

# What Have We Learned from Policy Transfer Research? Dolowitz and Marsh Revisited

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Over the last decade, policy transfer has emerged as an important concept within public policy analysis, guiding both theoretical and empirical research spanning many venues and issue areas. Using Dolowitz and Marsh's 1996 stocktake as its starting point, this article reviews what has been learned by whom and for what purpose. It finds that the literature has evolved from its rather narrow, state-centred roots to cover many more actors and venues. While policy transfer still represents a niche topic for some researchers, an increasing number have successfully assimilated it into wider debates on topics such as globalisation, Europeanisation and policy innovation. This article assesses the concept's position in the overall 'tool-kit' of policy analysis, examines some possible future directions and reflects on their associated risks and opportunities.

**Keywords:** policy transfer; lesson drawing; policy innovation; policy diffusion; policy analysis

## The Birth of a Concept

Policy transfer and its analogous concept lesson drawing are now common currency within political studies and public policy analysis. Although definitions vary, policy transfer is widely understood as 'a process by which knowledge of policies, administrative arrangements, institutions and ideas in one political system (past or present)' is used in the development of similar features in another (Dolowitz, 2000, p. 3). Research into policy transfer underwent an exponential growth between the late 1990s and mid-2000s, but is now arguably in a more mature phase. So instead of a discrete area of research, nowadays policy transfer is commonly employed in the analysis of broader phenomena such as Europeanisation, globalisation and policy innovation. For example, within the Europeanisation literature, it is cited as one way to explain policy convergence (Holzinger and Knill, 2005) alongside globalisation (Evans, 2009; Stone, 2004; 2010) and actions by non-state actors. Similarly, policy transfer can both be caused by and be an outcome of policy innovation activities (Jordan *et al.*, 2012).

Policy transfer research has its roots in comparative policy analysis in the US (Bulmer *et al.*, 2007; Dolowitz and Marsh, 1996). Authors first became interested in the diffusion of policy innovations within and between particular federal states and cities (Walker, 1969). However, this approach was itself criticised for ignoring the multiplicity of transfer processes associated with diffusion activities (Dolowitz and Marsh, 1996). Out of this critique a new approach was born. Labelled 'lesson drawing', its focus was on the voluntary act of transfer by rational actors working in specific political contexts (Rose,

1991). However, lesson drawing research was itself criticised for its 'implicit assumptions' that the drawing process was both rational and voluntary (Bulmer *et al.*, 2007, p. 13). In an attempt to transcend these arguments, David Dolowitz and David Marsh (1996, p. 344) coined a new term, 'policy transfer', to encompass both 'voluntary' and 'coercive' forms of practice, noting that the latter can occur when 'one government or supra-national institution [is] pushing, or even forcing another' to adopt a set of policy innovations.

Since then, policy transfer has been extensively employed as a concept to classify and explain a multitude of processes occurring both within and between different political contexts. While undoubtedly related to other concepts such as policy diffusion, lesson drawing and policy innovation, it is fair to say that policy transfer now represents a distinct research focus in its own right (Marsh and Sharman, 2009). Three major approaches to studying transfer are now apparent. First, research has emerged that aims at developing theories of policy transfer. While Richard Rose (2005) provided significant additional analytical weight to his earlier concept of lesson drawing, theoretical arguments on policy transfer were subsequently developed by others (for example, Bulmer *et al.*, 2007).

Second, researchers have applied these theoretical arguments to ever more empirical venues. One outcome has – to borrow a popular term used in this literature – been an expansive diffusion of policy transfer research from its original, rather state-centric core to encompass other actors and venues. It has for example been used to study, *inter alia*: social and welfare policy (Dolowitz *et al.*, 2000; Pierson, 2003); crime (Jones and Newburn, 2006); public education (Bache and Taylor, 2003); development assistance (Stone, 2004); spatial and/or urban planning (De Jong and Edelenbos, 2007; Dolowitz and Medearis, 2009); utilities regulation (Bulmer *et al.*, 2007; Padgett, 2003); environmental issues (Betsill and Bulkeley, 2004; Holzinger and Knill, 2008; Jordan *et al.*, 2003; Smith, 2004); and even the creative industries (Prince, 2010). These cases encompass a multiplicity of empirical contexts including the UK and the US (for example, Dolowitz, 2003; Jones and Newburn, 2006), as well as Europe (Bulmer *et al.*, 2007), Australasia (Pierson, 2003; Prince, 2010) and Asia (Kwon, 2009). Crucially, this research has shown that transfer involves many actors including, *inter alia*, supranational organisations such as the EU (Bulmer *et al.*, 2007), pressure groups, and transnational advocacy groups (Stone, 2004; 2010).

