Policy assemblages, mobilities and mutations: Toward a multidisciplinary conversation.

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#### Introduction

In their welcome discussion of the policy transfer literature, "What Have We Learned from Policy Transfer Research?," Benson and Jordan (2011, p.368) ask if "the heat has started to go out of the debate" on policy transfer and if "academics more or less know what should be known" about the concept/phenomenon? As geographers who have, for a number of years, engaged in discussions of policy assemblages, mobilities, and mutations with colleagues in our field as well as with anthropologist, planners and sociologists, we argue that there is indeed heat left in the debate. There is a lot left to understand about how, why, where, and with what consequences policies circulate globally. Therefore, in response to Benson and Jordan, we would like to discuss how the concept of policy transfer has been, and continues to be, reinterpreted and reapplied by scholars in disciplines outside of political science. Working out of a diverse set of theoretical traditions, most notably neo-Marxist political economy, post-structuralism, and post-colonialism, these scholars have grappled with precisely the sort of conceptual, methodological, and empirical issues/questions that Benson and Jordan point to as the future foci of policy transfer research (see for example, Peck and

Theodore, 2010a; McCann and Ward, 2011 for collections of some of this work). Unfortunately, this significant and growing literature is largely absent from Benson and Jordan's review and, when it does appear, it is engaged with only minimally (e.g., passing references to Russell Prince's (2010) work).

In this commentary we outline "the 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 discussing the theoretical orientations, methodological strategies, and empirical sites of the policy assemblages, mobilities, and mutations approach, we take up Benson and Jordan's (2011, p. 368) question about the implications of the broadening application of the policy transfer concept for its analytical value. Their key point is "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). We argue that while the notion of policy *transfer*, narrowly defined, has lost a significant amount of intellectual currency outside of political science, the emergence of multi-disciplinary perspectives on how, why, where, and with what effects policies are mobilized, circulated, learned, reformulated, and reassembled highlights a wealth of opportunities for further conceptualization and empirical investigation.

By 'talking back' to political science in this way, we will detail how the policy assemblages, mobilities, and mutations approach is both linked to and critical of the policy transfer literature. We will discuss how it has departed significantly from the original conceptualization (a move signaled by the adoption of a new nomenclature) and how it has expanded its empirical foci and methodology even as its contours are still being refined and debated. Through this intervention, we hope to

encourage political scientists to look beyond the limits of their own field and join more fully in an ongoing conversation involving multiple disciplines.

# From policy transfer ...

Research on policy transfer has always been about the intersections of society, politics/governance, and space. It has been about the character and organization of territories and about the interconnections, differences, and similarities among territories, such as the US and the UK. As Benson and Jordan demonstrate, there is now a voluminous, almost exclusively political science, literature that seeks to model or theorize how transfer processes operate, create typologies of the actors and institutions involved in transfer, identify the power relations through which adoption occurs, and specify the conditions and mechanisms under which certain policy transfers succeed or fail. This literature, which is internally differentiated and heterogeneous in some respects, has generated a series of useful insights. Yet, critiques of four of its key premises and central foci have motivated much of the more heterodox and multi-disciplinary policy assemblages, mobilities, and mutations work done *outside* of political science – work that is given short shrift by Benson and Jordan.

The first critique of policy transfer research addresses an issue that Benson and Jordan themselves document: it expends considerable effort on identifying and categorizing those involved in the transferring of policy. While the empirical description of transfer agents is crucial to the study of policy-making, we suggest that the focus on *agents* often comes at the expense of an attention to *agency*. The political science literature tends to downplay the fundamentally social – practical, interpersonal, institutionally-embedded, yet fluid and processual – character of policy-making in

general and the social practices of comparison, education, emulation, imitation, and persuasion that characterize transfer of policies addressing everything from welfare/workfare and poverty (Peck and Theodore, 2001, 2010c; Theodore and Peck, 2000;) to Business Improvement Districts (Cook, 2008; Ward, 2006, 2007, 2011a, 2011b), to municipal governance (Clarke, 2012; Massey, 2011), to planning (Cook and Ward, 2012b; Gonzalez, 2011; McCann, 2011a, 2012; Temenos and McCann, 2012; Robinson, 2011), to public health (Keil and Ali, 2011; McCann, 2008, 2011b). A focus on typologies of actors, and on overly-prescriptive models and definitions of what is or is not policy transfer allows the models and typologies themselves to be reified, becoming the *objects* of debate rather than *facilitating* analyses of the social processes that constitute policy transfer.

