

**Policy Transfer:
What We Know About What Transfers, How It Happens, and How to Do It.
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1. Introduction

Policy transfer is the spread of a policy – or some aspect of a policy – across units of government¹ that occurs as a result of the adopting unit having at least some knowledge of the existence of the policy in other units. It is a subset of the broader term “policy diffusion,” which is the spread of policy across units *regardless* of whether that spread results from knowledge or from other factors such as convergence – a unit adopting a policy similar to other units because it is responding to similar conditions/problems, even if it is unaware of the existence of the policy elsewhere. Policy transfer thus requires “policy learning.”

In this paper I will focus on what we know from the research literature about how policies transfer, what kinds of policies transfer, how policy learning that results in policy transfer takes place and what is known prescriptively about how governments *should* engage in the process of policy transfer (lesson-drawing). The paper will NOT focus on health policy nor on policy transfer within the EU, neither of which are in my area of expertise. Instead, I will draw upon the very substantial body of research on policy transfer in various policy areas and across not only between nations, but also across states and cities. More broadly, I will also draw upon literature from a wide range of diverse perspectives, including innovation, innovation and policy diffusion, organizational learning and policy learning, and knowledge utilization in order to provide a basic understanding of policy transfer. In the process I provide citations for those who wish to pursue any of this literature further.

¹ Our concern in this paper is with policy transfer across units of governments (national, state and provincial, and/or local), but the research literature on policy transfer is much broader and is often focused on business or other private organizations. I will draw upon that literature when appropriate and relevant.

I begin by identifying these different bodies and, in the process, by sorting out some terms. The literature on *policy transfer* (the spread of policy across units based upon at least some knowledge of policy elsewhere) and *policy diffusion* (the spread of policy across units regardless of how the spread occurs) is itself a subset of the broader literature on innovation diffusion (the spread of new activities among individuals or organizations). In addition, there are literatures on *organizational learning* and *policy learning* (how policy makers incorporate new knowledge about policies to change their beliefs and behavior), *policy change* (how and under what circumstances policy change occurs), *policy innovation* (the process and circumstances under which a unit adopts a policy new to it), *knowledge utilization* (the extent to which and circumstances under which knowledge, particularly knowledge distilled from research or systematic analysis, is utilized in the policy process and results in policy learning and policy change), *lesson-drawing* (the explicit effort by one government to learn from the experience of others), and on *best/good practice* (the identification by an organization of policies/activities that they believe governments should adopt). These literatures, while distinct, overlap very substantially, and we shall draw from all of them.

An initial question is what we mean by “policy” and what is it about “policy” that might transfer. Government “policy” includes inter alia, the broad objectives of government activity, the types of activities engaged in (e.g., services provided, regulations imposed), the eligible beneficiaries of the service or targets of regulation, the means of financing activities or services, program design, including the processes through which services are produced and/or delivered and the tools used to do so, the internal structure and organization of the government institution(s) through which services are delivered, the strategies for achieving the organization’s objectives (e.g., how its activities should be “framed”), etc. (See Zaltman et al., 1973, pp. 14-15 for a more general discussion of differing types of innovation.) All of these might be subject to policy learning and transfer. More broadly, Dolowitz and Marsh (1996, pp. 349-350) identify seven objects of policy transfer: “policy goals, structure, and content; policy instruments or administrative techniques; ideology, attitudes, and concepts; and negative lessons.”

Mossberger (2000, ch. 6) also refers to the diffusion of “policy labels,” which are general concepts related to some elements of policy design and which convey a positive value-laden symbolism. In the case of enterprise zones which Mossberger studied, it was the

label that diffused more so than the content, with the positively valued label attaching itself to a very wide range of area-based economic development programs' policy designs. Policies – or the various elements of policies – may transfer largely intact (policy imitation) or they may be adapted for transfer. As policies diffuse over time, they may also be “reinvented” to take advantage of learning from policy adoption by prior units.

2. Innovation Diffusion, Policy Diffusion, and Policy Transfer

We begin with an overview of the now vast literature on innovation diffusion, of which policy diffusion and policy transfer are subsets. The starting point in accessing findings on diffusion is Everett Rogers' encyclopedic review of the diffusion literature², now in its fifth edition (2003). Rogers (p. 5) defines diffusion as “the process in which an innovation is communicated through certain channels over time” among the members of a system. An innovation is an “idea, practice, or object that is perceived as new by an individual or other unit of adoption.” A communication channel is the *means* by which information is conveyed across units of government. For our purposes, the innovation we are concerned with is a public policy and the members of the system through which the innovation (policy) diffuses are national governments.

Rogers (p. 20) defines the innovation decision process as “the process through which an individual (or other decision-making unit) passes from first knowledge of an innovation (policy), to the formation of an attitude toward the innovation, to a decision to adopt or reject, to implementation and use of the new idea, and to confirmation of this decision. Much of the research on diffusion, and on policy transfer, is concerned with the time dimension along which these steps occur. Thus, there is research on the characteristics of early as opposed to

² In his review of diffusion research, Rogers (ch. 2) identifies 8 different types of diffusion studies:

- Earliness of knowing about an innovation among system members (system members are the unit of analysis)
- Rate of adoption among system members of *different* innovations (innovations are the unit of analysis)
- Innovativeness of members of a system
- Opinion leadership in diffusing innovations.
- Characteristics of diffusion networks
- Rate of adoption among system members across different kinds of systems (e.g., do policy innovations diffuse more quickly among national governments or among local governments?)
- Use of various communications channels by different system members
- Consequences of innovations

late (or later) adopters, the rate of adoption (the time it takes for an innovation to diffuse through the system), and the form of the adoption curve (most innovations have an “S” shaped adoption curve with a few adoptions at the beginning, followed by an increasing number in the next period of time, and finally a leveling off).

