

# **A multi-disciplinary approach to policy transfer research: Geographies, assemblages, mobilities, and mutations**

Eugene McCann (Simon Fraser University) & Kevin Ward (University of Manchester)

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## **Abstract**

This paper outlines an approach to the global circulation of policies/models. This 'policy assemblage, mobilities and mutations' approach has emerged in recent years, primarily through the work of geographers. It is both inspired by, and somewhat critical of, the policy transfer approach associated with work in political science. Our argument is that the focus of geographers on place, space, and scale, coupled with an anthropological/sociological attention to 'small p' politics both within and beyond institutions of governance offers a great deal to the analysis of how policy-making operates, how policies, policy models and policy knowledge/expertise circulate, and how these mobilities shape places. In making this argument, we first briefly review the literatures in human geography and urban studies that lie behind the current interest in the mobilization of policies. We then outline the key elements of the policy transfer approach that these geographers have drawn upon and critiqued. In the third and fourth sections we compare and contrast these elements with those of the burgeoning policy mobilities approach. We then turn to the example of the Business Improvement District policy, which has been moved from one country to another, one city to another, in the process becoming constructed as a 'model' of/for economic development. We conclude the paper by arguing for an ongoing multi-disciplinary conversation about the global circulation of policies, one in which geographers are involved alongside those from other disciplines, such as anthropology, history, planning and sociology, as well as political science.

**Key words:** policy transfer; policy mobilities, assemblages, and mutations; geography, politics, urban

## **Bios**

Eugene McCann is an urban geographer whose broad research interests focus on urban policy mobilities, the relationships between urbanization and globalization, the politics of urban drug policy and of urban development, planning, and design policies. His work has a specific focus on the political strategies of activist groups and it involves case studies in Canada, the United States, Australia, and various European countries. He is co-editor (with Kevin Ward) of *Mobile Urbanism: Cities & Policymaking in the Global Age* (Minnesota, 2011).

Kevin Ward is an urban economic and political geographer whose broad research interests focus on urban policy mobilities, comparative urbanism, the politics of economic development, and state restructuring. His current program of work is entitled *Transatlantic Travels* and involves examining the changing relationship between financial and land markets in a number of cities and countries around the world. He is co-editor (with Eugene McCann) of *Mobile Urbanism: Cities & Policymaking in the Global Age* (Minnesota, 2011).

A recent review of the policy transfer literature (Benson and Jordan 2011, p. 368) notes its proliferation beyond its 'home base' of UK political science and asks if: "this pattern impl[ies] that ... the concept [is] now being successfully reinterpreted and reapplied in different ways to inform our understanding of related contexts and processes?" The authors go on to explore what this proliferation might mean for "the analytical value of the concept itself". They conclude that it is still useful but that its continued growth and spread into areas beyond its political science raises the specter of the concept being "stretched" to the point where it "reveals less and less about more and more." We detect in this conclusion and in the authors' review more generally a worryingly limited and *disciplined* vision of policy transfer's new directions beyond political science. While Benson and Jordan clearly acknowledge and, to some extent, applaud the work of non-political scientists, their worry about analytical dilution is palpable and their tentative explorations of the work the concept has inspired beyond political science is limit.

Our purpose in this paper is not to respond directly to Benson and Jordan's largely valuable review of the policy transfer literature (but see McCann and Ward, 2012a). Rather, we use their argument to outline one of the new directions for policy transfer research, beyond political science: ongoing attempts to analyze the global circulation of locally-produced and implemented policies by geographers, sociologists, anthropologists and others, working under the rubric of 'policy assemblages, mobilities, and mutations.' This approach is inspired by, but is also critical of, what may be thought of as the 'traditional' policy transfer approach developed in political science. We argue that geographers' focus on place, space, and scale, coupled with an anthropological/sociological attention to social relations, networks and 'small p' politics, both within and beyond

institutions of governance, promises to deepen and strengthen, rather than dissolve and dilute, work on policy-making and policy mobilization.

More specifically, we make a “distinction between the rational-formalist tradition of work on policy transfer, rooted in political science, and social-constructivist approaches” emerging across other social science disciplines (Peck 2011, p. 774). In the light of this distinction, we agree: “that as policy transfer has increasingly been employed in and across different types of governance analysis, more and more research questions and puzzles have emerged, not all of which can be explained solely in *transfer* terms” (Benson and Jordan 2011, p. 373; emphasis added). Yet, while we agree with this statement, we are not *in agreement* with its negative implication about the merit of non-political science work on policy transfer. Rather, we suggest that policy *transfer*, narrowly defined, has indeed lost intellectual currency outside of political science, precisely because it tends to have been *narrowly defined*. The emergence of multi-disciplinary perspectives on how, why, where, and with what effects policies are mobilized, circulated, learned, reformulated and reassembled highlights, on the other hand, the benefits of understanding policy-making as both a local and, simultaneously, a global socio-spatial and political process.

