From global ideas to local action

*Building capacity to reshape urban transport policy*

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A busy bicycle path that carries nearly 40,000 people on bikes per day.  
Mr. Visserplein, Amsterdam, The Netherlands
“Technology scanning tours are expected to produce specific recommendations for the highway community in the United States. Eventually, they will spur further research and demonstration projects and will be put into practice across the country, creating better roads for the American traveler.” *US Federal Highway Administration Study Tour Report for Pedestrian and Bicyclist Programs in European Countries* (1994)

The practice of seeking transport technologies and borrowing solutions from elsewhere is as old as cities themselves. Indeed, a historic tradition of international transport study visits continues today – with various aims, agendas, and purposes of the visits. As the quote above illustrates, public agencies have been using “technology scanning tours” for decades to scout global practices that hold promise to be transferred to new contexts. When returning from a tour, participants report technical solutions and policy lessons learned. In the 1994 FHWA report on a visit to the Netherlands, Germany and England, transferable lessons on effective safety measures included traffic calming, networks of on-street bicycle lanes, and restricting traffic movements as potential transferable solutions to the U.S. context (p. 95-96). While the above quotation may, at first glance, seem like an unremarkable routine justification for a government program, the implicit aim is ambitious: these foreign experiences will advance knowledge and trigger the spread and adoption of new practices that directly improve environmental conditions for citizens. One question that arises from this logic is to what extent does learning from abroad transmit or accelerate such transformative trajectories of action?

Within the study of transport policy, there is marked increase in scholarship documenting how international “best practices” favoring sustainable mobility, such as walking, cycling, and public transit, are picked up and moved around by societal actors (Chapter 3 provides a systematic review). For example, Bogota’s bus rapid transit system has inspired many cities to follow suit (Montero, 2017), and their exchanges with South African city officials have been closely examined (Wood, 2014); Malta learned about road pricing
policies from several European cities (Attard & Enoch, 2011); and some Dutch cycling policies have been deemed “irresistible” (Pucher & Buehler, 2008) and an element of international interest (Pojani & Stead, 2015). While plenty of ink has explored which particular ideas are picked up or are potentially transferable from one place to another, what remains very murky is the facilitating role of learning within this banner of ‘policy transfer’ and circulation of best practice (Marsden & Stead, 2011; May, 2015). To untangle this gap for the transportation planning community, the questions of how actors learn and how that learning translates into policy action need to be more central. A rich base of literature from other domains, such as political science and management science, suggest that learning plays an intervening role in the processes of governing and decision making (i.e., Argyris & Schön, 1978; Hall, 1993; Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995). This thesis uses knowledge from these fields to explore learning and provide new insights for urban transport policy challenges.

There are long-standing calls for governments to adopt and implement policies that achieve and reinforce sustainable forms of urban mobility (Banister & Marshall, 2000; World Bank, 1996). Despite these pressures and modern advances in technologies, motorized transport (mostly single-occupancy vehicle trips) remains, with rare exceptions, a dominant form of urban travel (Banister, 2005; Holden et al., 2019). High levels of car use are linked to, for example, the built environment and spatial structure of cities and regions, inefficient and lacking alternatives, and cultural, political, and institutional systems that uphold automobility (Ashmore et al., 2018; Banister, 2008; Wiersma et al., 2020). The exorbitant costs of car use and “car-dependency”—to the individual, society, and the environment—are increasingly recognized (Banister, 2005). This is particularly the case in urban contexts, where tension between density, car ownership and space culminates (Wiersma et al., 2020) and is readily experienced on city streets (von Schönfeld & Bertolini, 2017). To transition toward sustainable mobility, a variety of ‘push and pull’ policy measures can influence travel behavior away from cars (Wiersma et al., 2020). However, similar to other urban challenges, adapting urban transportation systems and moving away from auto-dominated transport planning rouse complexities and uncertainties and no doubt requires significant change (Bertolini et al., 2008; Schwanen et al., 2012).

Although the policies to support such a transition are broadly agreed upon, such as integrating land use and transport or furnishing infrastructures for cycling, walking and transit (Banister, 2008; Glaser & Krizek, 2021), seemingly countless barriers
thwart implementation efforts. Among many, the challenges include deficient political and public support (Banister, 2008; Vigar, 2000), lack of technical skills (Dill et al., 2017) in a continually changing technology landscape (Cronin & Alexander, 2019), and low integration of policies and knowledge (Hull, 2008; te Brömmelstroet & Bertolini, 2010). Such challenges are acutely experienced at the municipal or inter-municipal level, where a city’s or region’s unique social, political, and regulatory context impacts “on-the-ground” implementation (Bulkeley, 2010; Hull, 2011). To overcome barriers, leveraging public support and coordinating policy actions are seen as fundamental elements of successful policy implementation (Banister, 2005; Holden et al., 2019; Stead, 2008). Underlying issues remain how to seed public support or acceptance and how to build capacity to coordinate policy actions: “the debate is not about what needs to be done; it is about how to facilitate implementation and change” (Banister, 2005, p. 84, author emphasis).