2.1. Adoption Rates and Order: Much of the more systematic research has focused on policy diffusion and transfer among the 50 state governments in the United States. A substantial amount of this research has been concerned with the order of adoption and the characteristics of those governments that adopt earlier. Most research finds that the adoption pattern does follow the classic “S” curve. The literature also suggests that the adoption pattern differs across policy areas and, indeed, across policies. Both the rapidity of diffusion and the order of adopting units differ with the policy under consideration (see Gray, 1973). There is still contention over whether some governments are consistently more innovative – i.e., likely to be early adopters – and other units more likely to be laggards. Walker’s early research (1969) found consistent patterns of first policy adopters, with “industrial, urban, cosmopolitan” states being most likely to be early adopters. However, Gray (1973, p. 1185) explored a set of individual programs in three separate policy areas (as opposed to Walker’s single innovativeness score) and found very little correlation for the order of adoption across programs or the three policy areas. However, in a later review of the literature, Gray (1994, p. 242) concludes that “the consistency of state rankings (of early adopters) over time is quite remarkable.” (See also Savage, 1985).

2.2. Determinants of Adoptions (Characteristics of Adopters): For a specific policy, the literature on the determinants of the adoption process divides the process into internal factors and external factors (see, for example, Berry and Berry, 1990, pp. 395-6; Gray, 1994, pp. 233ff; Berry and Berry, 1999; Karch 2007, pp. 50-52). Internal factors are those that are characteristics of the adopting organization such as size, wealth, and availability of resources, all of which have been empirically found to be correlates of innovation across many types of organization (see Mohr, 1969, p. 112). Rogers (2003, pp. 411-12) also cites research that associates structural characteristics of organizations with propensity to adopt innovations, including centralization of decision making and formalization (the extent to which the organization emphasizes rules and procedures), both negatively related to innovation, and

degree of interconnectiveness of organizational members, which is positively related to innovation (see also DiBella and Nevis, 1998, pp. 61-77). In addition, studies have shown that the attitude towards change of individuals who are organizational leaders is positively related to innovation.

Internal factors that have been associated, at least in some research, with early policy adoption in the diffusion process include *problem severity* (governments with more severe conditions which the policy is perceived to address are more likely to adopt), *resident wealth and government slack resources* (governments that have greater fiscal resources to apply to a new program are more likely to adopt), *institutional capacity* (governments that have greater personnel capacity, more professionalized personnel, greater expertise, and systematic external scanning processes in place are more likely to adopt since they are more likely to learn about and be able to evaluate policies in place elsewhere), *ideology* (states whose populations are more left-leaning are more likely to rapidly adopt policy innovations that are perceived as consistent with that orientation, while more right-leaning states are less likely to adopt these kinds of innovations and more likely to adopt those that have a more conservative bent, and *political culture* (generalized organizational or resident attitudes towards change). In addition, Mintrom (1997) and Mintrom and Vergari (1998) found that the existence or lack thereof of a *policy entrepreneur* within the state pushing the proposal is an important determinant of adoption.

External factors include *geographic proximity* (states are more likely to adopt if states proximate to them adopt either because of competitiveness concerns or because their communication channels are more highly developed with nearby states) and *connections to and membership in knowledge communities* through professional associations (see particularly Balla, 2001 for a study on the effect of professional association membership on policy adoption) or networks (see Mintrom and Vergari, 1998, who find that connection of policy entrepreneurs within a state to external policy networks increased the probability of state adoption of), international and national organizations, and international and national networks of policy experts³.

³ Rose, 1991, p. 15, cites Haas who terms these “epistemic communities,” which he defines as knowledge-based networks of individuals with a claim to policy-relevant knowledge based upon common professional beliefs and standards of judgement, and common policy concerns.” Heclo, (1978) refers to these more loosely as “issue networks.”

2.3. *Determinants of Innovations (Policies) that Diffuse:* What about the policies themselves – are there certain kinds of policies that are more susceptible to policy transfer or more likely to diffuse quickly? Of the many attributes of policies that have been hypothesized as contributing to adoption, *success* (or rather *perceived success*) is the most obvious. As has frequently been noted (Walker, 1969; Berry and Berry, 1990; Berry and Baybeck, 1995; Shipan and Volden, 2008), policies that are perceived to have been successful elsewhere are more likely to be adopted than policies for which knowledge of success is less certain. Berry and Baybeck (2005, p. 505) observe, “When confronted with a problem, decision makers simplify the task of finding a solution by choosing an alternative that has proven successful elsewhere.” Of course, as we shall discuss below, the problem is how a unit considering adopting a policy in place elsewhere *knows* that it has been successful there. The frequent finding in the literature that the number of previous adopters is positively related to the likelihood that a new unit will adopt is cited as evidence of the importance of perceived success; a government considering adoption will use the frequency of prior adoption as a heuristic for assessing the policy’s success.

The notion of perceived success is reflected in the first of the Roger’s five innovation attributes affecting the probability of an innovation being adopted, either by individuals or by organizations. The five attributes Rogers (2003, ch. 6) discusses are:

- *Relative Advantage.* Is it perceived to be better than the idea that it supersedes?
- *Compatibility:* Is it perceived as consistent with existing values, past experience, institutional setting, and other relevant contextual concerns?
- *Complexity:* How difficult is the policy to understand? The more complex, the less likely it is to be adopted.
- *Trialability:* The extent to which the innovation can be experimented with on a limited basis rather than require full implementation from the outset.
- *Observability:* The degree to which the *results* of an innovation are readily visible from use elsewhere to those considering adoption.