The paper is divided into five sections. In the first, we sketch out some of the key debates in the human geography and urban studies literatures since the 1990s. These have motivated geographers’ current interest in the mobilization of policies. In the subsequent section, we turn to how geographers working in this area perceive the ‘traditional’ policy transfer approach by highlighting what we see as its key elements. In the third section, we outline the key aspects of the burgeoning policy mobilities approach with reference to the inspirations it draws from, and the critiques it makes of, the policy transfer approach. In

the following section, we briefly discuss the example of the Business Improvement District policy. Despite its contested origins, this method of financing and governing economic development continues to be introduced into cities and countries around the world. In the process of being circulated globally it has become a 'model', a way of doing something from which others look to learn. This example is used in the paper to illustrate the virtues of the 'assemblages, mobilities and mutations' approach. We conclude by making a case for continued multi-disciplinary exchanges and engagements amongst those working on similar issues related to the circulation and movement of policies/models but from different disciplines.

## **The intellectual origins of the geographical approach**

Geography is a diverse, 'interdisciplinary,' discipline. Geographers have a wide range of objects of study and are united less by what they study than by how they study physical and social processes. In very basic terms, geography is defined by its attention to connection and disconnection within and among places and to congruence and difference across space, from the local to the global scale. Critical human geographers are, more specifically, interested in the spatial relations that shape, and are shaped by, all social processes and phenomena. They believe that important insights are to be gained into the production of societies by engaging in analyses of the uneven distribution of power and resources across local, regional, and national territories and through globally-extensive networks – i.e., analyses of the production of space. Two related themes characterize critical geographical scholarship: social constructivism; and a relational understanding of

the world. Thus, an object of study – a policy, for example – is approached as a complex social construction (but no less ‘real’ for all that) which can only be understood by studying *both* its apparently ‘internal’ characteristics and, simultaneously, its ‘external’ relations, which are co-constituted. Therefore, geographers focus on the relational co-production of the material and the social and on the relational co-production of the local, the global and everywhere in between.

Geographers have insights into a range of phenomena, yet why has policy become a particular focus of some geographical scholarship? On the one hand, policy is profoundly important for the production of spaces ranging from the neighborhood (e.g., urban planning policies) to the globe (e.g., national defense policies) and, therefore, must be the focus of a responsible social science. Yet, we suggest that the contemporary global-relational approach to policy among geographers also has other, less immediately evident, roots in literatures and debates in geography and in the interdisciplinary field of urban studies since the 1990s. These conceptual antecedents include dissatisfaction with the world/global cities literature and with some fundamental assumptions underlying the urban politics literature, paired with a desire to push our understandings of spatial scale in new ways.

Since its emergence in the mid-1980s through the work of John Friedmann (1986), and its consolidation in the 1990s in Saskia Sassen’s writing (2001), the global cities literature (Brenner and Keil, 2006) has shaped how urban scholars understand the relationships between cities and the globalized economy. Its basic argument is that post-1970 economic globalization has not made place, location and distance less important, as the common myth would have it. Rather, certain cities have become increasingly crucial to

the financing and corporate 'command and control' of far-flung production centers and markets. Cities like London, New York and Tokyo have famously been identified as the most intense centers of command and control activities – 'global cities' – while a cadre of fifty others are identified as having certain degrees of 'globalness' (Beaverstock, et al 1999).

Yet, while this work provides important insights into a corporate globalness that is at once highly global and intensely local, its foundational assumptions, methods and conclusions have been criticized in recent years. Specifically, it has been critiqued for its narrow economism, since its definition of what makes a city global is tied specifically to high-level financial and corporate activities. It has also been critiqued for its related tendency to leave most of the world 'off the map' (Robinson 2005), as it tends to direct the attention of those interested in globalization/urbanization to a few places at the top of an urban hierarchy where high-level corporate control is located. Based on these critiques, the counter-argument to the global cities approach is that *all* cities are global and that the point is to figure out how they are global and with what consequences. In this regard, geographers' attention to policy as a global-relational social product – one produced by its circulation or transfer among cities, as much as its development in cities – is spurred by a desire to understand both how cities are global in terms of policy-making and governance and what different insights into globalization and urbanization are offered by such an approach.

Many of the geographers who have taken up the challenge of understanding how cities are global in the context of policy-making have longstanding interests in the study of urban politics. While this field has roots in the study of the politics surrounding urban



development efforts in Western cities since the 1960s, it has now expanded greatly.

While this literature has always acknowledged the wider, regional, national and global contexts in which struggles over urban space are situated, this acknowledgement has, nonetheless, often tended to be 'gestural', in the sense that the wider context is often only pointed to at the beginning and end of an intensely local study. This is an entirely understandable move on the part of researchers, since local politics are so complex that an accompanying detailed analysis of every aspect of the wider context is well-nigh impossible. The localist tendency in urban politics research is combined with a tendency to understand politics in its broadest definition. Geographers currently working in the policy mobilities tradition have been encouraged to do so in part by a dissatisfaction with an overly-localist definition of urban politics and policy-making. At the same time, they are greatly influenced by a discomfort with narrow definitions of what counts as urban politics and gravitate instead toward an understanding of politics, broadly defined and ranging beyond the formal institutions of the state to representation, identity, social movements, etc.