Third, other research has adopted a more normative stance, that is, by actively promoting policy transfer as a means to guide and even stimulate policy innovation. Learning from other political contexts has for example been touted as a means to address continuing policy failures that do not respond to indigenous policy innovations (see, for example, Rose, 2005).

So what has been learned from all this academic activity? The last comprehensive review of the policy transfer literature, conducted by Dolowitz and Marsh in 1996, is now over fifteen years old. It helped to establish policy transfer as a specific research focus at a point when work was still rather disparate. Thereafter its usage continued to expand with the authors themselves returning to the subject four years later (Dolowitz and Marsh, 2000). This expansion is reflected in the total number of articles produced. Google Scholar

reveals that 'policy transfer' and 'lesson drawing' featured in the title or abstract of a dozen articles published before 1996, twenty between 1996 and 2000 and well over thirty between 2001 and 2005. After 2005, the rate of expansion has declined, with just over twenty published in the period to 2010. Much of this activity has occurred within UK-based political science journals, although the last decade has witnessed a spillover into more internationally focused publications and non-politics subject areas.

So does this pattern imply that the heat has started to go out of the debate and that academics more or less know what should be known about policy transfer? Or is the concept now being successfully reinterpreted and reapplied in different ways to inform our understanding of related contexts and processes? If so, what might this ultimately imply for the analytical value of the concept itself? One potential outcome which was flagged in the pages of this journal (James and Lodge, 2003) may have been a form of conceptual overstretching (Sartori, 1970).

In the remainder of this short review article we seek to address these questions in three ways. First, we briefly describe the approach originally adopted by Dolowitz and Marsh. Second, we employ their focusing questions to interpret subsequent research. Finally, we reflect on the current state of policy transfer research and identify three potential future directions.

### **Looking Back: So Who Learned What and from Whom?**

The article by Dolowitz and Marsh (1996) can be regarded as a landmark in the development of the concept. The authors successfully established a widely cited definition of transfer (see above) which henceforth framed research. They also did a great deal to contextualise the concept within a wider set of literatures, chiefly by posing and answering several questions (see also Dolowitz and Marsh, 2000). It is to those questions that we now turn.

### ***Key Terms and Definitions***

Dolowitz and Marsh were careful to distinguish policy transfer from cognate terms such as lesson drawing, policy diffusion and emulation. They cited the essentially rational and voluntary nature of lesson drawing, as conceptualised by Rose (1993), as a key distinction. This formed the basis of their useful distinction between voluntary and coercive subtypes. Despite some unanswered criticisms of this distinction (James and Lodge, 2003), it has remained a constant in subsequent studies. Although attempts have been made to demarcate them further (see, for example, Bulmer *et al.*, 2007; Bulmer and Padgett, 2004; Dolowitz, 2006; Dolowitz and Marsh, 2000), it has undoubtedly stood the test of time. To sum up, although our perception of what constitutes policy transfer has changed since the mid-1990s, it remains very much within their original conception.

### ***Who Transfers Policy?***

We can illustrate this trend by citing the most common agents of policy transfer. Dolowitz and Marsh (1996, p. 345) originally identified six types of actor that might conceivably

engage in transfer activities: 'elected officials; political parties; bureaucrats/civil servants; pressure groups; policy entrepreneurs/experts; and supra-national institutions' (see also Evans, 2009). The first four types had, they claimed, already been widely discussed, so they focused on the role of policy entrepreneurs, experts and international bodies such as the EU.

All these actors have, to varying degrees, featured in subsequent research, although discussion of the last two categories – experts and the EU – has grown particularly strongly. Dolowitz and Marsh (2000), for example, examined two actor groups, namely political consultants and non-governmental institutions. Researchers identified other non-state experts engaged in promoting norm transfer across national borders, for example transnational advocacy networks (Stone, 2004), transnational philanthropic institutions (Stone, 2010), think tanks (Stone, 2000) and epistemic communities (Dunlop, 2009). Yet it is the influence of international organisations that has proven most popular of all, particularly among Europeanisation scholars. In one early study, Claudio Radaelli (2000, p. 26) argued that the EU had evolved into a 'massive transfer platform' for disseminating different aspects of policy among member states. Subsequent research revealed just how far the EU's influence extends: from the environment (Jordan and Liefferink, 2004) through to foreign and energy policy (Bulmer *et al.*, 2007), and from policy goals through to policy instruments (Jordan *et al.*, forthcoming). Different institutional settings within the EU's multi-level governance framework were also shown to shape the degree and type of transfer occurring (Bulmer and Padgett, 2004). The introduction and application of policy transfer concepts within this debate has therefore opened up many new research questions on actors and their roles, albeit within the relatively 'closed' setting of the EU.

