Policy Transfer and the Internationalisation of Social Policy

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This article analyses the theoretical utility of policy transfer in developing perspectives on international and comparative social policy. It argues that existing work on policy transfer provides us with a theoretical tool to connect perspectives on international policy change, by focussing on the knowledge base of policy and the motivations of actors throughout the policy process from the global level to the context of practice. In doing so, it explores the role of epistemic communities in policy-oriented learning, particularly in education. The article concludes by suggesting four areas for future work on transfer which would serve to advance international policy analysis.

Introduction

The domestic and international iteration of social policy in areas such as education and health is a growing phenomenon. It represents a challenge to those who seek to develop international and comparative social policy in both theory and practice. This article assesses the contribution made by established work on policy transfer to developing our understanding of the international and domestic movement of ideas and practices in the making of social policy. It is argued that the existing frameworks of policy transfer help us to assess how and why policy changes at all levels of governance. These frameworks are presented as analytical tools which help to provide a valuable cross-disciplinary dialogue on the role of policy-oriented knowledge and the motivations of actors in policy making at international, domestic and local levels. The article highlights the role of ‘epistemic communities’ in the development of generic international agendas, particularly in education. The article concludes with an exploration of the utilities of the policy transfer literature for the development of perspectives on international and comparative social policy.

What is policy transfer?

Definitions and frameworks

In the simplest of senses, there is nothing new about policy transfer. Through work such as Dolowitz, Hulme Nellis and O’Neal (2000), Dolowitz and Marsh (1996), Evans and Davies (1999), frameworks have been developed which seek to advance earlier debates about the international movement of ideas and practices in social policy through concepts such as diffusion and lesson drawing (Rose 1991). These studies offer us frameworks rather than models or complete theoretical perspectives and accordingly, the literature is built
upon the straightforward proposition that policy transfer represents:

A process in which knowledge about policies, institutions and ideas developed in one time or place is used in the development of policies, institutions etc. in another time or place. (Dolowitz et al., 2000: 3)

The following analytical framework offered in Dolowitz et al., both describes the process of policy transfer and provides a framework for exploring the international movement of policy. It is based on nine questions:

- Why and when do actors engage in policy transfer?
- Who transfers policy?
- What is transferred?
- From where are lessons drawn?
- Are there different degrees of transfer?
- When do actors engage in policy transfer and how does this affect the policy making and policy transfer processes?
- What restricts policy transfer?
- How can researchers begin demonstrating the occurrence of policy transfer?
- How can policy transfer help our understanding of policy failure?

(Dolowitz et al., 2000: 9)

The literature offers a multi-level framework of policy analysis for exploring the movement of policy ideas and practices at three levels. At the level of global, international/ transnational structures, transfer studies offer a focus on the increasing complexity of the ‘global policy community’ and the rise of generic agendas in education and social welfare. At the level of domestic governance, policy ideas and practices are transferred across sectors and from previous governments or policy trajectories. Thirdly, policy transfer operates at the inter-organisational level. Here, the movement of ideas and practices can be domestic or international, top–down or bottom–up and can by-pass the central institutions of domestic governance. Depending on the context of the transferring agents, policy transfer can be either voluntary or coercive (obligated transfer). At all levels, the literature suggests that the transfer of ideas and institutions is a key instrument in policy development.

**Policy transfer as analytical tool: connecting literatures on policy making**

I argue that the most significant contribution of existing work on policy transfer is that it provides an opportunity to illuminate the processes of policy change. The power of the framework to singly ‘explain’ anything is limited, but its capacity to enhance the explanatory power of other perspectives on international and domestic policy making is considerable. It offers us an analytical tool to connect accounts of policy change based on processes with more critical perspectives of policy based on ideology and discourse. This is achieved primarily through the focus the transfer literature provides on policy learning. The policy transfer frameworks compel us to examine the origins of ‘new’ knowledge about policy, who supplies such knowledge and the political and practical purposes to which this knowledge is put. Consequently, we can understand more about the nature of policy development at any level and at any stage in the policy process.
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In a field of social policy as complex as education policy (the policy domain in which I have conducted most of my case study work), an account of policy change requires broad perspectives on structural change and ideology and a narrower focus on processes. It is a field in which academic perspectives have ‘talked past one another’ in accounting for how and why policy changes.

