchy, an organization has a hierarchy of functions or a hierarchy of formal authority (Simon 1997). This is particularly the case of government organizations of large size. From the examples immediately above, a municipal government or its agency can have the official goal or mission statement; the fire department in the organization can have the operational or operative goal; and the rescue program or division in the department can have the subgoals or objectives. Later in this book (Chapters 4, 5, 6, 7, and 8), program goal ambiguity is measured with performance objectives at the program level for empirical analyses. In many cases, people use the terms goal and objective interchangeably. In this book, I use performance goals rather than objectives and goals, as
originally stated in the PART (Program Assessment Rating Tool) reports (which are the data for the program goal ambiguity measurements in this book; for the explanations about it, see Chapter 4) and used by public management scholars (e.g. Heinrich 2012; Moynihan 2013).

The correspondence of a goal hierarchy to an authority hierarchy is also connected to the roles (or tasks) of individuals and groups in an organization. Such goal-authority-role sequence is the essence of rationality in administrative management. Specifically, the organization specifies individuals’ roles and tasks at each level of the authority hierarchy, along with the goal hierarchy. That is, the organization limits the scope of individuals’ decisions and activities. As a result, the individuals’ decisional burdens can be reduced to manageable proportions (Simon 1997). Such a process is rational, given the limits on individuals’ knowledge and computational capabilities, which Simon coined bounded rationality described immediately below.

The Concept of Ambiguity

The definitions of ambiguity in Cambridge and Oxford English Dictionaries is “the fact of something having more than one possible meaning and therefore possibly causing confusion” (Cambridge University Press 2017) and “the quality of being open to more than one interpretation” (Oxford University Press 2017), respectively. Similar to these lexicographical definitions, Feldman (1989, p.5) defined ambiguity as “the state of having many ways of thinking about the same circumstances or phenomena.”

Ambiguity is inherent in the complexity of decision situations, the uncertainty about future consequences, and the basic features of human beings, particularly bounded rationality. Bounded (limited) rationality is due to the situational complexity and uncertainty in that it is very challenging for individuals and groups in an organization to consider or guess all information about and all alternatives to their decisions, such as goal-setting (Lindblom 1959; March and Simon 1993), and to arrive at precise estimations about the consequences of their current decisions and behavior (Simon 1997). Because of such challenges, individuals and groups in an organization tend to make their decisional scope and problems as narrow and simple as they can manage, which is evidence that human beings are conscious of their bounded rationality. As a result, individuals and organizations might set the intentions and preferences of their decisions and behaviors ambiguously, intentionally or unintentionally (March 1978). Thus, ambiguity is considered one of the major concepts and phenomena that the complexity of administrative situations and decision
making incorporates. Likewise, such complexity can be fleshed out by prevalence of ambiguity in organizations.

The pervasiveness of ambiguity implies the diversity and complications of ambiguity to which many scholars in decision making and organizational behavior have paid much attention. Scholars have provided various aspects or elements of ambiguity in organizations. As a widely-recognized example, March and Olsen (1979, p. 12) presented four major types of ambiguity in organizations. First, the ambiguity of intention is concerned with ill-defined and inconsistent objectives, which often make it very difficult to identify meaningful functions for an organization clearly. Second, the ambiguity of understanding suggests the difficulty in grasping the causal relationship between organizational actions and their results, since in many cases the relationship is not clear. Third, the ambiguity of history indicates the state of history being reconstructed and twisted differently. Individuals tend to interpret differently what happened, why it happened, and whether it had to happen. Fourth, the ambiguity of organization signifies the phenomenon that organization members’ participation patterns are uncertain and inconsistent over time. The reason is that the members are changing in the attention given to different decisions from one time to another. These four aspects of ambiguity do not arise independently but are intertwined. This leads to complications for examining or analyzing ambiguity in organizations. Of the four elements, the first indicates goal ambiguity which is the key concept of this book.

GOAL AMBIGUITY IN PUBLIC MANAGEMENT

This section presents fundamental characteristics of goal ambiguity, or ambiguous goals, in public organizations.