In addition, researchers have also extended their investigations to identify many other non-state agents of transfer. Policy transfer was subsequently shown to occur within horizontal and vertical actor networks extending across governance scales below the state, both within and across borders (Betsill and Bulkeley, 2004). Sub-national institutions such as regional and local governments were also identified as important transfer agents, benefiting from a number of linked processes including globalisation and devolution (Betsill and Bulkeley, 2004; Cairney *et al.*, 2009; Evans and Davies, 1999; Wolman and Page, 2002). In addition, the influence of transnational corporations (Dolowitz and Marsh, 2000), intergovernmental norm diffusers such as the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) and also global financial institutions (Dolowitz and Marsh, 2000; Evans, 2009; Stone, 2004) was also shown to be significant under conditions of greater globalisation. As a result of all this work, we now know that policy transfer involves many more actors than was originally thought.

### ***Why Engage in Policy Transfer?***

In a similar vein, our understanding of why actors engage in transfer has also changed. Dolowitz and Marsh (1996) originally explained the occurrence of transfers in terms of their voluntary and coercive nature. Drawing on several authors, they pinpointed the role of dissatisfaction among policy makers, public disquiet, perceptions of policy failure,

political competition, the need to legitimate particular policy actions, and uncertainty. With regard to more coercive forms of transfer, the critical distinguishing characteristic (*vis-à-vis* lesson drawing) was cited as follows: ‘direct coercive transfer’ denoting the forced transfer of a policy; and ‘indirect coercive transfer’ resulting from transnational policy externalities and mutual interconnectedness between states (Dolowitz and Marsh, 1996, pp. 347–9; see also Evans, 2009).

Although these modes of transfer have been widely discussed in the subsequent literature, attempts were also made to distinguish more carefully between the voluntary and coercive sub-types. What constitutes coercive transfer in the context of international organisations, for example? In the EU this is a debatable point because member states (i.e. the importers) must first approve policy innovations in the Council of Ministers (Jordan *et al.*, 2012). On the basis of this empirical finding, Simon Bulmer *et al.* (2007, p. 15) developed a continuum of different transfer types including ‘semi-coercive’, ‘conditionality’ and ‘obligated transfer’. Meanwhile at the global level, Diane Stone (2010) associated coercion with the activities of powerful states and/or international organisations such as the World Bank when they seek to impose their policies on other actors, especially those in the developing world (see also Evans, 2009). Yet for non-state actors, persuasion and voluntary transfer appear to be the main modes of operation (Stone, 2010). In general, the more empirical question of why and when certain types of transfer appear in particular settings and not others has still not been fully addressed.

### ***What Elements of Policy are Transferred?***

More evidence of the extension out of the concept comes from research on different objects of transfer. Dolowitz and Marsh originally listed a number of things that could in theory be transferred, namely ‘policy goals, structure and content, policy instruments or administrative techniques; institutions; ideology; ideas, attitudes and concepts; and negative lessons’ (Dolowitz and Marsh, 1996, pp. 349–50). Initially, studies primarily focused on the ‘hard’ transfer of policy instruments, institutions and programmes between governments (Dolowitz, 2003; Jones and Newburn, 2006). But others (such as Stone, 2004) have continually reminded us of the importance of the ‘softer’ transfer of ideas, ideologies and concepts; elements of ‘policy’ that circulate freely among non-state actors under conditions of greater globalisation. For Stone (2010, p. 270), the ‘soft’ and the ‘hard’ forms of transfer coexist and may very well complement one another. The key point here is that the focus of research has expanded well beyond the traditional elements of policy, which include goals, targets and instruments. The softer forms of transfer now constitute a popular focus of emerging work, a trend that is further extending the boundaries of the transfer concept.

