Politics, Power and Policy transfer

Abstract

Although the extensive literature on policy transfer and learning has succeeded in raising awareness of the myriad issues associated with this complex field, the goal of developing a clear and systematic conceptual apparatus capable of explaining (at least) *how* policy is transferred, *by whom* (or *through what* structural mechanisms) and with *what effects* has so far proved elusive. This verdict is not in fact surprising because, as the literature demonstrates, ‘policy transfer’ is characterised by contested definitional and conceptual debates, inherently complex contextual detail, and challenging methodological problems, which together conspire to limit the scope and impact of theoretical insights and empirical findings. Nevertheless, despite these difficulties it is possible to utilise what is a sophisticated and insightful literature in a different manner. Rather than treat policy transfer as a dependent variable, it is advantageous to understand the term as an integral component of the wider field of policy analysis and one that can throw light on a range of policy issues. The role of power in policy making – and specifically the differential operation of power relations in a globalising world – is one area that an appreciation of the complex dynamics of policy transfer can illuminate. Following a review of the core debates concerning policy transfer, this article goes on to argue that different power paradigms can be associated with different types of transfer process. An appreciation of the characteristics of these paradigms makes it possible to develop a model that depicts the interaction of power and policy transfer at different levels and spatial scales.

Key Words: policy transfer, power, globalization

*Introduction*

Despite the plethora of articles about ‘policy transfer’1 in recent years there is a danger that debates in this area of policy studies have generated more heat than light. Although the literature contains significant insights into the processes and mechanisms by and through which something called ‘policy’ is somehow ‘learned’, ‘transferred’, ‘diffused’ or ‘emulated’, the overriding impression is of an area that is so complex, and in which variables are both so mutable and extensive, that it becomes virtually impossible to produce an acceptable level of explanatory parsimony. As Dunlop and Radaelli (2013: 600) have commented recently, ‘…even the most casual of observers would note that the field is struggling to produce systematic and cumulative knowledge on this topic’. In view of these conceptual and empirical difficulties, it is important to ask two fundamental questions. First, *why* is this field so apparently complex and, second, how might it be possible to use the literature to illuminate key issues about policy making that incorporate, but go beyond, the relatively narrow concerns of policy transfer? The particular issue of interest for this article concerns the differential uses of power in policy processes in which forms of transfer and learning play a significant role. Power relations are, of course, discussed implicitly and, on occasion, explicitly (Dolowitz and Marsh, 1996, 2000; Evans, 2009; Hudson and Lowe, 2009) throughout the literature, although transfer as ‘coercion’ has perhaps not been given as much detailed conceptual space as other more consensual versions of transfer. This deficit is particularly stark in areas of global social policy where power inequalities between major global institutions, often supported by core metropolitan economies, on the one hand, and developing economies, on the other, lead to programmes being effectively imposed or potential benefits being made conditional on specific performance. Before turning to this issue, however, it is important to clarify and explore some of the claims being made here. What have been the main contributions to the field of policy transfer to date? What are the strengths and drawbacks of these approaches?

*Policy transfer: key issues*

It is possible to understand the policy learning literature over the past twenty years or so as engaged in a debate that, at its core, contains two different sets of assumptions – one that understands policy transfer as an essentially rational process that is itself open to rational enquiry and one that believes it to be inherently messy, incremental and potentially ‘irrational’. The more rational policy transfer is held to be, the greater the temptation to treat it as a dependent variable. Rose (1991: 22), for example, sees rationality in policy transfer, or ‘lesson-drawing’ as he calls it, as a potential range of processes through which policies can either be copied, emulated, hybridised, synthesised or inspired (Rose, 1991: 22) in ways that permit ‘steps [to] be taken to make a programme effective in one country today succeed elsewhere tomorrow’ (Rose, 1991: 24). Researching these processes in Rose’s view, could make it possible to predict whether ‘a programme now in effect in country X would be effective if transferred to country Y’ (Rose, 1991: 8). Underpinning this approach is the assumption that, whether policies are directly copied, ‘emulated’ or merely inspired by developments elsewhere, the *processes* involve a logical sequence with actors starting with problem identification, scanning programmes elsewhere, adapting programmes to local requirements and conducting a prospective evaluation of likely success. The implication is that these processes are open to ‘measurement’ and modelling with the hope that – at the least – a comprehensive model of policy transfer can be developed.

A different and wider-ranging approach that nevertheless assumes that policy transfer has a rational character can be seen in the seminal contributions of Dolowitz and Marsh (1996, 2000). For these contributors, the main aim was to provide a clear framework within which the various processes associated with policy transfer could be itemised and analysed. The key questions posed by Dolowitz and Marsh belie an assumption that the transfer process is rational because the process is imagined as a logical series of steps with a beginning and an end, a finite range of actors involved and contextualised by a number of exogenous factors, including those that determine whether a particular transfer process is voluntary or coercive. Of particular significance for Dolowitz and Marsh (2000: 8) were questions about why actors engaged in policy transfer, who these actors might be, what was being transferred, from where, the degrees of transfer were involved, and whether the transfer process itself could be considered a success or failure.