Tornatzky and Klein (1982) conducted a systematic review of 75 studies concerned with the attributes of innovation. In addition to the five innovation attributes above, they found that research also examined *cost* (higher cost innovations hypothesized to be less likely to be adopted), *communicability* (the greater the ease with which an innovation can be communicated to others, the more likely it is to be adopted), *profitability* (the greater the

expected profitability the greater the hypothesized likelihood of adoption), and *social approval* (the greater the status achieved within a potential adopter's reference group by adopting the innovation, the more likely the innovation is to be adopted – a potential explanation of the innovation “fad” phenomenon). The 75 studies included both innovation adoption by individuals (e.g., a new technology by farmers) and by organizations. They found that the research yielded only three of the innovation characteristics that were statistically significantly related to adoption: compatibility and relative advantage were positively related to an innovation's adoption while complexity was negatively related to adoption. However, they note that the lack of significant findings for many of the other characteristics may have reflected either or both poorly designed or insufficient number of studies rather than definitive findings of lack of relationship.

Downs and Mohr (1976) distinguish between primary and secondary characteristics of innovations with primary characteristics consisting of attributes intrinsically related to the innovation itself (e.g., the cost of instituting an innovation), while secondary characteristics are those that are perceptions of potential adopters (e.g., relative advantage). They argue that it is the secondary “perceived” characteristics that are probably most closely associated with adoption.

Rose (1993, ch. 6) focuses on *public* policy innovations and suggests a variety of hypothesized characteristics that are likely to be related to adoption. The first set relate to the policy's context in the originating country – the more a program's operations are dependent upon the political or institutional structure of the originating country that are not present in the adopting country, the less likely the policy is likely to be adopted (or, if adopted, to succeed). Similarly, the more a program is dependent on its relations to other programs in one system the less likely it is to be adopted by another system where those relationships do not exist.

Rose particularly emphasizes complexity and hypothesizes that the more complex a policy is the less likely it is to be adopted by other governments. He distinguishes (pp. 132-133) between simple and complex programs on several dimensions:

Differences between Simple and Complex Programs
(Adapted from Rose, 1993, p. 133)

Dimension	Simple	Complex
Goal	Single	Multiple
Theory of Causation	One, direct	Many, often indirect
Empirical Focus (Objectives)	Clear	Vague
Perception of Side Effects	Unconcerned	Concerned
Familiarity	Substantial	Low, novel
Predictability of Results	High	Low

Rose also hypothesizes that the larger the scale of change from existing conditions that the policy implies, the less likely is adoption. Mooney and Lee (1995), in their study of “morality policy” diffusion across American states, suggest that the *degree of conflict* that adoption of a policy would engender negatively affects probability of adopting that policy.

Rose supports his hypotheses with examples, but does not subject them to formal tests. Nicholson-Crotty (2009) tests the effect of complexity on the adoption of 57 previously studied policies that diffused across the American state governments between 1850-2001. He argues that complex policies are likely to be adopted more slowly because complexity requires more technical information, increases uncertainty and requires greater efforts of policy learning. He finds that low complexity policies are significantly more likely to diffuse quickly across US state governments than are high complexity issues. He also finds that policies that are high *salience* – i.e., policies that are important to a sizeable portion of the population – are more likely to be adopted quickly than are less salient ones.

In addition policies that diffuse through hierarchy – i.e., are required by higher levels of government or are promoted through incentives from higher levels of government – are likely to diffuse quickly (Eyestone, 1977; Welch and Thompson, 1980; Savage, 1985; Dolowitz and March, 1996; Daley and Garand, 2005) as are policies that are promoted by national advocacy coalitions (see Haider-Markel, 2001), as good practice by professional associations, or by international or national membership organizations to which the government belongs. Radaelli (2000, p. 26) notes the European Commission in particular is a very active promoter of best practices. Stone (2004, p. 550) points to a broader set of key

non-state actors in the policy transfer process, including international organizations such as the UN, OECD, and the EU, trans-national interest groups and non-governmental organizations, and global think tanks and consulting firms.

Studies of policy transfer within the European Union (see Bulmer and Padgett, 2004) indicate that policy transfer occurs more rapidly through hierarchy (the application of rules and sanctions in member states through the EU) than through other means such as negotiation (the agreement on common rules and norms by the member states), or facilitation (the use of the Open Method of Coordination, a quasi-formal policy transfer mechanism (See Kerber and Eckardt, 2007)).

3. Processes of Policy Transfer:

We now turn to the actual process of policy transfer and ask how policy transfer occurs. As noted earlier, policy transfer is a subset of policy learning, which is, in turn, a subset of organizational learning, so we begin by asking what is known about the processes of organizational and policy learning.

3.1. Organizational Learning and Policy Learning: There is a vast literature on organizational learning, and since governments are organizations, it is useful to start with that literature. In a strict sense, organizations, which are simply constructs, cannot learn; only human beings can learn (Farkas, 1998, pp. 3, 32). Argyris and Schon (1996, p. 191), define organizational learning to occur when individuals, acting on behalf of organizations and interacting with others in the organization, learn in such a way that the beliefs, attitudes or values of relevant organizational members change and, in the case of policy transfer, organizational behavior changes. Learning thus involves knowledge acquisition that results in change in belief and/or behavior.

However, as Huber (1996), stresses, knowledge acquisition is only one phase of the learning process. The other elements consist of information distribution (the distribution of knowledge acquired within the organization – what Yeung et al. (1999) call sharing across time and space or “generalization” – and information interpretation, which is the assigning of meaning to information.

3.2. *Policy Learning*: Policy learning is learning by governmental organizations about aspects of public policies. Bennett and Howlett (1992) define policy learning simply as "the general increase in knowledge about policies." Jenkins-Smith and Sabatier state (1993, p. 42) that

Policy oriented learning involves relatively enduring alterations of thought or behavioral intentions that result from experience and which are concerned with the attainment or revision of the precepts of the belief system of individuals or of collectivities.

Jenkins-Smith and Sabatier argue that learning that affects core, strongly-held, beliefs is difficult and unlikely. Instead, policy learning is more likely to occur with respect to secondary aspects of an individual's belief system, those that affect instruments or ways of attaining goals rather than fundamental beliefs or goals themselves.