These concerns resonate with a third longstanding focus of critical geographical scholarship: scale. Scales like the local, national and global are, from this perspective, social constructs. There is nothing natural about a nation state or, hence, the 'national scale' and the character and bounds of a locality is always up for contest and rearrangement. Nonetheless, these scales are very real in that they are the product of, and also facilitate the furtherance of, political and economic interests. Scales are not understood as discrete 'levels,' however. Instead, they are relationally constructed, in that one only makes sense and only has power in relationship to others (e.g. the division of

rights and responsibilities within a federal state). Moreover, they are not “unilinearly ordered” (Marston 2000, p.227), but, instead, they interpenetrate. Thus, urbanization is not (only) a local process, but also one associated with globalization, national state policies, etc.

Yet, there is a need to further ‘populate’ our discussions of scale: to ask *who* constructs and interconnects scales and *how* do they do it, in a detailed empirical sense. One way to think about scale beyond the abstractions discussed above and to think carefully about the socially-produced character of scale is to focus on how scales are brought and held together – assembled – by actors and institutions (Allen and Cochrane 2007). As we will discuss later, this approach highlights the work and politics involved in connecting up the world in particular ways and necessitates a particular methodological orientation.

Policy transfer offers a starting point for attempts by human geographers to extend existing debates and conceptualizations in our discipline. Drawing on, and combining, a range of conceptual frameworks, particularly neo-Marxist political economy, post-structuralism and post-colonialism, geographers address the types of conceptual, methodological, and empirical issues and questions that Benson and Jordan point to as the future of policy transfer research (e.g., Peck and Theodore, 2010a; McCann and Ward 2011). Yet, their focus on social construction, relationality, representation, assemblage, practice at the micro-level, and politics (broadly defined) also sets their work off in new directions from the policy transfer tradition.

## The policy transfer literature as understood by geographers

While, as we have suggested, geographers have found the policy transfer literature useful in many ways, it is perhaps not surprising that their disciplinary, conceptual and methodological differences from political scientists have meant that geographers have also critiqued the policy transfer literature in four specific ways.

While concepts like Stone's (1999) 'transfer agents' have been employed by geographers to emphasize the importance of understanding who exactly mobilizes policies, there is a concern, one also expressed by Benson and Jordan (2011), that there has been perhaps too much emphasis in the traditional policy transfer literature on categorizing the actors and institutions involved. To put this another way, there is often too much focus on identifying transfer agents and putting them into categories and, on the other hand, too little attention to *agency* and the process of policy mobilization and the wider contexts that shape and mediate the agency of various policy actors. This partial elision of the fundamentally social – practical, interpersonal, institutionally-embedded, yet fluid and processual – character of policy-making in the traditional policy transfer approach means that there is a tendency to downplay the social practices of comparison, education, emulation, imitation and persuasion that geographers have found in their studies of welfare/workfare and poverty policies (Peck and Theodore 2001, 2010c; Theodore and Peck 2000), Business Improvement Districts (Cook 2008; Ward 2006, 2007, 2011a, 2011b), planning policies (Cook and Ward 2012b; Gonzalez 2011; McCann 2011a, 2012; Temenos and McCann 2012; Robinson, 2011) and public health strategies (Keil and Ali 2011; McCann 2008, 2011b). While typologies of actors are necessary for understanding how policies

circulate (see McCann 2008, 2011), geographers have expressed concern about overly-prescriptive models and definitions of what is, or is not, policy transfer. Perhaps stemming from their social constructivist orientation alluded to above, those working in the policy mobilities approach have sought to avoid allowing the models and typologies themselves to be reified and to become the *objects* of debate, rather than *facilitating* analyses of the social processes that constitute policy transfer.

Geographers' interest in the social production of scale and the politics of defining and connecting spatial scales has, as we suggested above, led to an engagement with policy transfer. Yet, the way that the traditional policy transfer literature conceptualizes scale has been one of its most frustrating tendencies for geographers. It has an overwhelming focus on national governments and, thus, the national scale. This limits our ability to see policy transfer and policy-making taking place at other scales. Dolowitz and Marsh's (1996, 2000) references to 'countries' and 'foreign models' underscore this limited view of who (and where) transfer agents are. In response to this critique, Dolowitz and Marsh (2012) have noted the work that they and others have done on international organizations and the EU, for example. They are right to make this point, but the tendency in the policy transfer tradition is to look at inter-*national* structures and organizations or only to acknowledge inter-local circulations when they are confined within single national contexts. It is important that we acknowledge that urban policy actors can act globally in their own right, meaning that policy regimes of various sorts are relationally inter-connected (McCann and Ward, 2011). If policy transfer literatures are to expand and thrive in new directions, geographers argue that they must rethink the basic scalar categories and the fundamental understandings of what scale is, and what scale does. The sites from, and to, which policies