There is no doubting the influence of these contributions. By framing the questions about policy transfer in this way Dolowitz and Marsh provided a research agenda that is of continuing relevance (see Benson and Jordan, 2011). That said, the approach has not been deemed entirely satisfactory. As pointed out in note 1, ‘policy transfer’ was used by Dolowitz and Marsh (1996, 2000) as a generic term that contained concepts ranging from the voluntarism associated with Rose’s lesson-drawing, through structural accounts of policy diffusion (e.g. Simmons and Elkins, 2004) to others that combine structure and agency to produce sophisticated analyses of particular transfer events (see Fawcett and Marsh, 2012). For Evans and Davies (1999: 365), ‘the framework developed by Dolowitz and Marsh is clearly designed to incorporate a vast domain of policy-making activity by classifying all possible occurrences of transfer, voluntary and coercive, temporal and spatial’. However, this all-encompassing approach means that no robust *theory* of policy transfer is advanced. As Evans and Davies (1999: 364 original emphasis) argue, the framework is unable ‘to determine with *precision* the phenomenon it is trying to explain’. To move on from this point, Evans and Davies developed a multi-level, multi-disciplinary perspective that takes greater account of the prevailing conditions or contexts within which policy transfer takes place, including a greater appreciation of the structure-agency relationship and, in particular, the ways in which policy transfer networks as temporary transfer agents both condition, and are conditioned by, structural forces associated with global, transnational and international movements and institutions.

Although Evans and Davies attempted to provide a clearer account of the key factors involved in policy transfer, one result of their analytical approach has been to point up just how complex transfer processes actually are. It is interesting that in his more recent writing Evans (2010: 159) continues to reflect on the theoretical and methodological difficulties involved in developing a robust model, noting that ‘much of the existing literature does not provide adequate techniques for demonstrating policy transfer’. In many ways this verdict is not surprising. If the transfer literature has a particular strength it lies in its ability to identify the complexities of a highly pluralised field. If it has a weakness, it is an inability to push beyond this exploration of parameters and content to accounts of transfer that are theoretically coherent, methodologically sound and consequently able to inform the conduct of transfer events. This weakness is significant because the absence of a compelling model of transfer raises the possibility that such a model is chimerical. It may be less a question of discovering adequate techniques to measure policy transfer somehow, as Evans would have it, and more one of accepting that the continuing investigation of this area of policy studies is likely to produce more questions than answers. Going further, it is important to retain something of Lindblom’s (1959, 1979) understanding of policy making as an incremental process of ‘muddling through’; going further still, it is not fanciful to perceive policy transfer and learning as a field in which the key players ‘nick stuff from all over the place’ (Dwyer and Ellison, 2009; see also Stone, 2012) using only the outermost bounds of bounded rationality as metaphorical route markers.

Although this conclusion may not appear to be particularly rewarding, at least for those who continue to hope for an all-encompassing theory, much can be derived from successive analyses of policy transfer that build knowledge incrementally – and indeed adapt to the ever-changing conditions of policy development – over time. By ceasing to treat policy transfer as a dependent variable, it becomes possible to use the insights produced by policy transfer analysis to explore key dimensions of the ever-changing and increasingly global policy process – one such dimension being power, as discussed below.

What, then, are the key problems that make policy transfer as a dependent variable so difficult to ‘measure’? This is not in itself a new question and efforts to answer it have consistently been attempted by Evans (2009, 2012), Stone (1999, 2004, 2012) and many others. A swift recap of the core issues is important, however, partly because it provides a snapshot of the current state of knowledge and partly because it exposes key lacunae in the literature that signal a need to reassess contemporary understandings of the field. Arguably, the main inhibitions to the production of a comprehensive account of policy transfer concern the innate complexity, and in some respects the essential contestability, of three key dimensions: the structural and/or institutional origins of any transfer; what it is that is being transferred; and the range of actors involved, including institutional actors. There are, of course, other questions that could be included in this kind of policy analysis, the issue of policy convergence being one (Holzinger and Knill, 2005; Knill, 2008), but this matter stands somewhat to one side of the issues being pursued here.