Definitions and Dimensions of Goal Ambiguity

Goal ambiguity in public organizations has long received much attention from numerous prominent scholars in social sciences and seasoned practitioners. Already around forty years ago, Rainey, Backoff, and Levine (1976) found, from a thorough literature review, that over a dozen scholars advanced the assertions and observations (included in Chapter 2) about causes and effects of goal ambiguity in the public sector. Ironically, however, goal ambiguity was only recently defined in public management.

At the organizational level, Chun and Rainey (2005a, p. 2) referred to organizational goal ambiguity as “the extent to which an organizational goal or set of goals allows leeway for interpretation.” At the program level,
Jung (2012, pp. 679‒80) defined program goal ambiguity as “the extent to which a set of goals in a public program allows different interpretations in deciding work related to target, time limit, and external evaluation.” Here program refers to “the specific public service a governmental organization provides” (Selden and Sowa 2004, p. 398). Chun and Rainey’s definition is based on the lexicographical definition of ambiguity, and Jung’s is more focused on the general key components of goal. This program goal ambiguity has applied to the organization level (e.g. Jung 2011; 2013; 2014b; 2014c; Jung and Rainey 2011).

Goal is a multidimensional construct (Bandura 1989). Likewise, goal ambiguity must be multidimensional. As the dimensions of organizational goal ambiguity, Chun and Rainey defined and measured mission comprehension ambiguity, directive ambiguity, evaluative ambiguity, and priority ambiguity (for the details, see Chapter 3). As the dimensions of program goal ambiguity, Jung defined and measured target ambiguity, timeline ambiguity, and program evaluation ambiguity (for the details, see Chapter 4). Actually, before the developments of these goal ambiguity dimensions and measures, scholars had used just a general perceived measure of goal ambiguity developed by Rainey (1983; Rainey, Pandey, and Bozeman 1995) for empirical analyses. In this book, the three dimensions of program goal ambiguity are included in Chapters 4, 5, 6, 7, and 8. Additionally, organizational priority ambiguity and a perceived measure of organizational goal ambiguity are used in the South Korean case and the English case, respectively, in Chapter 9.

**Importance of Goal Ambiguity**

Ambiguous goals of public organizations can have negative ripple effects throughout an organization and further on citizens and society. Goal setting is the starting point of managing every organization. How goals as fundamental constraints are set influences the series of the subsequent management activities from setting lower-level goals to motivation and public service performance. Hence, ambiguous goals in public organizations, policies, and programs raise many problems. For example, Boyatzis (1982) studied the competencies of a broad sample of managers and found that compared with business managers, public managers displayed weaker “goal and action” competencies, that is, competence in formulating and emphasizing means and ends. He reasoned that the lack of clear goals such as sales and profits caused this difference on the part of the public managers. In more recent research, we also see evidence that organizational goal ambiguity related to higher role ambiguity and turnover intention as well as to lower work satisfaction and motivation at the individual level.
Performance goals in public management and policy (e.g. Davis and Stazyk 2015; Jung 2014a; 2014b; 2014c; Pandey and Wright 2006). Other observations concerned negative effects on organizational structure, delegation of authority, and decision processes (e.g. Downs 1967; Pandey and Rainey 2006; Tullock 1965). Numerous scholars over the years have contended that public organizations’ ambiguous goals make it difficult to develop clear and measurable performance indicators; this leads to difficulty in evaluating goal achievement and thus to performance evaluation on the basis of adherence to rules and procedures rather than actual achievement of performance goals (e.g. Barton 1980; Dahl and Lindblom 1953; Lynn 1981; Meyer 1979; Warwick 1975). Under accountability pressures, agency executives tend to demand compliance with rules developed in the implementation of external authorities’ mandates. Efforts to assure compliance often lead executives to develop still more rules, which indicates higher degrees of red tape (e.g. Bozeman and Feeney 2011; Lynn 1981; Warwick 1975). Furthermore, ambiguous goals make it difficult to find the locus of accountability of organizational or program actions (Perry and Porter 1982), which is particularly problematic in the cases of program or policy failure.

In short, ambiguous goals or higher goal ambiguity can make it harder to maintain or improve public service performance for citizens and society for a variety of reasons. (Chapter 2 presents negative effects of goal ambiguity at length, along with positive effects.)