are transferred should not be understood as discrete territories, arranged in a discrete hierarchy. Instead, a notion of scales as assembled relationally by particular interested actors, as unbounded and dynamic, but no less real or powerful, provides, as Allen and Cochrane (2007) have shown, a great deal of insight into politics, policy, and governance. To be clear, this is not an argument for somehow dreaming away the power of the national state. Certainly, the national state should be a focus of any research into policy mobilities, but neither the national state, nor inter-*national* relations, can be the sole contexts in which such research occurs, nor can the national scale be assumed, *a priori*, to be the ultimate reference point and context for analyses of policy transfer.

Clearly, one aspect of the new direction taken by geographers and others interested in circulating policies has been a change of nomenclature from policy 'transfer' to 'assemblages, mobilities, and mutations.' This change has been made for very specific reasons: 'transfer' seems to connote a very flat and straightforward process, even if this is not how it is understood by those who developed it and advanced its use. Indeed, Peck and Theodore (2001, p. 449) argue that 'transfer' entails an: "implicit literalism . . . which tends to suggest the importation of fully formed, off-the-shelf policies, when in fact the nature of this process is much more complex, selective, and multilateral." Of course, this literalist trap is not the fate of all policy transfer literature. Stone (1999), for example, highlights the importance of studying how policies *mutate* as they travel and geographers have been drawn to the sociological literature on *mobilities* because it seeks to unpack the multiplicities and socio-spatial complexities of movements (from transportation to migration) that have frequently been thought of in simple 'point a to point b' terms. Thus, the policy mobilities literature seeks to use qualitative and ethnographic research methods,

among others, to analyze not so much how policies are 'transferred' but how they mutate as they are moved (Peck 2011; Peck and Theodore 2010b, 2010c).

A fourth concern with the traditional policy transfer literature is its longstanding conceptualization of transfer agents as optimizing, rational actors. These are actors with solid, if not perfect, knowledge and clear priorities about what they are looking for when they 'scan' globally for policies to 'import.' While Dolowitz and Marsh (2012) argue that the literature has broadened from this core and, certainly, their own introduction of 'coercive' and 'voluntary' forms of transfer (Dolowitz and Marsh, 1996) enhances the literature, there remains, nonetheless, a shadow of this sort of thinking over the traditional policy transfer approach. We would want to emphasize that there is no pool of policies out there waiting to be selected on the basis of clear priorities, expertise, and 'perfect information'. Rather, geographers like Peck and Theodore (2012) have argued for the need to pay close attention to the conditioning fields and institutions, existing pathways and trajectories, which structure the conditions under which transfer agents operate and in which they make their (always structurally conditioned) choices.

## **Building on and beyond policy transfer**

Our argument so far has been in two parts. On the one hand, the practice of policy circulation has been an attractive object of study for geographers seeking to push forward certain debates within our own discipline and analyze the mobilization of policies as a crucially important aspect of the political-economic construction of neoliberal globalization. Yet, on the other hand, the policy transfer literature, while useful in many

ways, has been less than fully satisfactory in this endeavor. In this section, we turn from critique to a description of key elements of a research agenda on policy assemblages, mobilities, and mutations.

Those involved in this approach can, for the most part, be characterized as scholars whose roots are in some form of neo-Marxian political economy, but who, to a greater or lesser extent, take the insights of post-structuralism and post-colonialism seriously. The use of the notion of *assemblage* is a case in point. It has become central to some of the recent geographical work (Prince 2010; McCann and Ward 2011, McCann 2011c), while others are more skeptical. The concept emerges from the work of Deleuze and Guattari (1987). Rather than connote a static arrangement of parts, whether organized under some logic or collected randomly, assemblage indicates a perspective focused on the detailed qualitative and ethnographic study of the practice of assembling some form of coherence, such as a policy. From this perspective, assemblage refers to: “the *process* of arranging, organizing, fitting together ... [where] an assemblage is a whole of some sort that expresses some identity and claims a territory” (Wise 2005, 77; his emphasis; see Anderson and McFarlane 2011; McFarlane 2009, 2011). In other words, the process of assemblage – assembling a scale like the ‘local’ or assembling a policy, or a city, is fundamentally spatial. It is, as McFarlane (2009) makes clear also crucially about labor: the work of policy transfer agents and the institutions through which they operate.