*Origins, Policies and Actors*

It is helpful to categorise transfer processes as either ‘exogenous’ or ‘endogenous’, although these categories are not always entirely discrete. Exogenously derived transfers may be coercive or consensual in nature and have a common feature in their point of origin being combinations of structural forces, and sets of actors, which stand outside the immediate transfer locus. Pressures – often global and economic – can occur outside a particular arena and trigger subsequent learning and transfer activities within this particular universe of institutions and actors. There may also be feedback effects by which policies that owe much to the impact of exogenous institutions, actors and ideas, may be altered in the course of domestic shaping and implementation in ways that have a recursive impact on these original sources of change. ‘Coercive’ transfers, for example, frequently originate in ideas and policy prescriptions developed by key global institutions, but these institutions themselves vary in character and the policies they prescribe change over time (Mahon, 2010). Global institutions like the International Monetary Fund (IMF) or the World Bank (WB) operate alongside other influential transnational actors including powerful nation states, epistemic communities and private sector interests. Of course, transnational transfers need not be purely coercive. Consensual transfers occur, for example, where national governments accept aid or other support programmes conditional upon meeting mutually agreed targets negotiated with global institutions (Orenstein, 2009) – although, as discussed below, the detail lies in the nature of power relations and the relative strengths and weaknesses of parties to the bargaining process. Rather differently, what may be thought of as global ‘discussion-chains’ – international conferences, policy summits and so on – can also lead to policy programmes that become objects of negotiation with national governments.

Exogenous pressures for policy transfer can also originate within regional organisations such as the European Union, MERCOSUR, ASEAN or the African Union operating in an institutional frame that includes national governments and other national actors, the regional agencies of global institutions, and regional policy networks. Depending on the nature of the institutions involved – and regional bodies vary considerably in power and influence – they can either coercively drive or facilitate policy transfer in areas such as labour market policy, health policy, security policy and aspects of social policy. Regional institutions can also transfer policies and ‘learn’ among themselves (Farrell, 2009).

Endogenous forms of transfer may appear a contradiction in terms. After all, the idea of ‘transfer’ implies that something is imported from ‘outside’ into a different arena. Whilst it is true that the identification of the need for change is likely to stem from an awareness of shifts and movements caused by a range of external forces and actors, it is nevertheless the case that the impetus behind decisions to implement new policies or embrace new ideas can originate endogenously in perceptions of policy failure, or pressures created, for example, by domestic institutional change. Endogenous transfer processes are more obviously associated with policy transfers between nation-states where national governments have themselves identified a need for new policies or the improvement of existing ones in response to emerging political demands or perceived policy failures. Typically, the countries involved come from the wealthier parts of the world and tend to enjoy relatively close social, political and cultural ties. There are numerous studies of policy transfer among core OECD countries such as the USA, UK, Germany, Australia and Sweden in which the clear desire to ‘learn from abroad’ is accompanied by the internal recognition of policy deficits (e.g. Fawcett and Marsh, 2012, Dwyer and Ellison, 2009; Deacon, 2000; Daguerre and Taylor-Gooby, 2004; Daguerre, 2007; Cebulla, 2005).

Turning to ‘what’ is transferred, it is important, following Stone (2004), to distinguish between ‘soft’ and ‘hard’ forms of transfer. In a context where global institutions are involved and where power relations are unequal, (exogenous) pressures from these institutions targeted at national governments in developing economies can take the form of the hard transfer or imposition of economic strategies and the policies associated with them. Arguably there is less room for contingency here – certainly those contingencies associated with interventions from non-state actors such as informal policy networks and private interests that feature in soft transfer processes. While it is certainly possible for policies, and indeed institutions, to be transferred wholesale from country A to country B – and some of the studies mentioned above specifically explored examples relating to the spread of Active Labour Market Policies in the wealthier OECD countries – the exact replication of a policy in a different country is hard to achieve. Difficulties preventing any simple transfer of this kind include the degree of resistance to change, or problems associated with ‘translation’.

Where resistance is encountered – or simply where the play of historical, bureaucratic or cultural assumptions and practices militates against simple adoption – ‘what’ is transferred may be something less than a fully defined policy. It may be, for instance, that particular types of legislation or regulatory tools are transferred. Stone (2012: 486) refers to ‘the spread and adoption of Freedom of Information Law and the Ombudsman’s office’ in this respect. Again, ideas and knowledge that ‘inform’ policy discussions while not prescribing specific policy outcomes can be imported in a number of ways – for example, through formal interactions among government officials or through the spread of new ways of thinking through informal policy networks. If ideas and discourse are important factors in policy transfer (Schmidt and Radaelli, 2004; Béland, 2005) practices, or ‘ways of doing things’, may also be learned and lead over time to policy developments that mimic or emulate the spirit of practices elsewhere without their accompanying institutional frameworks. Massey’s (2009: 388) observation that ‘all policy transfer is in reality policy mimesis’ acknowledges that the boundaries of the ‘what’ of policy transfer can be porous, the further implication being that transfer routes and pathways can be hard to trace. Of course, the ‘softer’ the type of transfer and the more voluntary and consensual the processes are, the more difficult it becomes to measure precisely what has been transferred, let alone the impact or success of the transfer itself.