There is some debate (see Freeman, 2006, ch. 17) about whether policy learning should be conceived of as primarily instrumental (i.e., gain knowledge, process knowledge) or more organic and constructionist. Freeman (2006, p. 379) writes:

Implicit in the different literatures... are two different ways of thinking about learning, one largely positivist and the other constructionist. They might be described as mechanistic and organic in turn. The first model, the positivist or mechanistic, assumes that a thing exists in time and space, and is picked up and carried over – transferred – and used in another time and/or place... Transfer, whether of knowledge, technology, or public policy, is an act of engineering... The second model, constructionist or organic, treats policy as emergent. Policy does not exist somewhere else in finished form, ready to be looked at and learned from, but is finished or produced in the act of looking and learning. Learning is the output of a series of communications, not its input; in this sense it is generated rather than disseminated.

More in the tradition of the second model, Hecló (1974, pp. 305-306) refers to policy learning as a form of collective puzzling or what Peter Hall (1993) terms "social learning," in which the learning that occurs is not so much about technical details of policy as how to interpret or think about the policy. This mirrors a theme in the literature on knowledge utilization (see Weiss, 1983, 1998; and Greenberg, Linksz, and Mandell, 2003, pp. 48ff.) where utilization can be conceived as instrumental/concrete (direct use), conceptual/enlightenment (affecting people's understanding or the general intellectual

orientation of policymakers. or symbolic/persuasive (as a means of mobilizing support for a policy).

3.3. Policy Learning and Policy Transfer: In general organizations learn as a result of the incorporation of new knowledge about the state of the environment (external conditions, processes, etc.), feedback about the effect of the organization's actions on the environment (are its activities/policies having desired effects), the turnover of organizational personnel that results in the organization acting on the basis of new beliefs (and may be the process through which new information about or feedback from the environment is incorporated), and from the consideration of the actions/practices/policies engaged in by similar organizations. It is the last of these that we consider *policy transfer*.

Policy transfer is thus a subset of policy learning where learning occurs as a result of information about policies in place elsewhere. Dolowitz and Marsh (1996, p. 344) define policy transfer as “a process in which knowledge about policies, administrative arrangements, institutions, etc. in one time and/or place is used in the development of policies, administrative arrangements and institutions in another time and/or place.”

Policy transfer learning requires not only the acquisition of knowledge through information interchange but also *utilization* of the knowledge about policies elsewhere.

3.4. The Micro-Processes of Policy Transfer: How does policy transfer occur? As suggested above, policy learning through policy transfer requires a focus on information and on channels of communicating information. Coming to an understanding of policy transfer thus leads to a series of important information-related concerns: How is information about policies elsewhere obtained how is it assessed (is it accurate, can it be trusted, is it likely to be useful?), and how is it utilized? What do we know from existing research (studies of organizational learning as well as studies of policy transfer) about these questions?

3.4.1. Sources of Information: Information comes through communication channels, which Rogers (2003, p. 204) defines as “the means by which a message gets from the source to the receiver.” There are a great many sources of potential information about policies in existence elsewhere. Information sources include the mass media; professional/scientific conferences and meetings; professional associations and networks that produce and distribute information on practices elsewhere, including “best practice” guidance; policy “entrepreneurs” and change agents; formal and informal study visits and exchanges, etc. (See Newmark, 2002, pp. 155-165 for a discussion.)

Interpersonal networks are seen as particularly important sources of information. Rogers (2003, p. 341) calls attention in particular to the research of Granovetter and others that stress the importance loose networks connecting diverse individuals have in providing new information (“the strength of weak ties.”)

Rogers stresses the importance particularly of “face to face exchange,” noting that the research literature suggests that interpersonal channels, which he defines as “channels involving a face-to-face exchange between two or more individuals,” are particularly “effective in persuading an individual to accept a new idea, especially if the interpersonal channel links two or more individuals who are similar in socioeconomic status, education, or other important ways.”

Since face-to-face exchange is important, it is not surprising that geography also plays an important role in policy transfer – in addition to the possibility of policy transfer as a competitive reaction, geographic propinquity simply increases the potential for interaction among policy makers (Newmark, 2002, p. 163). Furthermore, international policy transfer must bridge language gaps, although the increasing dominance of English and translations into English has made this less of a barrier.

Brannan et al.(2008, p. 26) note that the transfer of information is a function of the relationship between originating and potential adopting governments and that research suggests information is more likely to travel through communication channels and networks where both share, “geographical proximity or regional identification; socio-economic equivalence; political similarity; and psychological identification.” Walker (1969) originally argued that information traveled through regional networks of proximate governments, and research by Berry and Berry (1990), Mintrom (1997), Mintrom and Vegari (1998), find that the actual adoption of a policy in an American state is associated with adoption in contiguous states.

But while information about policies elsewhere may be easily available, all information is not created equal. What kinds of information are policymakers likely to pay attention to and utilize? Karch (2007, ch.3, 4) stresses the importance of time constraints and salience in affecting information sources. Public officials search for information resources that do not require a huge time investment. They are therefore drawn to policy innovations that are highly visible through media coverage of debates and controversies. But, such sources are unlikely to provide much detail on policies in other areas. Karch finds that, at least with respect to the use of sources for policy information for the diffusion of five policies across the American states that he examined, national organizations such as professional associations and think tanks provided more usable and detailed information consistent with the time constraints of policy makers.

Karch's findings are consistent with Walker's original discussion of the increasing importance of networks created through national organizational membership. Walker (1969, p. 894) observed that regional communication channels were increasingly being supplanted by specialized communication systems that cut across regional lines. He particularly had in mind professional associations and national associations of state government officials such as the National Association of State Budget Officers and the National Association of State Conservation Officers, two examples he gave. Walker argued that such groups

are sources of information and policy cues. By organizing conferences or publishing newsletters they bring together officials from all over the country and facilitate the exchange of ideas and knowledge among them, thus increasing the officials' awareness of the latest developments in their field.