Assemblage, as a concept, is spatial, not only in the territorial sense, but also in the closely related scalar sense. Policies, after all, are not only local constructions; neither are they entirely extra-local impositions on a locality. Rather, policies and governance practices are gatherings, or relational assemblages of elements and resources – fixed and

mobile pieces of expertise, regulation, institutional capacities, etc. – from close by and far away. They are assembled in particular ways and for particular interests and purposes. Thinking about policy as a constructed whole in this way avoids the tendency to assume that policies emerge in full-form from a specific place or that they circulate unchanged. Any critical analysis in geography or political science acknowledges this, yet entrepreneurial ‘policy boosters’ (McCann 2012) in local governments will often seek to tie their place to a specific policy innovation. This concept is helpful as a frame for policy studies because it emphasizes, as do critical analyses in political science, that policies are not internally coherent, stable ‘things’ but must be understood as social processes.

A second defining feature of this ‘post-transfer’ approach involves the notion of policy *mobilities* (Cook and Ward 2011; McCann 2008, 2011; Peck 2011). Clearly, the term has been used in this growing literature as a replacement for ‘transfer’ and, thus, to distinguish the two approaches through nomenclature. But, the purpose is not simply one of terminology. Rather, the use of ‘mobilities’ derives from an apparent, if perhaps unintentional, flatness in the term ‘transfer.’ The sociological literature on mobilities, on the other hand, highlights the social and spatial complexity of movements of all sorts. As the originators of the mobilities approach suggest, a focus on mobilities,

is a part of a broader theoretical project aimed at going beyond the imagery of ‘terrains’ as spatially fixed geographical containers for social processes, and calling into question scalar logics such as local/global as descriptors of regional extent ... (Hannam et al. 2006, p. 5; see also Sheller and Urry 2006a, 2006b)



Furthermore, mobilities scholars emphasize that mobility (as opposed to simple movement) is a complex, power-laden, process, rather than a straightforward a-to-b movement (McCann 2011). It is one that involves a wide range of practices and sites. It is about fluidity, mobilization and deterritorialization, but, necessarily also about ‘moorings,’ stabilities and territorializations.

This account, we would argue, opens up the range of possibilities for research and conceptualization. An account of policy mobilities must attend to a range of scale, sites, interests, actors and relations within and beyond the state if it is to fully analyze the social process of globalized policy-making. This orientation overcomes the reification and “methodological nationalism” that Benson and Jordon (2011, p.373) identify as a characteristic of some orthodox policy transfer research. Instead, it points to the importance of policy-making as an emergent socio-spatial process. In this regard, a mobilities orientation allows us to think carefully about *embodied* practice and agency across “translocal fields of power” (Ong 1999, p. 159). The global circulation of policies and expertise are shaped by, and also shape, social connections made by various policy actors. These connections, relationships and bonds are sometimes made through face-to-face encounters, such as meetings, conferences, site visits, etc. (Cook and Ward 2012, McCann 2011a). Yet, perhaps more often, they are made at a distance, through email, electronic or hard-copy documents about policies in other places, or using other online resources. These are teaching and learning activities that may seem mundane, but which many of those working in this literature – often, again, influenced by post-structuralist arguments such as Foucault’s conceptualization of governmentality – nonetheless, see as crucial to a full understanding of governance and policy-making (e.g., McCann 2008; McFarlane 2009,

2012; Temenos and McCann 2012). While these objects of study often encourage an analytical attention to individuals or small groups of people as policy mobilizers (Larner and Laurie 2010), they are, nevertheless, also acknowledged to be conditioned by wider ideological and institutional contexts (Theodore and Peck 2012). The use of the term mobilities, rather than transfer, is, then, intended to highlight the multiple and complex nature of policy-making in and beyond the (national) state.

Linked to the concepts of assemblage and mobility is that of *mutation*. This has two related connotations. On the one hand, the places, institutions, and communities through which policies pass are clearly changed as those policies move. For Peck and Theodore (2010a, p. 170): “mobile policies are not simply travelling across a landscape – they are remaking this landscape, and they are contributing to the interpenetration of distant policymaking sites.” On the other hand, and perhaps more crucially in terms of the specific understanding of policy mobility, policies are not only remolded when they are adopted in a new place, they are also reshaped in, and through, the process of mobilization itself. The mobilization of policy often involves interpretation and reinterpretation by various actors along the way. Policy consultants, for example, make a business out of abstracting certain elements, or ‘lessons’, from specific policy contexts, molding them into a persuasive story and then remolding that story to fit the needs and aspirations of their clients elsewhere. This representational politics means that the spaces and times of travel are not ‘dead’ or unimportant but should be taken seriously as playing a role in shaping policy knowledge (McCann 2011a).

In our discussion above, we indicate that those working on the policy mobilities approach are, in part, interested in what might be termed, ‘small p’ politics and ‘small p’

polymaking – practices that might be at first regarded as mundane and less important than larger institutionalized processes. This attention to the (more than) mundane has methodological consequences which mark a fourth characteristic of this approach.