‘Critical policy sociologists’ such as Ball (1990, 1998) and Olssen et al. (2004) have given us Foucauldian influenced accounts of policy change in education. Ball in particular, has argued convincingly that policy making in education is evolutionary and fluid rather than rational-technocratic and linear with orderly stages and decision points. The struggle between policy actors and the discourses they generate is carried out throughout the levels of the educational state. As a consequence, policy changes meaning in moving from ‘the context of influence’, as Ball terms it, where think tanks, civil servants and policy advisers both nationally and internationally compete to mould and shape policy, to the ‘context of practice’, where regional, local, and institutional actors can re-interpret policy at the ‘chalk face’. Policy sociology is valuable in providing theoretical depth to accounts of policy change and in highlighting the proclivity of educational policy makers to idealise and transfer notions of educational practice from the past. However, its theoretical sophistication is also a weakness, since it is difficult to operationalise without the aid of other more mechanistic perspectives.

Policy transfer also serves to invigorate theories which have offered the primary perspectives on policy making for decades. The rationalist-synoptic ideal of policy making offered by Lindblom and Herbert Simon in the 1960s and 1970s was founded on a conception of a policy process involving rational actors pursuing clear goals in the course of solving problems; while it provided a useful ideal type of heuristic stages of policy making from problem definition to implementation, it did not reflect reality. Significantly, for our purposes, there is a total absence of an account of how policy changes. One of the greatest utilities of the transfer framework is to shed light on the strategic motivations of actors in the policy process, whether these are financial, ideological or simply pragmatic. The case studies offered in Dolowitz et al. (2000) ranging from the Americanisation of British Higher Education to the use of US ideas in British Employment policy, reveal that transferring policy is rational, since it is about making choices in policy development but it also about realising ideological goals. Whether change is required because of major systemic disruptions or crises, or whether an adaptation of an already established policy is necessary, policy makers must respond intelligently by making use of knowledge transferred from other contexts. One of the more under-developed uses of the transfer framework for policy-making theory is its capacity not only to assist in focusing on strategic change, but also to highlight the reasons for policy continuity and short-term pragmatism. An ‘incremental’ search for knowledge from other contexts often represents the most expedient means to muddle through.

During the 1990s, policy theory took a more critical turn in order to address the absence of the ‘politics of policy making’ and the internationalisation of policy processes. This ‘deepening’ of policy theory has involved two general movements, both of which have important implications for the use of policy transfer as an analytical tool. The first of these featured a rejection of formulaic policy processes, promoting instead a notion of policy making based on the interaction of groups of actors aligned by interest and mutual resource dependence in the case of policy networks (Marsh and Rhodes, 1993) or ideology in the form of advocacy or discourse coalitions (Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith,
1993; Fischer and Forrester, 1993; King, 1999). Secondly, this critical turn was advanced through work on policy-oriented learning and the role of knowledge in the policy process (Rose, 1991; Haas, 1990, 1992). Haas in particular, establishes a connection between policy change and learning on the part of policy makers, who cannot achieve the delivery of policy reflecting their ideology without new knowledge on how to put this into effect. This literature is significant in highlighting the role of ‘epistemic communities’ or competing groups of policy specialists, often found in think tanks (Stone, 2000, 2001). The policy transfer literature offers a useful development on this work because the supply of knowledge by ‘epistemics’ involves the transfer of ideas from other contexts – either other countries or the domestic past.