A second critique of the orthodox approach to policy transfer research addresses its tendency to focus on the national scale. This limitation is clear in Dolowitz and Marsh's (1996, 2000) references to 'countries' and 'foreign models', which belie a particular conceptualization of the institutional geography of policy transfer – one which clides the various sites and scales, including the local or urban, in and through which policies are produced. While there is some acknowledgement that inter-local transfers and learning can happen within one national system (Dolowitz and Marsh, 1996; Stone, 1999), the traditional literature retains a problematic separation between the domestic and the international which does not acknowledge that urban policy actors can act globally in their own right, meaning that policy regimes of various sorts are relationally interconnected (McCann and Ward, 2011). This inter-scalar, relational mapping of policy transfer demands and rewards a fundamental rethinking of the basic categories and tenets that underpin our understanding of policy transfer. Our argument is that the sites from and to which policies is transferred need to be understood not as discrete territories but, rather, as unbounded, dynamic, relational assemblages (Allen and Cochrane, 2007). As a corollary, we must avoid the temptation to understand policy transfer through a straightforward import-export metaphor. It is not that simple.

Indeed, a third concern with the orthodox literature addresses precisely how the notion of 'transfer' is understood. As Peck and Theodore (2001, p. 449) argue, the term 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." While not all policy transfer literature falls entirely into this literalist trap – Stone (1999, p. 57) notes, for example, that "the process of modification in transfer requires closer investigation" – it is important to further detail and conceptualize how policies are not merely "transferred over space . . . [but rather] ... their form and their effects are transformed by these journeys, which also serve continuously to remake relational connections across an intensely variegated and socio-institutional landscape" (Peck 2011, p. 793, original emphasis; see also Peck & Theodore 2010b, 2010c).

Fourth, much of the policy transfer research literature that Benson and Jordan review has at its core a conceptualization of transfer agents as optimizing, rational actors, who know what they are after and scan 'the market' for possible solutions, making decisions and trade-offs over which policy products to adopt, albeit on the basis of imperfect knowledge. The 'coercive' and 'voluntary' refinement introduced by Dolowtiz and Marsh (1996) marked an improvement from its theoretical predecessors. Only just, however. There is no cloud of free-floating policies hovering in the ether, waiting to be selected on the basis of 'perfect information'. Rather, there are conditioning fields and institutions, existing pathways and trajectories, which structure the conditions under, and the economies within, which transfer agents, operate (Theodore and Peck, 2012).

## ... to policy assemblages, mobilities, and mutations

So, while the orthodox policy transfer literature is certainly about global relations and territories, it does not entirely engage with the full range of social, spatial, and even political elements of policy mobilization. In the last decade or so, its gaps have been populated by a series of "rolling conversations rather than a coherent paradigm" (Peck 2011, p. 774). The approach that has emerged out of these discussions has, at its theoretical core, a conceptualization of policy-making as a global-relational, social and spatial process which interconnects and constitutes actors, institutions, and territories (McCann, 2011; McCann and Ward, 2010, 2011).

There are four commonalities in this approach, the first of which is around policy assemblages (Prince, 2010; McCann, 2011c). The concept derives from Deleuze and Guattari's (1987) work and speaks not to the static arrangement of a set of parts, whether organized under some logic or collected randomly, but 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). Policies and the territories they govern are not entirely local constructions but neither are they entirely extra-local impositions. They are assemblages of parts of the near and far, of fixed and mobile pieces of expertise, regulation, institutional capacities, etc. that are brought together in particular ways and for particular interests and purposes. For us, thinking about policy in this way – as a constructed whole – upsets the often implicit assumption that policies emerge fully formed in one particular place and then sometimes move, whole and unchanged, across space. They do not. It also troubles the idea that policies are internally coherent, stable 'things.' They are not. An assemblage is always *in the* 

process of coming together and being territorialized just as it is always also potentially pulling apart and being deterritorialized.

This argument leads to the second defining feature of this multi-disciplinary, or perhaps 'post-transfer,' approach which involves the notion of policy mobilities (Cook and Ward, 2011; McCann, 2008, 2011; Peck, 2011). It is through this emphasis on mobility, as framed by the recent sociological and geographical mobilities literatures, that we understand mobility as a complex and power-laden process, rather than a straightforward A-to-B movement (McCann, 2011). This stance overcomes the reification and "methodological nationalism" that Benson and Jordon (2011, p.373) themselves note as a feature of the most orthodox policy transfer research. We argue for an understanding of policy-making as a multiply scaled, relational, and emergent social process. Furthermore, the use of the term mobilities provides an opportunity to think about the transfer, translation, or transformation of policy models and ideas in terms of the embodied practices and agency across what Ong (1999, p. 159) calls "translocal fields of power." Global circuits of policy knowledge shape and are shaped by social connections made by actors sometimes at a distance – over email or by reading documents describing policies in other places, or by watching YouTube videos. These teaching and learning activities have been documented in various contexts (e.g., McFarlane, 2009, 2012; Temenos and McCann, 2012) and, while they often encourage an analytical attention to individuals or small groups of people as policy mobilizers (Larner and Laurie, 2010), they are also argued to be conditioned by wider ideological and institutional contexts (Theodore and Peck, 2012). Furthermore, while these mobilizations are often initiated and experienced at a distance, they also depend on the intermittent co-presence of those actors in specific places like conferences, site visits, etc. (Cook and Ward, 2012, McCann, 2011a).