Drawing on longstanding traditions in anthropology and sociology (McCann and Ward 2012), this methodological approach is largely qualitative and ethnographic. The sociological notions of ‘global ethnography’ and ‘extended cases’ that encourage deep studies of particular social processes and sites while, at the same time, accounting for relations among sites and scales (Burawoy et al 2000), has been influential in this approach. Specifically, research into policy mobilities is framed by a commitment to *following* and an attention to *situations*. For anthropologist George Marcus (1995), ‘following’ is a research method for analyzing numerous objects of study. People can be followed in their daily lives, of course, but for Marcus things, metaphors, stories and conflicts as mobile objects of research. In terms of the study of policy-making, it is one thing to ethnographically ‘shadow’ policy-makers in their daily (largely local) work lives, but it is also necessary to follow them as they engage beyond their locality, connecting and remolding scales of policy-making. Therefore, there is an imperative to reflect on how researchers might best move *with*, or *after*, transfer agents and other policy actors as they make, teach, learn, modify and circulate policies through their daily work practices. Engaging in what Shore and Wright (1997, p. 14) term “studying through”, geographers and others have engaged in tracing ways in which power creates webs and relations between actors, institutions and discourses across time and space, and “following the source of a policy – its discourses, prescriptions, and programs – through to those affected by the policy” (Wedel et al 2005, p. 40). Following Marcus’ (1995) broad definition of

mobile objects that can be studied through following, we would argue that not only can policies and policy actors be followed, but that places can also be followed in order to understand the representational politics involved in policy mobilization. There are numerous ways in which places, in all their complexity, are reduced to a particularly one-dimensional 'model' that is then moved by policy actors.

As geographers, we are interested in both mobilizations among and within places. Therefore, 'following' is coupled with the study of *situations* in the policy mobilities approach. Traditionally, geographers distinguish between sites, defined by their internal characteristics, and situations, defined by their relations to wider contexts. Therefore, from this perspective, the situations of policy-making and mobilization are not only associated with the local places of everyday (work) life, such as government offices. Rather, they are also associated with places outside of policy actors' own 'home' locations, including ones that are fleeting or mobile, such as conferences, seminars, workshops, guest lectures, fact-finding field trips, site visits, walking tours and informal dinners. However, these situations are not only socio-spatial and global-relational. They are also fundamentally political because they are places where persuasion and negotiation occur. They are situations in which formal and institutional decision-making processes occur, for example, and they are locations for inter-personal persuasive politics. This politics is always referential, we would argue: it always involved stories and evidence of, and about, 'elsewhere'. In understanding situations this way we argue for opening up what constitutes 'the field' or the object of study in the analysis of policy transfer/mobilities (McCann and Ward 2012). In the penultimate section of this paper we turn to the Business Improvement District example.

## **Assembling and constructing a ‘model’: Business Improvement Districts**

A Business Improvement District (BID) is a public-private partnership in which property and business owners in a defined geographical area vote to make a collective contribution to the governance of their commercial district. The first Business Improvement Area (BIA) is generally understood to have been established in 1970 in Toronto, Canada, although some have argued this point of ‘origin’ was pre-dated by the 1967 Business Improvement Districts Laws in Pennsylvania (Morçöl and Patrick, 2008). The policy has been introduced – and undergone a series of name/acronym changes on its travels – into such diverse settings as Cape Town, South Africa, Hamburg, Germany, Kruševac, Serbia, Liverpool, UK and Madison, USA (Hoyt 2006; Ward 2006, 2007). The emergence of Business Improvement Districts in these geographically distant locations, as well as in many others, is not the result of one ‘transfer’ from a-to-b, followed by another transfer from b-to-c. Neither is it the outcome of a series of transfers from a-to-b, then a-to-c, then a-to-d and so on. Rather, where the BID policy has been introduced is the consequence of a less additive and linear set of movements, where there are multiple ‘origins’ and where what emerges in one location is a combination of various aspects, elements and experiences assembled from one or more elsewhere. For each location – such as a city like Tokyo – some of these constitution parts stem from without, sometimes thousands of miles away, other times from close to home, while others stem from within, from past methods of economic development from within the location. In the example of the introduction of Business Improvement Districts in the UK, for example, to understand the form the policy took it is

important to appreciate their institutional predecessors, Town Centre Management Partnership (TCMP) policy.

There have been attempts to understand the processes through which the Business Improvement Districts policy has been ‘transferred’ from one country to another and from one city to another using a traditional policy transfer framework (see for example Morçöl et al 2008). This has generated a series of insights in relation to issues, such as the accountable, democratic and effective nature of the policy. In this section we take a slightly different approach. We focus on three aspects – those of assemblage, mobilities and mutations – in providing an account of how and with what consequences the BID policy has travelled. We begin by emphasizing the work that has been done by a range of different types of actors in assembling the BID policy and rendering it potentially mobile. Given how many cities and countries now have Business Improvement Districts there are a number of examples we use. Here, we focus on the movement of the policy from the US to the UK over the last decade.