The Paradox of Goal Ambiguity in Public Organizations

Such various reasons for negative effects of goal ambiguity are inherently connected with fundamental characteristics of public organizations. The term public implies that these organizations should be accountable and responsive to the public (citizens or taxpayers). The reason is that these organizations are publicly funded and owned (Wamsley and Zald 1973). Thus, compared with business organizations, public organizations face a more complex external environment, having a greater variety of external stakeholder groups including formal and informal political authorities (e.g. elected officials, legislators, courts, oversight agencies, other agencies, contracting private firms and nonprofit organizations, constituencies, clientele, interest groups, media). Those stakeholder groups have different and conflicting interests and demands, so there tend to be more situations that make it more difficult for public organizations to specify organizational goals and performance objectives. Furthermore, public organizations tend to have no clear market indicators and information (e.g. prices, profits, market shares) for their outputs, which are important for setting clear performance goals. This is particularly true in many value-
laden cases such as democratic values, human rights, and social welfare. Nonetheless, public organizations have been called to clearly set their performance goals in relation to effective management, accountability, and public service performance. I call such dilemmatic situations the paradox of goal ambiguity. This paradox is characteristic of public organizations. The paradox also suggests the tension public managers must face between goal clarification for managerial strategy and goal ambiguation for political need. Here several examples of such dilemmatic situations are briefly discussed. (The next chapter presents more specific reasons for greater goal ambiguity of public organizations at length.)

**Interventions on the society versus broader political support**
The fundamental legitimate objective of government and its organizations is to equitably protect the lives and property of all citizens. However, at the same time, goal setting by these organizations is decision making that sets the scope and intensity of countless interventions on social and economic systems and citizens’ lives. The interventions include fixing and changing minimum wages and price ceilings, offering welfare benefits to the old and the poor, restricting discrimination at work places, subsidizing schools and small businesses, and so on. Such interventions, in turn, are linked to many stakeholder groups with different interests that are likely conflicting throughout the society. Clear goals tend to create winners and losers, and have little room for political compromise. However, it is important for government agencies to maintain and obtain political support from diverse stakeholders in order to carry forward their projects and programs. As we have often seen in newspapers, some public policies and programs were stuck for quite some time, due to conflicts between the groups who would benefit and the others who would be disadvantaged or among these two groups and relevant government agencies and officials. As such, goal setting of government agencies is related to broad governance with conflict of interests.

**Employee work motivation versus lack of rival and market for outputs**
Public organizations have different stages of activity, compared with business firms. The latter fiercely compete to survive in the market, while the former mainly do not have rivals and rather control the market economy to a certain degree, regulating business firms’ activities. What about goal setting of business organizations? Many of them set new performance goals or adjust targets of the existing goals every quarter at the organizational and department levels. At this point, the timeline is expected to be clearly set, and the targets are clearly and ambitiously set or adjusted. This is an important starting point for activities to survive, and this allows
managers to clearly define individual- or team-level task or job goals for their employees. Then employees’ work motivation and performance are expected to increase, thereby improving organizational performance. In contrast, some people may view such motives to set clear goals as difficult to expect from public organizations. The reason can be found from the principles of establishing government agencies. In order to efficiently and effectively address all the problems of the society, the tasks and roles of each agency tend to minimize duplication of those of the others. The tasks of the Department of Defense are quite distinct from those of the Department of Social Welfare. And because of public funding (i.e. heavy reliance on taxes), public organizations deliver their goods and services directly to the intended beneficiaries without a market. In these manners, public organizations usually have lack of rivals in the public and private sectors and absence of market for outputs. In other words, they do not have important indicators such as prices, sales, and profits, which serve as criteria for setting clear goals and targets, unlike business organizations. Under such circumstances, it may be difficult to expect public organizations and officials to be motivated to improve organizational performance by specifying goals as much as business firms do.

Conflicts between values
Every public organization has to deal with various goals, which conflict with each other, due to public funding and ownership. The representative examples are the clashes between efficiency and equity and between efficiency and democratic civic engagement. Simply speaking, efficient goal achievement means achieving the goal with less money, time, and effort. However, if public organizations consider equitable distribution and participation among citizens, they need to spend more resources than in the case of just concentrating on efficiency. Basically, such value conflicts often occur between economic values and democratic values. In those cases, it seems a daunting task to determine clearly where the appropriate targets of relevant goals are.