‘Actors’ involved in policy transfer can be institutions, policy networks or influential individuals. If at one time, there was an assumption that national or sub-national governmental institutions and networks, peopled by national politicians, leading civil servants and key policy entrepreneurs were the main players in transfer processes, the recognition that ‘globalization’ has increased the spatial scale of play has led to a growing awareness of the vast range of interests and agencies involved, including new actors and new modes of governance (Crozier, 2008; O’Brien, 2009). As mentioned, leading global and regional institutions have come to be regarded as significant transfer agents – to the point where some observers now argue that these institutions are fundamentally reshaping the policies and policy processes of ‘sovereign’ nation states (Hameiri and Jones, 2015). Elsewhere, attention has been drawn to the role of global policy networks and epistemic communities, transnational corporations and other privately funded networks and foundations that, with the increase in global communications and removal of controls on capital movement are able to exert either ‘hard’ or ‘soft’ power and influence (Stone, 2004, 2010) on policy makers.

This brief summation of the main questions and debates in the policy transfer literature indicates the problems of depicting policy transfer as a bounded entity that allows it to be treated as a dependent variable. From difficult definitional issues, through problems associated with the scope and reach, and the what and who of transfer, the variables involved are extensive and the measurement of their influence too methodologically challenging to allow the development of a comprehensive, empirically testable explanatory model. However, what may be considered a weakness of the field in some respects arguably becomes a strength in others. By treating policy transfer as an independent variable capable of manifestation in varying sets of processes the literature can be used to explore the role of other relevant factors in the transfer process and particularly the ways in which these intrinsic components of transfer can ‘mutually condition’ one another. The utilisation and deployment of ‘power’ is a leading issue here because, with the dramatic expansion of transfer (voluntary and coercive) on a global scale, the recognition of the central importance of this concept facilitates a clearer, multi-level understanding of ‘transfer politics’. Of course, power permeates all aspects of policy making but the point here is that a focus on policy transfer will illuminate particular dimensions of power and influence, particularly at global level. The following section examines how policy transfer analysis can expose the role and nature of power – and how, conversely, an understanding of power can enhance understandings of key aspects of transfer.

*Policy transfer and power*

Power is an essentially contested concept in the social sciences as Lukes’ classic discussion of the idea convincingly demonstrates (Gallie, 1956; Lukes, 1974). Although its contestability means that the concept has to be treated carefully, in terms of policy transfer the key issues concern degrees of ‘coercion’, ‘conditionality’ and ‘influence’, these categories intersecting with varieties of ‘hard’ and ‘soft’ power discussed by Stone and others. It is obviously important to treat the concept of power in a nuanced manner. The policy transfer literature takes account of very different sources and concentrations of power, from transnational and national institutions through to formal and informal policy networks, and corporate interests (see Adam and Kriesi, 2007). In so doing, it provides a space to examine the complex interactions among different forms of power and different types of transfer. Certainly for present purposes, power should not be treated as a zero-sum phenomenon but rather as a fluid quantity capable of shifting in concentration depending on a range of factors including prevailing social and political contexts and the global economic environment. On this reading, the policy transfer literature can be said to utilise three ideal typical paradigmatic forms of power in its analyses of transfer processes: ‘power as mutual influence’ through voluntary or open learning; ‘power as weighted bargaining’; and ‘power as coercion and/or conditionality’. The important thing is that these paradigms contribute to an understanding of how different forms of power can be associated with different transfer processes in different environments.

*Power as Mutual Influence (PMI):* Power is best conceived in terms of ‘influence’ in this paradigm. The main characteristic of the paradigm is mutuality and the consensual (and largely endogenous) recognition that existing policies and programmes can be improved by attending to developments elsewhere. It is important, however, to treat ‘influence’ as a form of power because many of the debates about policy transfer within and among institutions, actors and networks, particularly among the wealthier Western nations, are largely concerned with discussions among ‘equals’ with participants not disadvantaged by significant power asymmetries. It is not surprising that OECD countries that are economically, socially, politically and culturally ‘close’ engage in forms of transfer that are largely voluntary and open, and where ‘influence’ is less an exercise of power *per se* and more about persuasion and debate in a context of open learning and adaptation. Of course, overall context is important and even where the initial stimulus for policy transfer is endogenous, policy preferences are subject to ‘fashion’ and shifts in macropolitical agendas (True et al, 2007). Nevertheless, in a pluralist environment in which influence is relatively diffused within and across key institutions and actors, the precise configuration of actors, degrees of institutionalisation and relative influence of formal and informal policy networks and communities will bear heavily on outcomes. This statement needs to be interrogated a little further, however, because much depends on matters of scope and reach. Where the number of interests is limited, for example, there is a greater chance of a ‘rational’ process of direct transfer, whereas, where the policy field is wider, with large numbers of actors involved, the need to accommodate different influences, interests and concentrations of power, may restrict the content of what is transferred and indeed the rationality of the transfer process.