“Origins are not what they seem”, according to Roy (2011, p. 310). In her concluding chapter to *Worlding Cities: Asian Experiments and the Art of Being Global* she challenges notions of originality and borrowing in the history of urban planning. What she argues for is an awareness of the complicated histories of what are often understood as ‘origins’. In the case of the Business Improvement District (BID) policy an awareness and sensitivity to its origins is important. Why? Well because claims over its New York City origins have facilitated the kind of work that has been done by actors, such as analysts, architects, consultants, engineers and planners, in rendering the policy mobile and malleable and in creating receptive audiences for it in countries and cities around the

world. For, during this period, the experiences of a small number of Business Improvement Districts in midtown Manhattan, New York became seen as an important element in the strategy for turning around the city's economy which had been struggling through the 1970s and 1980s.

Prior to 1981, commercial areas in US cities that wanted to levy additional taxes (or 'assessments') had to receive State legislative approval to form a Special Assessment District (SAD). Over the course of the decade legislation was enacted in a number of US states. This allowed cities within them to establish Business Improvement Districts. In 1981, the New York State Legislature was one of the first to grant its cities, including New York, the power to establish Business Improvement Districts. The following year, New York City Council passed two Local Laws – No. 2 in January 1982 and No. 78 in November 1982 – that meant new legislation was not needed each time a BID application was submitted by a commercial area in one of the five boroughs. These BID laws did not emerge out of nowhere. They drew upon existing approaches embodied in New York City SAD legislation and from aspects of BID policy in other US cities. Subsequently, the number of Business Improvement Districts in the city grew and by the end of the 1990s there were almost 50, the majority on Manhattan. As of 2012 there are sixty seven Business Improvement Districts in the five boroughs.

Accompanying the expansion of the BID policy in New York there were a series of claims by a range of actors over the role it was playing in the economic revival of the city. The think tank, the Manhattan Institute, which provided some intellectual support to the then Mayor Rudy Giuliani's attempts to 'civilize' New York City, was a firm supporter of Business Improvement Districts. It was even claimed that the BID policy embodied a more

fundamental shift in how urban policy should be framed. As MacDonald (2000, p.389) put it: “[T]he great advantage of BIDs lies in their private characteristics. Unlike government, BIDs possess finite goals, which they can accomplish free of civil service rules and bureaucratic procedures.” Business Improvement Districts were represented as constituting a new and effective method for revalorizing the city. The man in charge of some of the most high-profile mid-town Manhattan Business Improvement Districts - Dan Biederman – was dubbed ‘the major of midtown’ by the local media. According to the *New York Post* (1998, p. 3) “Biederman and Giuliani [were] on the same page, ideologically, and as a matter of urban philosophy”, while the *New York Times* (1998, p. 4), claimed that “[w]hat Biederman did on a small scale, Rudy Giuliani did on a large scale.” The link was clear. Manhattan and New York City more generally, was experiencing economic growth, at least in part due to Business Improvement Districts.

In the UK various politicians and policymakers had become aware of the economic turn-around being experienced by New York City. There were a number of ministerial visits during the 1990s to rationale of which was open-ended. Ministers simply wanted to learn about US cities. Moreover, in the mid-1990s a report has been written for the City of London, which explored the potential for the introduction of Business Improvement Districts into the UK (Travers and Weimar, 1996). This was well-received and economic and political stakeholders in UK city centers/downtowns began to take the policy seriously.

The Association of Town Centre Management (ATCM) (the trade association for the UK’s existing Town Centre Management Partnerships) approached the International Downtown Association. Various emails and phone calls were exchanged and the ATCM began to make a case for the introduction of Business Improvement Districts. This



involved questioning the limits of the existing policy, while extolling the virtues of Business Improvement Districts. Various elements were drawn together; assembled. Consultation documents were produced and websites established. Evidence from various cases in the US was marshaled into a form accessible to the UK policy-making community. This assembling work – done by academics, planners, redevelopment consultants, trade association officers and others – sought to construct something that could be introduced into the UK out of an altogether more complicated, messy and unstable set of circumstances in New York City. What was established was an informational infrastructure of sorts, consisting of a range of ‘things’ – benchmarks, commentaries, reports, photographs etc. – that was both the outcome of the linkages amongst UK and the US actors and also served to reinforce them.

Together with the assemblage activities, a range of mobilizing practices was evident. Transfer agents, such as Dan Biederman and other US speakers, were invited to the UK to share their experiences. Mike O’Connor, Senior Vice-President of Operations of the Alliance for Downtown in New York visited the Central London Partnership, the authority overseeing The Circle Initiative, one of the first Business Improvement Districts established in the UK. Their physical presence lent weight to the argument that some in the UK were making regarding the introduction of Business Improvement Districts. These performances at conferences, seminars and workshops of various sorts served both to educate and indoctrinate. All sorts of spaces were created in and through which comparison and learning could occur. This was not just about planners and redevelopment consultants. The Institute of Revenues Rating and Valuation (IRRV) and the Institute of Public Finance (IPF), the commercial arm of the Chartered Institute of Public Finance and

Accountancy (CIPFA), both ran events and established networks to educate their members about the financial implications of Business Improvement Districts in the UK. This was politics with a small p. The US BID policy underwent a process of translation. The UK version that was constructed through these activities was the outcome of relations *between* the UK and the US. When it came to announcing the establishment of Business Improvement Districts no one was left in any doubt of the UK government view about the policy's origins. The lead Department, the Office for the Deputy Prime Minister (ODPM), proclaimed Business Improvement Districts as "New York-style schemes" (ODPM 2003, p. 1), while Minister for Finance and Public Services, Andy Kerr, argued that: "you only have to look at Times Square in New York to see the massive improvement ... [Business Improvement Districts] ... can make to the look and feel of the area' (quoted in *The Guardian* 23 September 2003, p. np).