### ***Are There Different Degrees of Transfer?***

A gradual expansion in the way transfer is measured has also resulted from all this research. Dolowitz and Marsh originally drew on Rose’s (1993) continuum to categorise degrees of transfer. In addition to using the terms copying, emulation, hybridisation,

synthesis and inspiration, they combined two of them – hybridisation and synthesis – to denote instances where policy elements are drawn together from different contexts. Rose (2005, p. 81) later updated these categories to include: photocopying, copying, adaptation, hybrid, synthesis, disciplined inspiration and selective imitation. Other forms of transfer have since been identified, including non-transfer (Dolowitz and Marsh, 2000, p. 9), the creation of ‘policy assemblages’ (Prince, 2010) and even ‘failed’ transfer and/or the transfer of ‘negative lessons’ (Dolowitz and Marsh, 2000, p. 9). Consequently, there are now many more categories and types of transfer to consider. Indeed there is a sense in which almost *any* form of knowledge transfer, be it negative or positive, could now be considered a form of policy transfer.

One of the more promising avenues for research relates to the links between these types and specific transfer processes. For example, emulation or copying appears to result from ‘hard’ coercive transfer under conditions of Europeanisation (Bulmer *et al.*, 2007). As intimated above, globalisation and internationalisation have been linked to ‘softer’ forms of transfer involving various agents, resulting in more empirically subtle forms of imitation and inspiration. Consequently, it still remains exceedingly difficult to make general statements about transfer in spite of all the work done, let alone clear predictions. The EU, for example, has transferred hard environmental policy goals in a semi-coercive manner, but these have only resulted in fairly limited convergence at the national level (Jordan and Liefferink, 2004). Obviously, much depends on whether the analytical focus is what drives transfer, what transfer and how, and what the impacts are ‘on the ground’. A longer and more systematic review of the case study literature would certainly be welcome in this regard.

### ***From Where are Policies Transferred?***

Growth in the policy transfer concept has also occurred in other ways. Dolowitz and Marsh (1996) originally identified both endogenous and exogenous sources of learning. They argued that the first port of call for actors seeking to innovate is their own (i.e. domestic) context, which they pursue by examining previous policy successes and failures. Beyond this, policy makers could also look at foreign political systems, particularly those that are established innovators in a particular policy area. But they were very careful to note the importance of contextual constraints on policy innovation processes (see below).

After their study, an increasing number of alternative learning venues were subsequently identified by other scholars. The policy transfer literature continued of course to explore peer-to-peer transfer between national governments (Dolowitz, 2003; Jones and Newburn, 2006; Smith, 2004). But increasingly, those working from a Europeanisation, globalisation, multi-level governance and policy network perspective have suggested that lessons are also drawn from and transfer readily between many different venues, spanning multiple spatial and temporal scales. At the international level, national governments were thus shown to have widely transferred policy ideas and norms via epistemic communities, NGOs, think tanks, advocacy coalitions and intergovernmental bodies such as the OECD (Stone, 2004; 2010). EU member states also engaged in actively ‘uploading’ and ‘downloading’ policy to/from the EU level (Bulmer *et al.*, 2007; Jordan and Liefferink, 2004).

Vertical channels of policy transference were also found to extend upwards and downwards from the national to various sub-national levels (Cairney *et al.*, 2009), while evidence of horizontal learning between levels in different political systems was also identified (Bulkeley, 2006; Evans and Davies, 1999). Learning has also been detected within networks that transcend multiple scales and borders (Betsill and Bulkeley, 2004), although some feel that the literature continues to underplay 'side-loading' from parallel regional and even states such as the US. What all this research activity shows is that the locus of policy transfer activity has shifted away from its original government-centric emphasis to encompass multiple sites and actors. Whether this is a 'real' empirical finding, or simply a reflection of the arrival of more scholars into the field armed with different research foci and methodological approaches is difficult to judge.

### *What Factors Enable and Constrain Transfer?*

Finally, the continued expansion in policy transfer research has raised even more questions over what factors constrain it in practice. Dolowitz and Marsh (1996), again drawing heavily on Rose (1993), identified several potential constraints relating to the inherent complexity of some policy programmes. However, Dolowitz and Marsh argued that the impact of programmatic complexity was mediated through other factors. These included: path dependency arising from past decisions; institutional and structural impediments; a lack of ideological compatibility between transferring countries; and insufficient technological, economic, bureaucratic and political resources on the part of the receiving country to implement transferred policies.