An example of ‘restricted policy transfer’ in which only two countries were involved, the numbers of actors limited, and the policy at the heart of the transfer relatively circumscribed relates to the transfer of the Gateway Review Process for managing procurement processes from the UK to Australia (Fawcett and Marsh, 2012). Fawcett and Marsh argue that key figures (in the state of Victoria initially) identified a successful policy for managing procurement that they believed to be of benefit and, over a period of some years, worked with counterparts in the UK to effect the transfer. While, of course, complexities abounded, senior civil servants on both sides of the process acknowledged the elite nature of the transfer environment and that ‘support from the higher echelons of government and the public service is crucial if an initiative of this sort is to be successful’ (Fawcett and Marsh, 2012: 177).

Where power is less concentrated and the prospective policy is more publicly ‘visible’ and potentially contentious, the actors involved will be both more numerous and diverse, with the inevitable implication of competing interests and increased complexity. This wider environment is likely to be less conducive to the wholesale transfer of policies or institutions and may instead favour the importation of ideas, knowledge and ‘soft policy’. Depending on its origins, the impetus for transfer can either be championed or vetoed by core institutions of government – depending on the particular configurations of power and influence in various policy subsystems (True et al, 2007) – or either championed or contested by influential interests outside formal state structures. Much depends on the prevailing policy environment and the perceived urgency of the need to import new policies or ideas. Further, how the capacity to influence decision making is configured and concentrated will also bear closely on outcomes. In contrast to the Gateway Review Process considered by Fawcett and Marsh, Newburn’s (2010: 344) discussion of the transfer interest in US ‘zero tolerance’ criminal justice policies provides an insight into how difficult policy transfer can be in a situation where power is less concentrated and multiple interests compete for influence. Newburn acknowledges that international – and media – interest in zero tolerance policing in the 1990s had a certain symbolic effect in the UK to the point where ‘some of the ideas associated with such developments ‘do seem subsequently to have influenced British government policy’. When it comes to charting evidence of direct policy transfer, however, Newburn is sceptical, noting countervailing factors in the forms of ‘significant variation in policing philosophies and styles…[and] the diverse histories as well as the institutional and cultural contexts within which policing is organised and undertaken’. These factors speak of a differentiated system populated by formal and informal networks and practices that, taken together, contribute to an environment characterised by low power concentration and multiple sets of interests – an environment, in other words, that is likely to support a transfer politics distinguished by reliance on mutual learning and the voluntary adoption and testing of policies or ideas.

Clearly it is not possible here to cover the full range of possibilities contained within this power paradigm. In principle, as observed, the paradigm relates almost exclusively to policy transfer within and among Western nations. Once inside the paradigm, there is a great deal of knowledge to be gained through the examination of different examples of transfer and the particular configurations of power and influence that they exhibit. However, despite its popularity among political scientists, it is hard to argue that the ideas and examples of transfer and learning associated with this paradigm exhaust the theoretical and empirical reach of policy transfer analysis. The increasingly global scope of policy transfer makes it essential to take account of the different ways in which power and influence are exercised – and in particular how inequalities of power mediate, and indeed dictate, policy outcomes.

*Power as Weighted Bargaining (PWB)*: This paradigm relates to processes that are largely exogenous to the transfer location and embrace agents that have sufficient power and influence to negotiate with national governments from positions of strength over the adoption of particular policies and programmes, or to promote ideas that can influence internal policy making. Negotiations do not take place among equals – although putatively powerful institutions may not always be successful in achieving desired policy take-up. Key actors include global or regional organisations, in addition to powerful nation states, that have the capacity to influence national governments. Again, key epistemic communities and global policy chains can also influence domestic policy debates, as can actors within domestic bureaucracies and policy communities themselves. Much depends on the positions particular organisations occupy in the hierarchy of global and regional governance, and the specific issues involved. As Deacon (2014), O’Brien (2009) and many others have observed, there are numerous international organisations that exercise power and influence at global, regional and national levels – too many to take into account here. Nevertheless, it is possible to divide these bodies into two rough categories, recognising, however, that there is a good deal of overlap between them (Orenstein, 2009). First, bodies like the International Labour Organisation (ILO), certain United Nations’ member agencies, such as the UN General Assembly itself, and many regional organisations use their reputations and global positions to exert ‘influence’ largely through ideational argument and persuasion. Second, in addition to a capacity to use their strategic positions to ‘persuade’, organisations such as the WB, the IMF and the World Trade organisation (WTO), as key institutions of global economic governance, can in certain contexts exercise a coercive capacity to ‘create, supervise and enforce rules’ (O’Brien, 2009: 169).