Despite the multiple citations and references to New York City, the BID policy that was introduced into the UK was not the same as that which it was claimed had achieved so much in New York City. Those in New York's Business Improvement Districts who met visiting ministers and officials tailored their accounts to both what they thought their audience wanted to hear or on the basis of what they knew about economic development in the UK. . Those returning from various trips and tours – examples of policy tourism – internalized and reflected on what they heard and saw. Some things got forgotten, other things became more important over time and the further they were away – quite literally – from where they had heard it. Through the processes of comparison, learning and referencing they began to translate something that 'worked' in New York into something that might 'work' in the UK.

This disjuncture between the city of New York and the UK reflects the differently constituted institutional structures in the US and the UK. The latter's centralized governmental system meant that, in order to create the 'local' conditions where private-led Business Improvement Districts might be established, the UK government had to act. This it did by establishing a competition. Localities bid for the right to establish one of the first Business Improvement Districts in the UK. Through this piloting mechanism the UK government played a strong role in setting the conditions and the context behind the introduction of the BID policy. This is in sharp contrast to the ways in which the BID policy in New York was represented. The version assembled for introduction into the UK not only drew upon elements from elsewhere, but also upon elements from the existing mechanisms – Town Centre Management Partnerships (TCMP) – for overseeing city center/downtown economic development. So, a hybrid in New York City – a bit Canadian, a bit from other US states, a bit reflective of local specificities – became a new type of policy, as it was assembled and reassembled on its travels: a hybrid of hybrids.

## **Conclusion**

[T]he locus of policy transfer [research] has shifted away from its original government-centric emphasis to encompass multiple sites and actors (Benson and Jordan 2011, p. 372)

Our recent edited collection, *Mobile urbanism* (McCann and Ward, 2011), is a first book-length attempt to gather a number of authors who have influenced, who are working on, or

who have been informed by, the policy mobilities ‘conversation.’ The book has an urban focus – its subtitle is ‘Cities and policies in the global age’ – yet even in that specific context, the chapters reveal a great diversity of topics. Authors address the mobile and relational aspects of policy-making in government services, urban planning, ‘creative city’ strategies, Business Improvement Districts, drug policy, attempts to mitigate the effects of emerging infectious diseases on urban populations and the construction and management of airports. These disparate studies are tied together by a broadly geographical concern for tracing how, and where, policy models and policy expertise move, studying how these models mutate as they move, and examining how they become part of new policy assemblages through a combination of everyday local practice and global connection. The range of objects of analysis and the various ways in which the authors operationalize their broadly constructionist and relational approach underscores Benson and Jordan’s point: policy transfer research is not what it once was. It is also not *where* it once was; not in terms of its disciplinary home or its institutional focus, or its location at certain scales.

In this paper, we have provided a brief account of the origins and characteristics of the policy assemblages, mobilities, and mutations approach to policy transfer, as an example of one of the new directions to which Benson and Jordan and the editors of this special issue point. Our argument is that proliferation and spread of studies of policy transfer, broadly defined, is both an indication of a growth in the circulation of policies and also a sign of the growing interest in policy transfer among scholars outside of political science. While transfer activities are by no means new, there has been a qualitative change in their character and speed in recent decades. This change is characterized by growing numbers of consultants, think-tanks and others involved in circulating or marketing

potential policy products globally. Policy actors, themselves, seem to have adopted “[a]n extrospective, reflexive, and aggressive posture” (Peck and Tickell 2002, p. 47), as competition for investment and resources makes them feel compelled to look to shape new innovative – and quickly and cheaply workable – policy ‘solutions’ by assembling models and expertise from elsewhere.

Nonetheless, there is no doubt that the proliferation of work on policy transfer and the growth of approaches such as the one we have described is indeed the result of a still growing interest in the policy-making in global-relational context. This growth reflects the impetus of debates in geography and urban studies, a discontent with the limits of the traditional policy transfer approach in political science and an excitement about the possibilities of an ongoing conversation involving multiple disciplines. If these possibilities are to be brought to fruition, there will need to be an acceptance, on all sides, of the range of valid ways in which policy transfer can be defined and conceptualized and of the various methods through which it can be usefully studied. We hope then, that the new directions in policy transfer research can be multi-perspectival and multi-disciplinary ones.

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