3.4.2 Assessing Information: There is widespread agreement from the research that learning is likely to depend upon the learner's evaluation of the source of information. Recipients of information must, implicitly or explicitly, assess the quality of information they receive in terms of both usefulness and accuracy. How is this accomplished?

The literature suggests that information assessment is closely related to the degree of trust that the recipient accords to the source of the information. Given this finding, it is not surprising that the research indicates that the most likely source of information resulting in learning is interpersonal networks of near peers. Rogers, in his compendium of research on innovation, states (1995, p. 18):

Diffusion investigations show that most individuals do not evaluate an innovation on the basis of scientific studies of its consequences... Instead, most people depend mainly upon a subjective evaluation of an innovation that is conveyed to them from other individuals like themselves who have previously adopted the innovation. This dependence on the experience of near peers suggests that the heart of the diffusion process consists of the modeling and imitation by potential adopters of their network partners who have adopted previously. So diffusion is a very social process.

Rogers' synopsis is consistent with the finding from my own research (Wolman and Page, 2002). We examined how local regeneration authorities in England learned from one another and concluded (p. 497):

Our findings suggest that informal contacts with peers are the most trustful and useful sources of information among urban regeneration partnership officials, while some of the other more formal mechanisms – seminars and conferences and the production of good-practice guides – are less useful. Increasingly, these informal contacts are taking place within formal or quasiformal networks.

As this suggests, trust in the information is an important determinant of whether an individual will accept and utilize the information. Ideological similarity is likely to produce greater trust. So is familiarity, which is why participation in interpersonal networks is associated with trust and information acceptance. One of the striking features that resulted from our questionnaire on *domestic* policy learning in local regeneration bodies (Wolman and Page 2002) was the importance of neighboring bodies. In interviews we discovered that this phenomenon was in part related to issues of trust.

Choosing between different pieces of advice is difficult, and such advice is treated with caution as it is unclear whether the good practice really is as good as it appears or is claimed for it and, even if it is, whether it would work in a different geographical setting. Knowing which advice to follow depends in part on what advice one trusts. Neighboring bodies are attractive as sources for lessons because policy makers can see for themselves more clearly how their neighbor has gone about developing a program, can understand more easily the background social, economic and political conditions in which it was developed and can talk to the people who developed it. In one interview an official commented that she knew about the progress on a particular scheme in a neighboring authority as she drove past it every day on the way to work. Where it is possible to witness at close hand the developments and effects of a policy, it is easier

to judge the trustworthiness of the claims made for it. In policy learning, seeing may not be believing, but it does allow policy makers to test the level of trust and confidence they should put into borrowing from others as well as how they might modify what they borrow to suit the conditions in their jurisdiction.

3.4.3. Information Utilization: To what extent is information about policies elsewhere used in the policy process, what kinds of information are used, and how are they used? By utilization, we mean that knowledge about policies elsewhere is taken into account in the policy-decision process or shapes or affects the nature of the decision. As previously noted there are several different types of utilization. Utilization can be conceived of as instrumental (direct use), conceptual (affecting people's understanding or the general intellectual orientation of policymakers. or symbolic/persuasive (as a means of mobilizing support for a policy). Information about policies elsewhere can also relate to a very wide range of policy-related concerns (see discussion on p. 2).

The most obvious form of instrumental utilization is the direct transfer of programmatic design or technique, although as Richard Rose (1991) points out, this type of transfer does not necessarily imply mechanical copying, which is only one form of what he terms "lesson-drawing." Lesson-drawing also occurs through what he calls "emulation" (adoption but with adjustment for differing circumstances), and hybridization or synthesis (combining elements from several different programs).

Mossberger and Wolman (2003, p. 435) reviewed 17 case studies of policy transfer and concluded that "there is no question that information related to policy design is used in policy transfer... [Many of the studies reviewed] testify to the importance of learning from other countries in shaping the policies they studied, sometimes to the extent of near replication."

However, information about broader concepts related to the conceptual underpinnings of policy and general approaches is even more likely to be used. Information about policies elsewhere can encompass policy goals, concepts, or ideas as well as program structure, design, and techniques. It can also involve the transfer of what Mossberger (2000, pp. 116-117) calls "policy labels." Policy labels are names that are applied to a wide range of policies reflecting ambiguous and loosely bundled ideas (e.g., privatization, enterprise zones). The label itself is the concept that is transferred, although

some aspects of content may be transferred as well. As Mossberger writes, policy labels “stand for a general category of policies, encompassing wide variation... Adopters may use only the label, a general concept, or a concept with only elements of policy design.”

Information about policies elsewhere might also be used in the political process for *persuasive* purposes, with actors referring to the experience of other governments in an effort to persuade others of the desirability (or lack thereof) of a policy. This may be after-the-fact utilization (e.g., the use of the knowledge may not have contributed to the policy decision itself but may be used as a tactic to legitimize the decision taken).

More broadly, information about policies elsewhere, if it is used at all, is only one part of the information used in the policy process. Kingdon (199?) characterizes the policy process as consisting of three streams: problems, politics, and policies that operate relatively separately. As Wolman (1992, pp. 43-44) writes:

Policy transfer is not an isolated endeavor, but an integral part of the policy process. As such, it is best understood in Kingdon’s terms as one of a variety of policy alternatives competing in the “policy” stream of the process. Policy ideas from abroad compete with other alternatives in what Kingdon terms the “policy primeval soup... In the competition in the policy stream, ideas from abroad and those who promote them may have an advantage because they can be seen to be in place and working.

However, as Kingdon (1995, pp. 85) notes, the policy stream is only one stream and policies are likely to be enacted only when the three streams come together: “a problem is recognized, a solution is available, the political climate makes the time right for change, and the constraints do not prohibit action.” As this suggests, the utilization of knowledge about policies elsewhere is more likely to occur when those policies are seen to address problems perceived in the “recipient” country and to coincide with dominant or emerging ideas about the appropriate shape of policy.