A range of examples helps to illustrate the nature of PWB. At the softer end of the spectrum prevailing power balances within nation states and domestic cultures can mediate the impact of ideas and policy solutions that originate outside the transfer location. Lopreite’s (2012) account of Argentinian resistance to ‘travelling ideas’ concerning gender policies and reproductive rights is a case in point. Although, in Lopreite’s (2012: 121) opinion, ‘transnationalized ideas had a significant impact in a country like Argentina, with a long tradition of neglecting reproductive rights’, the extent of the impact was mediated in a number of ways. For example, the financial crisis of 2001-02 created an opportunity for new thinking about poverty reduction and the nature of the family, which allowed elements of Argentinian political culture to come to terms with global thinking and policy solutions about reproduction, gender and the role of the family. In this way, the new ideas that came out of the 1994 Cairo Conference on Population and Development – ideas broadly supported by a WB interested in how changing gender roles might contribute to poverty reduction – gained political ground in Argentina particularly amongst progressive NGOs. However, because proto-natalist and maternalist ideology remained powerful in Argentina, the outcome, which saw the introduction of a range of reproductive rights but in the context of the continuation of strict abortion laws, can be understood as the result of a ‘double bargaining’ process involving both global and local levels of power and influence. On the one hand, core components of Argentinian society had to acknowledge and accept policies that granted greater reproductive rights because of the increasing global influence of ideas that supported them. In addition, the need for WB support for poverty reduction in a time of crisis made it difficult to resist WB-approved policies. On the other hand, heated internal debates among Argentinian politicians, bureaucrats, policy networks and social movements stimulated by these exogenous pressures also played an important role in the final configuration of policy outcomes.

Lying between soft and harder versions of PWB, the regional level in particular offers examples of learning and transfer that are *par excellence* ‘bargained’ solutions. As Yeates (2005: 6) has argued, because ‘regional formations often entail groups of countries with similar cultural, legal and political characteristics, agreement on the scope and nature of transnational collaboration is more feasible’. Such agreement in turn provides opportunities for policy transfer because, ‘processes of regional integration can create greater awareness of a range of common issues [and] contribute to the forging of transnational political alliances’ (Yeates, 2005: 7), the point being that smaller countries in particular can not only increase their bargaining position through membership of regional blocs, but can also adopt (or mimic) policies used by other member states. Negotiation and bargaining are the hallmarks of policy transfer in the regional universe because regional formations do not generally possess powers of enforcement – the consequence being that notice has to be taken of the views of member states even though formal power structures are weighted against any one national government.

The European Union’s (EU) Open Method of Coordination (OMC), which emerged from the European Employment Strategy (EES) in the late 1990s is a case in point. While this mechanism for EU-wide policy development is arguably less significant than it was, largely because its soft law approach has been overtaken by the more immediate requirement to ‘support’ the single market and monetary union in ways that are far from ‘soft’ or consensual (Hay and Wincott, 2012; Papadopoulos and Roumpakis, 2015), the OMC/EES stands as an attempt to encourage member states in a regional bloc to develop specific national policies benchmarked against collectively agreed objectives. The overall aim is to diffuse best practice through a process of mutual adjustment monitored at supranational level but underpinned by peer pressure to achieve the set targets (Schmidt and Radaelli, 2004). Although it predated the OMC, the EES remains the best instance of how the process worked, with member states like France acknowledging the specific benefits they derived from learning about other member states’ active labour market policies (Trubeck and Mosher, 2003: 44; Teague, 2001). Again, Radaelli (quoted in Guillén and Palier, 2004: 204) has pointed to significance of ‘cognitive harmonization’ - ‘the shaping and reshaping of perceptions of attitudes towards social problems and the way to tackle them’. The catch, of course, in this example of regional bargaining – and the inherent trickiness of determining the balance of the ‘weight’ in processes of weighted bargaining more generally – is that the overall OMC process became infused with a neoliberal economic logic supported by the EU’s main institutions that undoubtedly constrained the efforts of some national governments to pursue social democratic policy solutions (Radaelli, 2003).

A different example of PWB comes in the form of the global bargaining processes that contributed to the creation of the United Nation’s Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) during the 1990s. Fukuda-Parr et al (2014: 107) describe how the United Nation’s Millennium Declaration of 2000 that was agreed among the UN, the WB, the IMF, the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), and national governments, resulted from ‘a decade of efforts to redefine the development agenda’ involving organisations ranging from national governments to development agencies, policy networks and lobby groups. Key moments in the development of ideas involved a number of UN conferences such as International World Summit for Children in 1990, the 1994 Cairo conference on Population and Development and the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995, each of which influenced progress towards a global human rights agenda and, by implication, countered dominant neoliberal ideas about the importance of the free market in economic development (Fukuda-Parr et al, 2014). However, although these processes were clearly influential in drawing attention to global inequalities and particularly the plight of women in developing economies, the MDGs themselves ultimately did not reflect the broader ambitions of the wide range of actors who had contributed to these debates. This failure of vision owed much to the fact that, despite their endorsement of the Millennium Declaration, the US government, the WB, the IMF and the OECD pressured the UN to narrow its ‘broader, more essentialist rights-based approach’ (Saith, 2006: 1170) in favour of the constrained, target-driven, MDGs that these organisations preferred.