A further perspective on the knowledge-base underpinning policy at an international level is offered by Deacon (1997, 2003), who sheds light on the internationalisation of policy processes by focussing upon:

the trans-national networks that operate between governmental and non governmental international organisations and that in effect, establish a transnational or global discourse that is the backcloth against which global decisions are made. (Deacon, 1997: 60)

Deacon provides a valuable focus on the internationalisation of epistemic communities and the global market for knowledge about policy. He acknowledges that the context of international social policy often concerns institutional reform, whilst emphasising that the actual focus of much international effort to improve the world’s management of global issues is centred upon networks, partnerships and projects (Deacon, 2003: 6).

Consequently, it can be argued that the processes of policy learning and policy transfer provide a vital mechanism in the operation of these international networks and, further, in sustaining a global market for the evidence or knowledge base of policy and the generation of intellectual and political discourse on education and other significant areas of international social policy.

**The role of policy transfer in policy making: policy learning**

Policy-oriented learning is also a multi-level concept, since it can take place between Ministers and civil servants, think tanks and ‘invisible colleges’ of policy advisors or between groups of academic experts or practitioners in different counties linked only by email. For Haas (1990), policy change cannot take place without learning. He produces a knowledge-based definition of policies as packages of cause–effect prescriptions founded on ‘scientific knowledge’. Such knowledge is (at the level of central government institutions) based primarily on quantitative data supplied by professional organisations or policy specialists. Scientific knowledge is then moulded into ‘consensual knowledge’, or commonly accepted cause and effect propositions (i.e. in education policy, standards in education reflect the performance of teachers), which define the nature of policy problems and shape the responses available to government. Any departure from an existing policy requires learning on the part of policy makers or, ‘the penetration of political objectives and programmes by new knowledge’ (Haas, 1990: 316). Thus, learning is primarily about the use of knowledge to define political interests and to refine the strategic direction of policy proposals.

Epistemic communities provide such knowledge, which acts as a ‘trigger for learning’ in helping to break policy makers’ habits and their tendency to look for continuity and
stability in policy. Haas (1990: 41) defines them as groups of professionals ‘usually recruited from several disciplines’, linked by specialist knowledge and acting as a conduit for that knowledge in the service of policy makers. They may ‘share a common causal model and set of beliefs’ but unlike Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith’s (1993) advocacy coalitions, this is more akin to a community of scientists, ‘like biologists’, than to groups bound together by ideological principles. Rose (1991) offers a view of epistemic communities as ‘invisible colleges’ of experts; he refers to an epistemic community of education specialists, comprising local authorities, national civil servants, regional actors professional associations and think tanks. He observes that, ‘their locus and level may change but the focus remains education policy’ (1991: 16). If there is more than one epistemic community in a policy environment, they can be seen to behave like ‘rival groups of scientists’ (Haas, 1990: 42) in that the ultimate test of their ‘version of the truth’ is the adoption of their prognoses by the users of knowledge.

The policy transfer framework provides an essential linkage, which allows the diverse literatures, referred to above to converse. Drawing on the central tenets of all of this work we can explain policy change in education as the product of the interaction or confluence of three inter-dependent determinants: policy-oriented learning on the part of significant actors in the educational state, which in turn leads to refinement of the ideological basis of policy platforms and to changes in the systemic determinants of policy, such as movements in the global economy. Policy transfer then, is both a rational and an ideological strategy to deal with changing circumstance. Seeking workable, tried and tested, readily available definitions and responses from other countries and from the past is the means by which policy makers put their learning into effect.

The utilities of policy transfer for future work on international and comparative social policy

The remainder of this article draws upon the exposition above to highlight four areas of the policy transfer literature that I feel are worthy of further investigation and research. They are chosen as having a particular relevance to the field of international and comparative social policy. Developing the policy transfer frameworks will offer a means of deepening our understanding of policy complexity at the international level. It will also allow us to evaluate more effectively the role of individual actors at all levels in the construction of ‘generic’ agendas in international social policy such as evidence-based or evidence-informed approaches to health, education and welfare.