On a more technical level, the knowledge utilization literature also provides evidence on the kind of information that policymakers are likely to utilize. Greenberg et al. (2003, pp. 52ff) summarize the findings from the utilization research literature on the conditions under which social science research (particularly public policy knowledge derived from social experimentation) is likely to be used. These include “definitiveness” (the extent to which findings are concrete, unambiguous and uncontested), “timeliness,” “communication” (policy makers must understand them and they must be disseminated through policy networks),

“generalizability” (can the findings be applied to other times and places), and “relevance” (does it meet the needs of decision makers.) In a meta-analysis of studies on research utilization by policy makers, Johnson et al. (2005) identified seven characteristics of research and found four that were positively related to utilization in most studies: communication quality (clarity, breadth of dissemination), timeliness, research quality, and researcher competence.

4. Policy Transfer as Lesson Drawing: How to Do It⁴

To this point we have focused on positive and empirical concerns: how does policy diffuse, what kinds of policies are most likely to diffuse, how does policy learning occur, how do policymakers receive and process information in the policy transfer process. In this section we turn to normative concerns. How can policy makers best engage in the policy transfer process? Rose (1991, p. 3) terms this process “lesson-drawing,” an explicit and conscious process that addresses the question, “Under what circumstances and to what extent can a programme that is effective in one place transfer to another?”

Rose (1993, p. 21) states that, “Lesson-drawing is concerned with whether programs are fungible, that is, capable of being put into effect in more than one place... In the policy process a lesson can be defined as a *program for action based on a program or programs undertaken in another city, state, or nation.*” He observes (1993, p. 114) that successful lesson-drawing (i.e., policy transfer) requires prospective evaluation “of whether a program that operates in one place today could work in another in the future.”

What kind of analysis does this require? Wolman (1992, p. 42) sets forth three critical questions that need to be addressed in considering transferring a policy from one country to another:

- Are the problems to which the policy is to be addressed in the recipient country similar to those to which it was addressed in the originating country? If not, are the problems to which the policy is to be applied in the recipient country nonetheless susceptible to the policy?
- To what extent was the policy “successful” in the originating country?

⁴In this section I rely and draw from several previous publications: Wolman, 1992; Wolman, 1993; Wolman and Page, 2002; and Mossberger and Wolman, 2003.

- Are there any aspects of a policy's setting in the originating country that are critical to its success there, but that are not present, or are present in a different form, in the recipient country?

Mossberger and Wolman (2003, pp. 430ff) posit a set of guidelines for policymakers on how they should engage in policy transfer which serve as criteria against which actual efforts of policy transfer can be assessed. These include awareness of information about policies elsewhere, accurate assessment of information, including the extent to which policies elsewhere addressed similar problems and whether the policy actually was successful elsewhere, and the effort to try to figure out whether differences in the policy setting in the new policy environment will affect the policy's implementation and outcomes.

4.1 Assessing Adequacy of Information: Policy transfer presumes that there is some awareness of policies elsewhere, but prospective adopters should also have information from as many sources as possible (including similar policies in more than one country) and of sufficient detail and accuracy with respect to program design and operations. In their review of 17 case studies of policy transfer, Mossberger and Wolman (2003) found that, while borrowing countries appeared to have reasonably accurate and detailed information about the mechanics of the policy/program under consideration, most of the policy transfer exercises appeared to focus on information from only one country (or state), even when similar policies existed elsewhere. They note (2003, pp. 431-2) that limited search was sometimes linked to policy transfer that began as a result of an enthusiastic encounter through a site visit and that ideological preferences also often limited search to policies of governments with similar ideological approaches. They cite Dolowitz (2000, p. 34) who noted that in examining the American welfare to work experience, British policy makers focused heavily on one state, Wisconsin, even though the experience of other states was both relevant and accessible. As Dolowitz noted, "if the government extended its examination of the American welfare-to-work system to include states such as Utah and Oregon, it is likely they would learn some of the drawbacks of the system."

4.2. Assessing Similarity of Problems and Goals: One of the more frequently cited reasons for unsuccessful policy transfer is the effort to transplant a policy intended to serve one purpose in the originating country to serve other ends in the borrowing country, particularly if these

differences are not recognized and taken into account. Dolowitz and Marsh (2000, p. 21), for example, argued that the problems resulting from the British adoption of American child support enforcement policy were a consequence of the different ends which the two countries pursued. In the U.S. the primary objective was to address the growing problem of single parents and to attract single mothers back into the workforce, while in the U.K., the primary objective was to reduce government spending. The primary target group for British enforcement policy thus became those fathers who, if full payments were made, could make the greatest contribution to the reduction of public sector welfare payments, while in the U.S. the focus was on those who had fallen behind or were making no payments.

Potential adopters need to first identify what problem (or problems) the policy has been used to address, and the goals associated with a policy or its variations. They should then determine the extent to which these are similar to problems they face and goals they wish to pursue. Differences in problem definition and goals between the originating and the borrowing units may not exclude further consideration of policy transfer, but some judgment needs to be made regarding why transfer may still be appropriate. Strictly speaking, of course, a program or policy may be successfully transferred even if the problems to which it is addressed are not similar in the two countries or even if different objectives are being pursued. At the very least, however, borrowing a policy when problems or goals differ can limit the ability to learn from the experience of the originating country. In these cases, prospective evaluation requires an even greater degree of leap of faith.

4.3. Assessing Policy Success: Mossberger and Wolman note (2003, p. 433), that “The problem of how to evaluate the performance of a program or policy in the country from which transfer is being considered is, in many ways, the most difficult dilemma in the policy transfer process.” For most policy areas there does not exist the equivalent of a Cochrane Collaboration or a readily available inventory of evidence-based policy evaluations. Formal and rigorous evaluations may not have been undertaken or completed; indeed, the program or policy may be visible *because of* its novelty and long before actual outcomes are known. In many policy areas, what passes for evaluation is actually a recommendation for best practice based on received wisdom or the self-evaluation (or self-promotion) of program operators.