Of course, this demonstration of the power of these international institutions needs to be balanced against the willingness of national governments to implement the domestic policy changes required to meet the MDGs. Despite the apparent power of key global organisations, nations can often exercise a power of their own through their ability to choose both their level of commitment to external demands and standards, and how they interpret these demands. In the case of the MDGs, national governments were able to customise targets better to accord with their perceived needs (Sherematova, undated) or present data in ways that demonstrated apparent conformity to core objectives such as poverty reduction despite significant regional variations (see e.g. UN, 2004; IMF, 2004).

Elsewhere, this residual power that sovereign states can deploy to resist the logic of global institutions’ policy demands can be seen in the apparently more ‘coercive’ instance of global anti-money laundering measures. The account of the role and influence of the Financial Action Task Force (FATF) provided by Hameiri and Jones (2015) makes it clear that well-positioned organisations, even if they cannot formally compel compliance under international law, can nevertheless deploy various techniques to ‘encourage’ the adoption of preferred policy solutions. In the case of FATF, the maintenance of a list of nations that were reluctant to implement various anti-money laundering policies demanded by the G7 group of countries contributed to a high degree of formal compliance, the fear being that failure to develop domestic Financial Intelligence Units and other state institutions to support international regulatory standards, would result in exclusion from global capital flows (Hameiri and Jones, 2015: 11). Importantly, however, as Hameiri and Jones point out, the balance of power relations within national governments can either facilitate or undermine the enthusiasm with which externally created policy demands are pursued. In this case, internal bargaining about the desired strength of domestic regulatory institutions played a role in the configuration of the institutions themselves, the outcome being that these internal deliberations fed back into the external ‘bargained environment’, with global institutions having to accept that national compliance with many of their demands is likely to vary.

FIGURE 1 IN ABOUT HERE

*Power as Coercion*: ‘Coercion’ can come in a range of different forms, some of which will inevitably lean towards the PWB paradigm, even as others display a clearly coercive character. If instances of simple ‘policy imposition’ are rare, there are many examples of ‘transfer’ where the conditions associated with a reluctance to adopt recommended policies are such as to leave a government with little choice but to implement them. A clear example of this dynamic comes in the form of the ‘bailout’ agreements imposed on Greece and other Southern European countries ‘that were accompanied by the demand on behalf of the surplus countries…to implement far-reaching austerity reforms and reduce drastically social protection’ (Papadopoulos and Roumpakis, 2015: 195). These reforms were promoted by the European Council, the European Central Bank and the IMF, and were implemented alongside a number of other measures, such as the formal monitoring of wage and collective bargaining agreements, that resulted in a reduction in the ability of Greece (and indeed other debtor member states) to manage its own wage and budget-setting strategies (Papadopoulos and Roumpakis, 2015: 196).

This sort of ‘coercive conditionality’ can also be observed in other areas of European social policy such as pension privatisation. Orenstein (2008, 2013) has examined the spread of market-driven pensions reforms rooted in the ideas of the IMF and WB, and, to be sure, the character of discussions between these global organisations, other relevant players and national governments varies depending on the relative position of the country in question. With reference to Greece, Gulec (2014: 82) has pointed out that pressure for pension reform emerged partly because of exogenous pressures from the IMF and WB, and partly, too, as a result of ‘the conditionality of (European) economic integration as a disciplinary form of adjustment’ designed, *inter alia,* to control public spending. Of course, as many commentators have noted (see Hay and Wincott, 2012), the EU’s commitment to an inclusive European Social Model organised on social democratic lines has itself been compromised by an increasing attachment to the market liberal ideas and policies promoted by the OECD, WB and IMF – particularly in the wake of European enlargement.

Outside the EU, Ozkan’s exploration of the roles of the WB, IMF and ILO in the development of Turkey’s Unemployment Insurance (UI) scheme in the 1990s further illustrates the complexity of a process that involved a combination of external pressures to adopt particular measures and subsequent endogenous debate about their utility amongst a range of interests in Turkey itself. As Ozkan (2013: 242-3) argues, ‘the new UI programme in Turkey can be viewed as a foreign model conveyed by the World Bank and the Turkish economic bureaucracy and inspired by the liberal ideas of the OECD and the World Bank’. However, while the neoliberal ideas of the WB and IMF ‘actively played an important role in bringing the UI idea into the Turkish context’ (Ozkan, 2013: 246), debates among various Turkish advocacy coalitions helped to counter the initial preferences of employers and trade unions to maintain their traditional approach to unemployment based on early retirement options and generous statutory severance packages. The conversion of the Turkish civil service to market liberal ideas, supported by the WB and IMF, was clearly an important aspect of this ‘translation’ process.