Public service motives versus bounded rationality or accountability avoidance
Concerning goal setting of public organizations, critics have claimed that decision makers tend to concentrate on short-term goals rather than long-term goals, which are more difficult to specify but more important for the public. One of the purposes of such tendency is to show noticeable performance to politicians and citizens within their term in office. On the other hand, some literature of public service motivation (PSM) revealed that public managers showed higher levels of motives to serve the public,
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compared with their counterparts in the private sector. Furthermore, some public managers rated such motives as the most important reason for entering public organizations. However, goal setting in public organizations is very complex, as described above; thus, in many cases, the achievement of goals contains high levels of uncertainty. Public managers or decision makers would be conscious of negative effects of ambiguous goals, but simultaneously of their bounded rationality in setting clear goals; it would be challenging to precisely estimate the scope of influenced areas, appropriate target levels and timeline, and so on. Or public managers or decision makers would avoid accountability and criticisms from politically elected officials and citizens for the failure to achieve the goals they set. Actually, this type of dilemma would apply to all the other dilemmatic situations described above.

Nature of Ambiguous Goals in Public Organizations and in this Book

Apart from the dilemmatic situations just described, public organizations or government agencies may be established inherently to deal with ambiguous tasks or goals. In this regard, Wilson (1989, p. 129) commented “Educate children, prevent crime, maintain relations with other nations—ambiguous as these objectives may be, they nonetheless justify the existence of school systems, police forces, and the State Department.” Generally speaking, the lower in the hierarchy the goals are, the more specific and measurable they become. However, for those inherently ambiguous high-level goals (or purposes), it may not be possible or even desirable to specify many of even the low-level goals, unlike in the private sector. In addition, as new social demands arise, it becomes harder to specify those goals. Therefore, excessive or premature clarification of goals in the public sector may convert ambiguities about the future into spurious precision about the future. Then, of course, adverse effects will be larger and wider throughout the society. Recent administrative reforms that emphasized the clarification of goals might not anticipate a great reduction in ambiguity for goals at all the levels of the goal hierarchy, but a certain level of decrease might be considered appropriate. In public organizations, the intrinsic ambiguity of goals is always combined with inherent public funding and ownership, and thus it is daunting to clarify public goals. Thus, goal setting in the public sector always appears to be like walking a tightrope, finding a delicate balance between great ambiguity and great clarity.

The goals in the analyses of this book (Chapters 4, 5, 6, 7, and 8) are program performance goals, which are not high-level general goals but low-level operational goals in government agencies. These goals have been what administrative reforms encouraged agencies to clarify. In addition, the
ambiguity I indicate is not about an individual performance goal but the collective level of goal ambiguity at the program and organizational levels. Overall, it is very difficult for an agency or a program to make satisfactory plans by precisely predicting the damage caused by natural disasters next year or to make precise estimations of the welfare demands in the future. Through the quantitative analyses in this book, I do not argue that goal clarification can be a magic bullet for the improvement of public service performance, and that as the level of goal clarity goes up, its positive effects also continue to be maintained or go up. There are some expectations for recent administrative reforms to involve the clarification of performance goals. One expectation should be a certain degree of reduction in negative effects that ambiguous performance goals can have on public organizations and their employees and presumably further on citizens and society.

NEEDS FOR QUANTITATIVE RESEARCH

As described so far, goal ambiguity is a basic condition of public work and influences numerous aspects of the management of public organizations, policies, and programs. In these regards, prominent scholars and seasoned practitioners have made assertions, based on their experiences or case observations. Their reliance on case and experiential evidence calls for research to verify or falsify the assertions about goal ambiguity with systematic empirical (quantitative) analyses, for the development of goal ambiguity research or theory. That is, despite the plethora of early assertions, large-sampled quantitative studies on predictors and consequences of goal ambiguity have been increasingly conducted just over the past 12 years or so. In addition, almost all the quantitative studies, as reviewed in Chapter 3, have been just about organizational goal ambiguity. Since decades ago, public programs have been a critical unit for managing public organizations, and thus policy implementation scholars suggested the shift of the analysis unit of public work from public organizations to public programs, along with more emphasis on specification of program goals and more attention to program management. However, quantitative research on program goal ambiguity has been rare. Furthermore, the existing quantitative studies are mostly fragmentary, that is, just focusing on direct relationships between goal ambiguity and its predictors or one of various consequences rather than demonstrating diverse paths. (The detailed summaries of existing empirical studies are presented in Chapter 3.)