A good part of the problem in assessing policy success is the question of whose information one should trust. In their study of how local regeneration partnership officials in Britain learn from one another, Wolman and Page (2002, p.493) note that these officials “place the greatest reliance on their own senses – what they saw or heard, particularly informally and particularly from people or sources they trusted.” However, this tendency can lead to haphazard assessment. In particular there is the seemingly pervasive problem of selection bias – potential borrowers tend to hear disproportionately from program advocates and to be unaware of or ignore critics and evaluations by social scientists. As Wolman (1992, 33) observes in his study of the UK adoption of the US Urban Development Action Grant (UDAG) program:

The unsystematic and unstructured means of information gathering about foreign policies have some obvious shortcomings. Visiting ministers, civil servants and fact-finding groups see what they are shown. They are, perhaps inevitably, exposed much more to the views of advocates – those who administer programs or receive benefits from them – than the views of critics or neutral observers. They tend to be shown “show-case” examples rather than average situations. As one observer remarked, “They will go for a week and come back full of enthusiasm, for they will have been told good news.” They rely more on verbal communication than on written material and rarely on analytic written material... Information garnered through contacts with consultants, journalists, academics, and visitors also tends to be highly impressionistic and unsystematic. The result of these various means of gathering information about foreign policies might be characterized as a pre-eminent form of policymaking by anecdote rather than by analysis.

As this suggests, information assessment is critical to informed decision making in policy transfer. Wolman and Page (2002) find that assessment can be particularly difficult, because producers of information, sometimes intentionally, may provide biased information. They write (2002, p. 498)

The information theory framework we applied has... directed us to examine aspects of the policy-transfer and policy-learning process that have been largely ignored in existing literature. In particular, we have focused on producers, facilitators, and senders of information in the policy-transfer process, as well as recipients. We have found that information senders frequently shape the information they send to support their own objectives and to enhance the reputation of their own programs, activities, and policies. Our framework also directed us to look at the question of information assessment... a critical finding of our study is the lack of ability on the part of regeneration partnerships and local authorities to assess the quality and veracity of the information they receive. Are claims of success for regeneration activity elsewhere really valid, or are they some combination of hype and wishful thinking?... These questions are all the more critical because it appears that partnership officials receiving information are rarely cognizant of their importance or of the need to ask them....

For their part, recipients are likely to react... by seeking their own trusted methods of assessment and evaluation. Above all, such methods consist of relying on immediate personal experience, trusted individuals, and information relating to the institutional structure of the policy area in which they are operating. If one adds to these considerations the constraints of time and resources, the focus of a policy borrower's attention is likely to be on the visible and the local as a source of policy learning.

In their study they asked British local urban regeneration officials how they assessed the information they received about the regeneration activities of other local governments. They report that many reacted with surprise, observing "I haven't really thought about that" or "That's a good question." Regeneration partnership officials tended to place the greatest reliance on assessing the reliability and usefulness of information on their own senses—what they saw or heard, particularly informally and particularly from people or sources they trusted.

However, they nonetheless were suspicious of the motivations of many of the sources of information. The following comments from five different regeneration partnership officials are typical:

How do you assess the quality of information? It's very difficult. I just apply my own critical faculties to what is being said. I apply my own judgment and experience...If there is something said in a formal presentation, I trust it more if I can follow up and talk to people. People are willing to be more honest in a personal conversation.

You talk to people; you look them in the eye. If it's theory, it's hard to assess; if you can see it, it's easier. For those things happening on the ground, you talk to people who are impacted or affected. Or you talk to the agency people responsible. It's not easy to do this. It's too time-consuming...But I'm suspicious of a lot of information about what's happening elsewhere. It's important to understand the motivation of these organizations [providing the information]. Many have an axe to grind.

My assessment of this stuff [information about the experience of regeneration activities in other local authorities] is very much contextual. I don't have the resources to do research. If you have the opportunity to go see something, that sometimes helps. I would pay more attention to and trust information from people in local authorities I am familiar with.

You get more honest assessments from informal contacts with people you do know. They're less likely to "BS" you. These kinds of contacts and conversations are different from a public presentation at a seminar where they can't really say

what happened because they have to look good. You're more likely to get the truth in an informal context.

How do you assess? It's difficult; you almost need a sixth sense. There's a lot of rhetoric and bluff around partnership work. You have to use your own experience and professional judgment. It's how much I trust the person I'm hearing it from.

Assessment thus occurs through the application of the official's own sense of what sounds right, with particular weight given to what he or she sees (which provides a bias towards physical development) or hears, usually in an informal context, from trusted sources. It does not reflect a critical evaluation in any policy-analytic sense as set forth above. In response to a question about how local authorities assessed information about the experience of others, an official from a local authority association observed, "Badly. The view is, if it works there it must work here." A central government official observed that local authorities as policy customers preferred guidance on the basis of informed opinion, rather than formal findings or evaluations.

The same problem exists for so-called "best practice guides" – how do we really know that "best practice" actually works at all, much less is preferred practice?

4.4. Assessing Differences in Setting. It is readily acknowledged that differences in setting might affect a program's transferability. Differences in setting might affect transferability either because the policy or program, if adopted, might not actually work in a different setting or because the policy or because the program, whether or not it might work, may not be politically feasible to adopt given the differences in the political environment and circumstances in the two settings. Both are critical concerns in lesson-drawing (see Rose, 1991, pp. 24ff).

Assessing the likely effects of differences in setting is therefore a critical analytic concern in prospective evaluation with respect to policy transfer. Do policy makers in the borrowing unit identify important differences in the policy or program setting? Identifying relevant differences can require a detailed understanding of context and the difficulty of the task increases with the complexity of the policy or the dissimilarity of the original setting. Decision makers must determine whether there are important differences in the policy environment being considered, and a judgment must then be made about whether any differences in policy environment, problems, or goals will influence either the effectiveness or the political viability of the proposed policy.