The third aspect we want to emphasize is mutation: policy is not only remolded when it is adopted in a new setting, but the mobilizing of policy, as a socio-spatial, power-laden process, often

involves change along the way, as policies are interpreted and reinterpreted by various actors. Since policies morph and mutate as they travel, 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) and 'policy tourism' should be studied more than it has been as a crucial element of policymaking (Cook and Ward, 2011; Gonzalez, 2011; Ward, 2011a). Furthermore, the places, institutions, and communities through which policies pass are also changed as policies move. As Peck and Theodore (2010a, p. 170) put it, "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."

A fourth feature of the policy assemblages, mobilities, and mutations approach is a methodological one, drawing on longstanding traditions in anthropology and sociology (McCann and Ward, 2012). One element of it involves the *following*, of people, policies, and even places (Marcus, 1995). An important consequence of the increased attention to the movement and mutation of policies is the imperative to reflect on how researchers might best move *with* or *after* transfer agents and other policy actors that produce, circulate, mediate, modify, and consume policies through their daily work practices. Engaging in what Shore and Wright (1997: 14) term "studying through", we engage 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: 40). As well as following policy actors and policies, we can also follow places. Here we are not talking of literal movement but the figurative uprooting and making-mobile of certain places as referential components of particular models, e.g., the 'Barcelona model' of urban regeneration, or the 'Vancouverism' model of urban design. 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. The representational or discursive politics involved in this process is crucial to the circulation of policies, we suggest.

Another methodological element involves the studying of *situations*. Geographers have traditionally distinguished between sites, defined by their internal characteristics, from situations, defined by their relations to their wider contexts. We think of the situations of policy-making, policy learning, and policy transfer as not only associated with local places, like government offices, but also 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, informal dinners, among many others. Furthermore, these policy-making situations are political in the sense that they are instances of persuasion and negotiation, ranging from the formal and institutional to the inter-personal persuasive politics through which individual actors conduct themselves and seek to shape the conduct of others. Yet, the relational concept of 'situation' indicates that ethnographic research into these seemingly banal practices and politics of policy mobilization does not reflect a blinkered localism. Indeed, these anthropological and geographical approaches dovetail well with 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). In the study of policy assemblages, mobilities, and mutations, the analysis of these interrelations and connections involves tracing the movements of policies, and policy knowledge from place to place, studying how they change as they move, and analyzing how they become part of new policy assemblages in a way that is both close to everyday practice while also attendant to the globalness of policy circulation. In doing this, we are arguing for an opening up of what constitutes 'the field' (McCann and Ward, 2012).

#### Conclusion

In their review, Benson and Jordan (2011, p. 372) argue that what "all this research activity [around policy transfer shows is that the locus of policy transfer activity has shifted away from its original government-centric emphasis to encompass multiple sites and actors." We would certainly agree. Moreover, they wonder if the proliferation of policy transfer research "is a 'real' empirical finding," showing a real multiplication of transfer activities, or whether it is "simply a reflection of the arrival of more scholars into the field armed with different research foci and methodological approaches" (ibid., p.372). Our argument is that it is not one or the other, but both. While there is clearly a long history and complex geography to transfer activities, recent decades have seen a qualitative change in their speed and industrial composition, characterized by a growth in consultants, think-tanks and others involved in marketing potential policy products globally. On the demand side, a growing number of policy actors seem to have adopted "[a]n extrospective, reflexive, and aggressive posture" (Peck and Tickell 2002, p. 47), as they have increasingly been pitched into competition with one another and are, therefore, compelled to look to shape new innovative – and quickly and cheaply workable - 'solutions' to local programs by assembling the packaged models combinations suited for their particular places. So, there is more to study and conceptualize. And yet, it is also true, as we have suggested above, that the proliferation of work on policy transfer (broadly defined) is also the result of the recent gathering of a new (read: largely non-political science) group of researchers around the orthodox notion of policy transfer and the related notions of assemblages, mobilities, and mutations. This growth in the number of those interested in studying how policies are mobilized reflects, as we have suggested, both a discontent with the limits of the orthodox approach and an excitement about the possibilities of a more wide-ranging conversation involving multiple disciplines about the topic. The locus of policy transfer research has shifted, as Benson and Jordon

suggest, but it has relocated to coordinates further than those they seem to have imagined.

The nascent policy assemblages, mobilities, and mutations approach we have briefly described differs epistemologically and ontologically from the orthodox accounts reviewed by Benson and Jordan. That does not mean there are no points of connection and overlap, however. There are certainly numerous opportunities of further research and conversation. We invite political scientists to be part of this multidisciplinary research agenda.

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