Whether or not this example is a clear illustration of PC may appear debateable. After all, internal discussion clearly played a role in the introduction of UI in Turkey and this endogenous dynamic counters the impression that a policy had simply been imposed from without. However, when weighing up the relative power positions of contributing actors, it is important to take account of a context that is characterised by the ability of powerful international organisations both to set the ideational agenda and to create economic and financial incentives to ‘encourage’ compliance. In the Turkish case, internal debates were plainly influenced by the neoliberal assumptions promoted by WB and IMF, and, in addition, both organisations were deeply involved in Turkey’s economic fortunes by virtue of their contribution to the country’s structural adjustment policies. In this way – and unlike the example of the FATF above – the transfer context was not conducive to a systematic defence of existing arrangements for unemployment provision.

A final – and different – instance of coercive transfer relates to the increasing role of public-private sector collaborations as champions and ‘implementers’ of particular policies. Holden examines the role of the UK’s Department of Health and the British healthcare industry in the export of the Private-Public Partnership (PPP) and the Private Finance Initiative (PFI) models to other countries. PPP/PFI effectively offers a means of using private capital to finance large public sector infrastructure projects, which are then leased to the public sector (usually) on a 20-30-year contract – an arrangement that guarantees a long-term income stream for the corporations involved. Holden (2009: 318) notes in relation to health infrastructure spending, that ‘the adoption of PPPs by other countries is of particular strategic importance to British firms, since these are already market leaders in PPP due to its extensive use in the NHS’. The ‘coercive’ element in this instance of PPP/PFI export comes in the form of a government’s decision to work with private healthcare firms to target a range of countries – usually developing economies – in order to ‘sell’ their expertise in the design, management and monitoring of PFI projects. As Holden (2009: 329) points out, because many countries, including large economies such as China’s, lack expertise and know-how in managing PPP/PFI arrangements, there is a danger that ‘a self-reinforcing process’ is created ‘in which greater private sector involvement is always seen as beneficial’, despite the well-documented risks and drawbacks associated with PPP/PFI. It is possible, then, for countries to find themselves contractually bound into costly infrastructure projects on the basis of advice that is not impartial and where they share an undue burden of risk.

*Conclusion*

Having discussed the inherent difficulties that efforts to produce a theoretically plausible and methodologically sound model of policy transfer, open to empirical validation, encounter, this article has argued that it is more fruitful to use the insights developed in the policy transfer literature as independent variables capable of illuminating different components of policy analysis. The current discussion has concentrated on how an examination of the parameters of policy transfer can shed light on configurations of power in global policy making – an area that has become increasingly important in recent years. Figure 1 provides a basic depiction of the key elements of the power-policy transfer relationship discussed in the article. Clearly this attempt to illustrate the various factors and relationships involved is schematic, and much more needs to be done by way of greater empirical detail – most obviously through more thorough case study material – than the brief, indicative examples provided here. In closing it is important to reiterate the ideal-typical character of the model and to acknowledge, once again, the innate complexities of this area of analysis. For example, the relative simplicity of the model as currently configured, although stressing the dynamic nature of relationships within Paradigms 1 and 2 (and arguably within Paradigm 3 but to a *much* lesser extent), means that it does not take adequate account of the possibility that different actors – particularly national governments – could find themselves in *different* power relationships with key global and regional players depending on the particular policy issues and balance of forces, endogenous and exogenous, involved. This area – the extent to which power is differentially fractured according to the key policy issues and wider socio-economic context of specific policy debates – in particular would benefit from further investigation.

1. The term ‘policy transfer’ is used as a shorthand to refer to a variety of types of policy movements including not only ‘lesson-drawing’ and ‘policy learning’, and other essentially ‘mutual’ forms of transfer, but also the forms of bargained and conditional/coercive transfer that are characterised by the less equal power relationships contained in the second and third power paradigms discussed in the article.

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Fig 1: Power paradigms and policy transfer

voluntary

Global North/Developed Economies

Strong states, and domestic networks/

epistemic

communities

Key global/international organisations, networks, epistemic communities, global corporations

Paradigm 1

Less powerful/influential (regional) organisations

Paradigm 1: PMI

Exogenous

Endogenous

Paradigm 2: PWB

Paradigm 3: PC

Developing economies/less powerful states with some endogenous bargaining capacity

Developing economies/global south

Weaker states/low bargaining capacity

Coercive