Candidates for consideration for differences in setting include contextual variables such as political, social, and economic institutions, political culture, public opinion, available resources, and the existence of other policies that impact efficacy.

Are there legal, political, or administrative structures that are needed to support the policy? There are a wide range of institutional differences among countries that might affect the successful transfer of policy. These include differences in the formal structure and operations of government institutions, in the relationships of different levels of governments to each other, in constitutional and legal provisions regulating private behavior and market relationships, in the operation of political and policy making institutions, etc.

It is perhaps easier to recognize important differences in structure than differences in attitudes, belief systems, and political culture. Policies exist within sets of political and cultural predispositions about the appropriate role of government, the relationship of citizen to state and, indeed, to each other, and the desirability of different forms of government policy. Do the proposed solutions run counter to cultural beliefs or public opinion in the country considering adoption? Dolowitz (1998) observes that the Thatcher government liked the local focus of American welfare-to-work programs, which it recognized as a consequence of the American federal system, and wished to replicate that focus within the British setting. However, Dolowitz (2000, 34) claimed that they failed to recognize that the perceived success of the U.S. system rested “less upon any individual policy or program than on a strong economy and a willingness to let the poorest of the poor fall through the welfare safety net.”

Furthermore, policies exist in a political context; they reflect the relationships among existing political forces that are likely to differ from country to country. They also reflect the relative influence among the various groups and interests in a country and the nature and extent of political bargaining and resultant compromises among them. How will partisan and interest group politics affect transfer? A policy that represents a viable political response in one country may not in another.

Another common setting-related problem reported in case studies is a lack of understanding or attention to the effects of interactions within the policy system. Are there related policies that are present in the original setting but lacking in the borrowing country? The appropriateness of policy transfer may be affected by the existence of other policies or policy

structures that may form necessary connecting links to the policy under consideration for transfer.

More direct and obvious differences in setting may matter as well. Does the country have sufficient wealth to support such a policy? Are there sufficient budgetary resources available?

To what extent do prospective policy adopters take these differences in setting into account? In their meta-analysis, Mossberger and Wolman (2003, p. 437) concluded that “Assessing differences in policy environment can be a formidable challenge, requiring considerable knowledge and analysis. The case studies demonstrated that differences in institutions and policy structures are commonly identified, but that more subtle differences, such as policy interactions and cultural variables, may escape the notice of adopters.”

5. Lessons for Lesson Drawing:

Does the policy transfer process meet the criteria for informed policy making?

Obviously this depends on standards of “informed decision making.”

Mossberger and Wolman, after reviewing studies of policy transfer, conclude (2003, p. 436):

This survey of the literature indicates the problems that arise in the use of cross-national policy transfer as a form of prospective policy evaluation when judged against a set of “rational” criteria. The scope of information potential borrowers have can be limited. Information about the policy may be inadequate or even inaccurate. Problems and goals may differ. Assessment of program success in the home environment is often problematic. Important differences in program setting between the home country and the importing country may not be taken into account. And available information may be ignored or not used appropriately in the decision process. This is a formidable indictment from the perspective of rational analysis as set forth in the policy analysis textbooks.

As the above suggests, lesson-drawing can be risky. The most fraught concerns are accurately evaluating the actual performance of the policy in the original country and assessing whether differences in setting and context between the original country and the borrowing country will make transfer difficult or impossible. A good approach to answering these questions is to identify one or more neutral and expert “policy translators” – neutral in the sense that they are not committed to the policy to be transferred, expert in the sense that they are knowledgeable about the policy, and policy translators in that they have a deep understanding of

policy and political setting in both countries. Perhaps surprisingly, people with all three of these attributes are likely to exist – but they will have to be searched for and sought out. Alternatively, but less usefully, individuals with one or more but not all three of these attributes can be consulted.

There are also some specific cautions for successful lesson-drawing.

- Appropriately discount the views of those responsible for designing, developing and/or implementing the policy/program and also the views of strong advocates. For understandable reasons, they are not likely to provide neutral or objective assessments of the policy. This is particularly difficult since these may well be the individuals who bring the policy to the attention of the prospective borrowers through interpersonal networks, information from which, as we have noted, is more likely to be accorded trust. Here the caution is “trust but verify!” It’s also worth noting that critics of the policy from its inception ought to be accorded the same degree of skepticism.
- Study visits can be helpful and are a source of much information. However, they can also be misleading. The threat of a serious selection bias problem exists in that many study visits highlight the most successful programs, or projects rather than average ones, and the host will be the Director of someone otherwise committed to the project. Again, the problem is magnified by the trust of information that frequently results from face-to-face interaction. Study tours should be arranged, if possible, by neutral parties, should include critics and neutral observers as well as advocates, and should visit average as well as model programs.
- Pilot or “one-off” programs or projects should also be treated with caution.
 - One concern is whether they have succeeded because of the charismatic nature of their leadership. The question here is whether the program could succeed with individuals with normal professional skills directing it.
 - Another concern is whether these programs can be brought to scale – or whether they are too expensive or resource intensive to exist in more than a few places.

More generally, in the likely absence of formal evaluation, any observer should attempt to impose the logic of lesson-drawing on the policy or program and its potential for transfer:

- What would the counterfactual likely have been, i.e., in the absence of the program what would the outcome likely have been? Put in other times, what was the “value-added” of the program?
- Is there any obvious selection bias? Is there something about the way the program is structured that makes the results non-generalizable to the population of interest, either in the host country or in the potential borrowing country?
- Is there anything about the setting in the host country that is likely to make the program work differently or not at all in the borrowing country?

These cautions should *not* be taken to suggest that policy transfer and lesson-drawing are processes that are so difficult that they are not worth pursuing. Instead they are offered in the spirit of how to maximize their very obvious potential.

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