Exploring policy complexity in international agendas

The role of epistemic communities and the role of individual actors within them in transferring ideas, structures, practices and institutions is the major area for developing theory and case studies. Haas suggests that policy makers consult them because ‘they know that their knowledge on policy is incomplete’ and they need to be ‘provided with a memory of past efforts to define and solve the problem’ (1990: 9). International case studies on education policy, (Dolowitz et al., 2000; Hulme and Hulme, 2000; Phillips and Ochs, 2004) provide some insight into the multi-faceted role of ‘knowledge-based’ actors in transferring policies. The role of some significant actors overarches that of epistemic, advocate and policy entrepreneur. The usual ‘suspects’ are the major trans-Atlantic Think
Tanks such as the Institute for Economic Affairs, The Social Market Foundation and the Heritage Foundation.

However, the multiple roles carried by individual ‘epistemics’ are best illustrated by the academics in the case studies. Their role can be that of political advocate, often linked to a Think Tank, such as Hayek and Etzioni. Yet, the role played by Sir Ron Dearing in the reform of Higher Education in the 1990s (Dolowitz et al., 2000) and David Hargreaves who played a significant part in developing the evidence-based movement in education, whilst acting as Chief Executive of the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (Hulme, 2004), is more complex. In all the case studies, however, these actors are instrumental in transfer, and their influence pervades the policy process at all levels from trans-national to inter-organisational.

The multi-level nature of international policy development

The education case studies serve to demonstrate the multi-level nature of transfer in policy making. At the international level, there is evidence of a developing generic global agenda in education (Ball, 1998 and Whitty and Edwards, 1998). A platform of market reform in schools, reinforced by managerialism and performance measurement provides a context for governments world wide to define problems in education; this in turn determines the responses chosen. A prime example of the international iteration of this agenda is the spread of evidence-based practice (EBP) in both health and education. Every western liberal democracy now has a ‘what works’ policy in education. There is evidence (Hulme and Hulme, 2004), that this development had its origins within a trans-Atlantic epistemic community specialising in EBP which began in the field of American and Canadian medical research and grew to incorporate advocates in the British education research arena. The role of high profile ‘epistemics’ such as David Hargreaves and David Sackett in the production and transfer of knowledge between the research centres that informed policy at the national level was crucial to the processes of transfer and policy-oriented learning in this case.

The internationalisation of policy making also has significance for the analysis of domestic policy making. The transfer of EBP into education policy in the UK is again illuminating. Since the late 1990s, New Labour has made use of evidence-based or evidence-informed policy and practice as a key justifying rationale for policy formulation and evaluation across public services. The most visible instrument of this approach has been the Centre for Management and Policy Studies (CMPS) within the Cabinet Office, which has been established as a source of ‘evidence of best practice’ for policy makers. The guiding principle underpinning this policy has been the notion of ‘best practice’ and this is drawn from the systemic review of research in the social and political sciences (Thomas and Pring, 2004; Davies, 2000). The terminology and methodology adopted has been transferred directly from policy made in the health sector.

An interesting but as yet under-developed aspect of the literature concerns the transfer of ideas and practices at the inter-organisational level or between contexts of practice, often by-passing the other levels. Hulme and Hulme (2000) outline a case of multi-level transfer in a series of initiatives in both the UK and the USA designed to combat ‘social exclusion’, using technology in schools. The case offers contrasts with other American influenced education policy. During the late 1990s both British and American
Governments formulated policies with the stated intention of enhancing the power of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) in the classroom, whilst dealing with social exclusion. These aims, pursued through the National Grid for Learning (NGfL) and through New Labour’s agenda for social inclusion via the establishment of Education Action Zones and Excellence in Cities were presented as distinctive projects in New Labour’s ‘Third Way’ agenda. However, these initiatives were preceded by the American Democrats 1996 National Plan for the Use of Technology in Schools, one of the US government’s few, truly national education policies of recent years. Clinton’s plan formed an almost verbatim blueprint for the NGfL. The case was significant because it led to the development of an international community of learning and to the sharing of good practice.