These constraints have been analysed in the subsequent literature and other intervening factors were shown to be significant. Mark Evans (2009, p. 246) argues that such constraints involve 'cognitive' obstacles in the pre-decision phase, 'environmental' obstacles in ... implementation ... and domestic public opinion'. Yet constraints can still be broadly conceptualised in relation to the transfer process, with four types being apparent: demand side; programmatic; contextual; and application related. With regard to the *demand side*, policy makers are often unwilling to move beyond the status quo unless forced to by unexpected shocks such as a huge failure in an existing policy or a global economic crisis (Stone, 1999). Even where demand is artificially created via coercive transfer, it may not necessarily be sustained due to subterfuge and even overt 'policy resistance' by entrenched interests (Bache and Taylor, 2003). Constraints then emerge over the specific *programmatic* characteristics of policy in what Ed Page (2000, p. 2) termed the 'exporter jurisdiction'. Here, the inherent 'uniqueness' of policies (Rose, 1993, p. 118) and their 'wider social and policy context' (Dolowitz, 2003, p. 106) can reduce their transferability. Exporter constraints are then mediated through *contextual* factors related to the 'importer jurisdiction' (Page, 2000, p. 2) such as path dependency or policy layering, 'historical background' (De Jong, 2009, p. 147), the relative density of institutional structures, political context (for example, Bache and Taylor, 2003), and ideological or cultural incompatibilities (for example, De Jong, 2009). Lastly, *application* constraints include the high transaction costs of institutional adjustment, the scales of domestic change required and whether policies themselves must undergo modification to ensure successful transfer. Crucially, these factors

will shape whether policies do in fact successfully transfer, a consideration hitherto ignored in the literature (see Marsh and Sharman, 2009).

Many of these constraints, however, appear to be primarily (although not exclusively) concerned with peer-to-peer transfer between national governments. The increasingly fragmented nature of policy making noted above raises significant and as yet unanswered questions over whether such constraints are different as governing moves further and further 'beyond the state' (Bevir, 2009, p. 14). For example, the inertial effect of domestic institutional structures appears to have shaped the transfer of policies in the EU, reducing the overall extent of convergence (Bulmer *et al.*, 2007; Jordan and Liefferink, 2004). Outside Europe (a relatively homogeneous policy context), even fewer clear-cut examples of the 'hard' copying of policies, institutions and programmes have been identified. However, the transfer of 'softer' norms and ideas via transnational and sub-national networks (for example, Stone, 2004; 2010) appears less encumbered by such 'hard' institutional constraints at the national level. The key point we wish to make here 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.

### **Taking Stock and Looking Forwards: Three Possible Futures**

Research on policy transfer has most certainly evolved. It originally emerged to answer a distinct set of questions when proponents were mostly interested in the *act* of transfer – the critical mechanisms through which policy-related items moved between governments, hence the early criticism that it was promulgating 'methodological nationalism' (Stone, 2004, p. 549). Nonetheless, many questions, including those originally forwarded by Dolowitz and Marsh (1996), have now, to varying degrees, been answered – at least from a government-centric perspective. For example, the contributions made by various authors have helped to identify the main actors engaged in policy transfer, their motivations, the main elements of policy transferred (goals? instruments?), the main directions of transfer (up, down, across?) and some of the constraints occurring in practice. Through their efforts, policy transfer has, in summary, been established as an important component of the wider toolbox of public policy analysis. So, where next?

This stocktake has identified two interlinked processes that seem to be underpinning the development of the concept. By implication, these suggest it may have at least three possible futures. The first process has been one of continual *evolution* as the concept has expanded to encompass other theoretical and empirical perspectives and foci. At the same time we also detect that a parallel process of *assimilation* has occurred as the concept has interacted with and been absorbed into debates in other literatures. Therefore, in future, work on policy transfer may continue to *evolve* and expand, it may undergo further *assimilation* or, third, it may enter into a period of conceptual *decay*.

### ***Evolution, Assimilation and Decay: New Questions and New Empirical Contexts***

Although many of the questions that originally motivated researchers have been answered, others have not, thus leaving plenty of room for new research to bloom.

First, Dolowitz and Marsh (1996, p. 355) argued that ‘more work’ was required on ‘how and why’ policy transfer happens. Research since then has sought to treat transfer as a dependent variable, and many potential intervening variables have been detected including institutional features (Bulmer and Padgett, 2004) and the type of transfer agents (Stone, 2004; 2010). Yet policy transfer has also been widely studied as an independent variable. For example, Christoph Knill (2005, p. 766) showed how policy transfer has led to ‘cross-national policy convergence’ via associated processes of Europeanisation and globalisation (Knill, 2005, p. 764). Transfer could also be one of many causes of policy innovation – another possible dependent variable. In short, policy transfer is now treated as an independent and a dependent variable; clear evidence of conceptual evolution.