For these reasons, this study aims at building and empirically verifying a conceptual framework of goal ambiguity with a wide array of programs in the U.S. federal government. Further, the performance goals of govern-
ment agencies mostly consist of program performance goals, so the issues and analyses about program goal ambiguity can apply at the organizational level. Thus, the framework is also empirically validated with agencies in the South Korean central government and local governments in England.

**PLAN OF THE BOOK**

This book comprises four main parts. Part I sets the background for the following empirical analyses by providing the broadest literature review, at the time of this writing, of goal ambiguity in public management.

Chapter 2 deals with general assertions and conceptual and theoretical arguments to help to understand goal ambiguity in public organizations, focusing on the following questions:

- Why are organizational goals more ambiguous in public organizations than in business organizations?
- What are the negative and positive consequences of goal ambiguity in public organizations?
- What is empirical goal ambiguity theory?
- What reforms and practices have been related to goal ambiguity in the history of public administration?
- What are the similarities and differences between goal-setting theory and empirical goal ambiguity theory?

Chapter 3 reviews and examines the existing empirical (mainly quantitative) studies on goal ambiguity systematically, focusing on its predictors, consequences, and mediation effects. Then it discusses the current state of and conceptual and methodological issues for program (or policy) goal ambiguity research.

The second main part, Part II, provides empirical evidence across a wide array of public programs and relevant academic and practical discussions, concerning the following questions:

- What dimensions of goal ambiguity can be conceptualized and measured? (Chapter 4)
- What program and organizational characteristics can influence the level of goal ambiguity? (Chapter 5)
- What political contingencies need to be considered between program management capacity and goal ambiguity? (Chapter 6)
- What is the relationship between program goal ambiguity and performance? (Chapter 7)
The third main part, Part III, provides and empirically validates a comprehensive conceptual framework for the analysis of program goal ambiguity, integrating the hypotheses and empirical findings presented in the prior chapters. Then this framework is applied to different governances—central government agencies in South Korea as a case in the East and local governments in England as a case in the West (i.e. different countries, different units of analysis, and different levels of government)—with different measurements of all the variables including goal ambiguity.

The conclusion chapter, Part IV, presents generalizable propositions supported in this book, as the contribution of the framework to the development of goal ambiguity research: regarding antecedents of goal ambiguity, moderation effects of organizational structures between management capacity and goal ambiguity, relationship between goal ambiguity and performance, other antecedents of performance, and mediator roles of goal ambiguity. Thereafter, the chapter discusses diverse issues for goal ambiguity research or empirical goal ambiguity theory: causalities through quantitative, qualitative, and experimental studies; extension of the framework of this book or goal ambiguity research with the help of other theories; measurement issues of goal ambiguity; positive and nonlinear effects of goal ambiguity; and additional theoretical and practical implications.

DATA AND SAMPLES FOR THIS BOOK

Methodological issues in developing measures of goal ambiguity, as well as difficulties in finding performance data that are archival and comparable across a range of types of programs, have made it daunting to investigate the assertions and arguments regarding goal ambiguity, including the relationship between program goal ambiguity and performance. However, at the program level, I have built the foundation to verify or falsify the assertions, by defining program goal ambiguity and developing its three dimensions (i.e. target ambiguity, timeline ambiguity, and program evaluation ambiguity) and their archival measure, as shown in Chapter 4.

To measure program goal ambiguity, I utilized the various types of information generated by the PART (Program Assessment Rating Tool)—a performance management framework developed by the Bush administration—from 2002 to 2008 in the U.S. federal government. (For detailed description about and controversy over the PART, see Chapter 4.) For this purpose, the sample size was 767 out of 793 programs, which were the full samples in PART 2006 (actually, evaluation as of fiscal year 2005). Then, the quantitative analyses in Chapters 5, 6, 7, and 8 consistently used...
691 programs randomly selected out of 1,017 programs, which indicate the total number of programs evaluated between 2002 and 2008. These programs were housed in 180 federal agencies.