This example highlights one of the more positive unintended consequences of international policy learning. At the inter-organisational level, the use of exemplar, both good and bad, can be used to respond from the bottom up to centrally driven policy. The most effective strategies of resistance involve sharing good practice and the dissemination of knowledge about policy across networks within the education community, locally, nationally and internationally.

### Explaining failure in social policy

The majority of the case study work within the policy transfer literature is based on examples of Anglo-American transfer, ranging from the reform of higher education through welfare to work to the Child Support Agency. This literature reveals that British governments over the past 20 years have looked primarily to the USA for very general political symbols or a quick fix to an immediate problem. Both Conservative and New Labour governments have demonstrated a proclivity to learn very selectively and expediently from other contexts in order to realise their political goals or in the case of education policy to control the policy environment more effectively. A focus on the origins of these policy ideas, through the influence of US ‘epistemics’, think tanks and upon the structures and practices they sought to transfer helps us to expose the contradictions in the ideological discourses underpinning social policy and to criticise more effectively the true intent and efficacy of policy. In so doing, the transfer frameworks provide us not only with a valuable tool in accounting for the reasons for change in social policy but also in accounting for the very high rates of policy failure.

Another determinant of the failure of transferred policy is the political, cultural, social and administrative ‘specificity’ of the origins of policy ideas and instruments. The case studies in welfare and education reveal that many of the US policies and practices informing British policy development were simply not ‘transferable’ since they had grown out of the legal, educational and social systems of their host state. This is, of course, not a problem unique to Anglo-American transfer. However, in most policy areas we are not comparing ‘like with like’ in seeking policy from federal administrations in the US and using those in a UK context. Ironically, the ‘differentness’ of the US Federal system is one of the main attractions of the United States to British and European policy makers. The US system faces similar problems, often with different manifestations – retention rates in education, the need for welfare reform etc. – but there are many different test cases in terms of state governments attempting to find responses to them. These studies
reveal that selectivity and partiality on the part of the transferring agent are the overriding determinants of failure in policy transfer. Those elements of policies and structures that are left behind are often as significant as what is actually transferred.

Broadening the parameters of policy transfer studies

There remain a series of challenges for researchers in developing the potential of the existing literature. Theoretically, the transfer frameworks present the danger of ‘infinite regression’. The origins of policy ideas are significant in revealing the motivations of policy makers and in evaluating their chances of successful policy development, yet all policy ideas are in some sense re-cycled and re-constituted. Policy transfer is at its most effective as a form of international and comparative policy analysis when combined with other perspectives. Methodologically, there are challenges in using transfer as an analytical tool. Evidence of transfer, even in the fields referred to above, is difficult to pin down. Moreover, there remains the problem of evaluating transfer as a ‘dependent’ or ‘independent’ variable. These issues however, merely serve to re-enforce the need for further work in both theory and practice into this growing global phenomenon.

Conclusions

I have argued here that the policy transfer frameworks provide us with an analytical tool to explore the processes of policy change at any level. The focus this work is on the origins of policy ideas, and the role of policy-oriented knowledge in agenda setting and policy formulation allows us to challenge some enduringly static ideas about policy making. In the field of international and comparative social policy, policy transfer can deepen our understanding of international policy processes. There is increasing evidence that policy transfer represents one of the primary instruments of international and global social policy. At a practical level, exploring the origins of policy ideas and instruments and the motivations of the transferring actors will serve to build the effectiveness of global policy analysis. Simply providing an awareness of the recurrence of policy failure when ideas or structures have been transferred without sufficient adaptation will assist this purpose. The case study work on the global spread of the evidence-based movement provides one example: there is a need for a many more. A focus on the epistemic communities, which operate within and between governmental and non-governmental institutions such as the World Bank, is clearly one way forward. However, in order to truly develop the capacity of policy transfer to deepen our understanding of international policy making, there is a need for more work on transfer at inter-organisational level. At this level, the sharing of policy ideas and the dissemination of good practice across formal and informal networks of practitioners can be the most effective form of political and cultural resistance to generic agendas in global social policy.

References


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