Second, Dolowitz and Marsh (1996) critiqued the overly pluralist assumptions made in the pre-existing literature, with only a rather limited consideration of structural factors. This led them to question the assumed rationality of voluntary transfer, pointing to alternative macro-theoretical explanations. To an extent, recent research has engaged with the role of political structures on shaping transfer, for example in more multi-level institutional settings (Bulmer and Padgett, 2004). Yet the vast majority of transfer studies focus on a small sub-set of countries mostly in the industrialised world, an empirical omission that has contributed to a failure to understand the role of deeper structural factors.

Finally, Dolowitz and Marsh (1996, p. 357) critiqued the early literature for being overly positivist, in so far as it provided ‘an inadequate conceptualization of the role of subjective perception’ in this process. More specifically they pointed to the failure to account for the way in which problems are socially constructed and how this intersubjectivity might determine where (and what type of) potential solutions are sourced. But this issue has remained under-explored and hence largely unresolved in the literature, although it has been taken up in the Europeanisation and globalisation debates (for example, Hay and Rosamond, 2002). While Andrew Jordan and Duncan Liefferink (2004) adopted a socio-logical institutional perspective in explaining the partial convergence in EU environmental norms, only a few studies have fully embraced a constructivist approach, despite its obvious potential. Scope certainly now exists to study transfer in more constructivist terms.

Evidently a concept like policy transfer has an innate capacity to combine with many different theoretical toolkits. Attempts have, for example, been made to find and explore new overlaps with the much older policy diffusion literature (Marsh and Sharman, 2009). Social learning, constructivism, policy networks, governance and new institutionalist approaches also appear particularly promising approaches (Laguna, 2010, p. 2). Others have argued for more sophisticated ‘multi-level’ modes of analysis that blend different theoretical arguments (Evans, 2009). In a sense, the scope for further evolution is limited only by the desire of policy transfer scholars to make new connections, but with expansion comes the risk that the whole sub-field becomes a net

importer of ideas developed elsewhere, and hence rather introspective and perhaps less able to contribute positively to wider debates.

### **Broadening Out: Ever Greater Assimilation?**

On one level, evolution remains the dominant pattern at present – the debate is still very much focused on describing and explaining processes of information exchange and learning between actors primarily operating at the national level. Although contributions to this discussion have tailed off in recent years, suggesting a certain level of maturation, other instances of non-state policy transfer are still being explored, thereby hinting at new opportunities for the concept to be taken up and integrated into cognate academic enterprises. In the EU, for example, the Europeanisation of national (and sub-national) policy making has both encouraged research on convergence and questioned the analytical value of policy transfer as a causal process (Bulmer *et al.*, 2007; Holzinger and Knill, 2005; Knill, 2005), although as identified above, more research is required into exogenously driven EU transfer activities.

Meanwhile the assimilation of this research into the wider field of multi-level governance has revealed new modes of (vertical and horizontal) inter-institutional transfer activity, extending well beyond traditional peer-to-peer networks of national governments (for example, Evans and Davies, 1999). The growth in research on networked governance has similarly engendered new questions over the precise ways in which information transfers between political contexts and the various actors that populate them (for example, Bulkeley, 2006; Jordan and Schout, 2006). Moreover, under conditions of globalisation, these networks have been shown to transcend national boundaries and state actors. The ‘soft transfer’ (Stone, 2004) of ideas and information supposedly occurs within these very networks, often operating under the wire of national control. Explaining them necessitates further investigations into how and what types of policy ideas are selected for transfer, how information is processed and utilised in different transfer processes, which actors are involved in such transfers and, most saliently of all, the eventual extent of transfer. Greater assimilation could help to enrich these and many other debates in cognate sub-fields, although perhaps at the perceived cost of losing some of the current distinctiveness and perhaps popularity of the transfer concept.

To conclude, policy transfer is a useful concept that transfers easily across different sub-disciplines and analytical contexts. Because of this it is inherently suggestive of new lines of investigation. However, the real challenge associated with the scenario of ever greater evolution is how to develop its analytical contribution without ‘stretching’ it to the point where it reveals less and less about more and more. Giovanni Sartori (1970) would have immediately grasped the importance of this particular point, as would Oliver James and Martin Lodge (2003). To avoid this fate, evolution must go hand in hand with consolidation. In this article, we have suggested some themes around which consolidation could occur. So although a sudden *decay* in transfer research – the third possible future – seems unlikely at the present time (there are still too many willing

contributors), the two obvious alternatives – namely further *evolution* and greater *assimilation* – pose just as many challenges to scholars of transfer as they open up new opportunities.

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