The South Korean case included 43 central government agencies from the President Rho administration (2003–2007) and 39 agencies from the President Lee administration (2008–2012). That is, the data were comprised of two time-point panels. The English case used 47 local government authorities. Of course, all these analyses in the three countries considered time lags between predictor, moderator, mediator (goal ambiguity), and criterion (performance) variables, using diverse data sources (archival or survey) for those variables.

CONCLUSION

The conceptual framework and its quantitative validations across three countries presented in this book suggest that the empirical evidence and practical implications for performance management through goal clarification can go beyond the PART, which provides the main data for numerous public programs. Optimistically, although discontinuing the PART, the second Obama administration built a system focusing on agency and program goals similar to the PART system under the title “Using Goals to Improve Performance and Accountability” (see http://www.performance.gov/). As explained on this website:

[A]t its core, these [performance] goals serve as a simple but powerful way to motivate people and communicate priorities in improving the Federal Government’s performance and accountability. Agencies establish a variety of performance goals and objectives to drive progress toward key outcomes, while outlining long-term goals and objectives in their strategic plans. Leaders in states, local governments, Federal programs, and in other countries have demonstrated the power of using specific, challenging goals—combined with frequent measurement, analysis, and follow-up—to improve performance while being more efficient and effective for the taxpayer.

In the current U.S. administration, the website underwent an overhaul as agencies developed and released updated performance goals and objectives in early 2018, with the president’s next budget submission to Congress. Actually, setting goals and performance measures and evaluating performance on the program basis, like the PART, still continues. In addition, some countries (e.g. South Korea, Singapore, Thailand, Scotland) have adopted a performance goal management system similar to the PART under performance reforms, and their scholars (e.g. Kwon
Performance goals in public management and policy

2015) have conducted empirical research on program goal ambiguity, using one of the same program goal ambiguity measures developed in this study and reporting a negative relationship between policy goal ambiguity and performance. Moreover, comparing the government performance management systems of Australia, New Zealand, and the U.S., Radin (2003) suggested that goal ambiguity is also an important and fundamental issue related to institutional structure/context (governance) in managing performance of public agencies in these countries. Therefore, the implications of this book can still apply and be meaningful in the context of the current federal government in the U.S. as well as in other countries, along with the ubiquity of the request to clearly state performance goals and targets of public organizations and their programs.

NOTES

1. This definition implicitly suggests conflict between organization goals and individuals’ personal goals; although individuals cooperate or coalesce for the achievement of organization goals commonly agreed, the individuals with different personal goals tend to have different priorities among the organization goals. This phenomenon is inherent in almost every organization. Cyert and March (1963) called it internal goal conflict.

2. The other two essential functions were to provide the effective system of communication and promote the securing of essential efforts; the latter function was divided into two main parts—bringing persons into a cooperative relationship with the organization and then eliciting the persons’ services that constitute outputs of the organization (Barnard 1938, pp. 217–31).

3. For this reason, goals are different from motives, which are the causes leading people to choose some goals (or goal-relevant activities) rather than others (or goal-irrelevant activities).

4. Charles Perrow (1961) explained that his “operative goals” looked similar to March and Simon’s “operational goals” or “subgoals” but that the latter were not defined systematically, nor did they include some complexities (e.g. an organization’s analysis of decisions, personnel practices, alliance, elite characteristics in an organization), compared to the former. Actually, March and Simon (1993) just indicated operational goals as the goals with which people can measure the contribution of activities or programs. March and Simon might not pay much attention to the difference between operative and operational goals, and used them interchangeably like other scholars, as shown in Simon (1997, p. 297).

5. One of these features is self-interest. In some cases, people can exploit ambiguity for self-interest. For example, some public managers can set targets and timelines of their performance goals ambiguously, to avoid accountability in case of underperformance or failure of achieving the targets on schedule. This can also be viewed as self-interested or strategic behavior in a situation of conflicting interests among influential stakeholders such as formal political authorities and interest groups.

6. The survey items are “This organization’s mission is clear to almost everyone who works here” (reversely coded), “It is easy to give a precise explanation of the goals of this organization” (reversely coded), and “This organization has clearly defined goals” (reversely coded).

7. As Simon (1997) pointed out, they also show high levels of ambiguity for some goals such as goodwill, social responsibility, and long-term goals.