One way to conceptualize such a facilitation process is through the notion of strategic capacity (described in more detail in the next section as well as Chapter 6). Originating in management sciences and public administration, strategic capacity denotes the ability of an urban governance network “to anticipate and influence change through planned, intelligent, and coordinated decisions and actions” (Honadle, 1981, p. 577). More recently, strategic capacity has been used in urban planning (Healey, 2004), transportation planning (Giezen, 2013) and political science (Gissendanner, 2004) to analyze adaptive governance processes. Learning to build strategic capacity seems necessary for governments and stakeholders to achieve progress. This invites us to explore which interventions might be most impactful for cultivating this strategic capacity.

An increasingly common way to learn to cope with the above challenges, and quite possibly to attempt to build strategic capacity, is to “learn from abroad” and engage in policy transfer (Dolowitz & Marsh, 1996; Dolowitz & Marsh, 2000). Along with enhanced global communications and travel, city-to-city learning and peer or policy networks have become fixtures of contemporary planning practice (Campbell, 2013). A rich base of literature examines how knowledge about policy solutions moves from one context to another, using a variety of terms like transfer, diffusion, and lesson-drawing (i.e., Dolowitz
Chapter 1

& Marsh, 2000; Hall, 1993; Rose, 1993). Popularized in the 1990s, the underlying principle of these notions suggests that since policy problems (i.e., congestion) are comparable across political and geographical boundaries, their solutions may be transferable as well (Dolowitz & Marsh, 2000). With their widely-cited policy transfer framework, Dolowitz and Marsh (2000) provide a useful and flexible heuristic to analyze cases of policy transfer, including who participates, effectiveness of transfer, and barriers of the process. However, critique was quickly launched at the framework’s rationalist underpinnings and doubtful utility to analyze the many complexities involved in the policy process (i.e., Evans, 2009; James & Lodge, 2003), especially around learning (i.e., McCann & Ward, 2012; Stone, 1999).

Learning in the context of policy making has an equally rich history of literature (see Grin & Loeber, 2006, for in-depth summary), also described in the next section. *Policy learning* is defined as a process where individual actors – not only policymakers but other societal actors – assimilate knowledge from previous experience or in light of new information, resulting in changes to policies, programs, rules, or other practices (Bennett & Howlett, 1992; Sabatier, 1988). Learning is regarded as a highly complex, social or collective process influenced by numerous interrelated factors and circumstances (Hall, 1993), such as the motivations and capabilities of actors involved (Stone, 2004), agency and power structures (McCann & Ward, 2012), political cycles and interests (Dunlop, 2009), and institutional norms and values (Steele, 2011) – *how things have always been done*.

The unresolved question is whether, and to what extent, policy outcomes have resulted from learning through policy transfer, and whether this learning influences actions to facilitate change. There are at least three key reasons for this unresolved issue. One reason is the historic difficulty in measuring and defining ‘learning’ and what necessarily consists of achieving a ‘policy outcome,’ both of which denote a range of circumstances beyond policy adoption or implementation and require efforts to operationalize. A second reason is a lack of empirics; these “sites of transfer” (Hudson & Kim, 2014, p. 496) are challenging for researchers to access, trace, observe, and follow actors across time and space to better understand causal relationships (McCann & Ward, 2013; Wood, 2016). A third reason is that there exists few, if any, theoretical frameworks that untangle the dynamics of learning through policy transfer, accounting for different contexts, underlying conditions, and adaptive effects. The heuristic value of such a framework would be beneficial to the research community.
This thesis aims to explore these unresolved issues and contribute to gaining a more complete understanding of how learning at the ‘site of transfer’ occurs and potentially assimilates from the individual and collective to wider circles. Transport planners and researchers would benefit from a more explicit understanding of how policy transfer enables learning – and how that learning translates into practical knowledge that influences organizational and institutional capacity for action. Should policy transfer serve a valuable instrument to governments (Stead, 2016), its role in learning has yet to be clarified (Marsden & Stead, 2011). To the degree policy transfer can help solve contemporary “wicked problems,” understanding organizational and institutional conditions and mechanisms of learning in the process is duly needed (Weber & Khademian, 2014). Such an understanding could expose linkages between the aforementioned barriers and uncover new ways of governing the transition to sustainable mobility, a nascent topic of interest (Curtis et al., 2019; Glaser et al., 2020; Marsden & Reardon, 2017).

Through five substantive chapters, this thesis extends this body of research by investigating policy transfer as a learning process aimed at building strategic capacity. Its overall objective is to generate new understandings of learning that can further current research efforts and offer potential solutions for the practice of policy transfer triggered by experiences in other contexts. This project has taken an article-based approach, meaning that each chapter represents a stand-alone article which has been published (Chapter 2, 4, 5), is under review (Chapter 3), or has been submitted (Chapter 6) to an international peer-reviewed journal. Adopting a mixed method research design, each chapter uniquely explores underlying individual, organizational and institutional conditions possibly conducive to learning and strategic capacity building.

In this Introduction, I first clarify the theoretical foundation of this work (1.1) and a summary of the knowledge gaps (1.2), highlighting the relevance of the work for the field of transportation planning. I then describe the aim of research (1.3), presenting the research questions, which also guide the structure of the thesis, leading to an overview of the research design (1.4).
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Term or Concept</th>
<th>Definition</th>
<th>Main Reference</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Actors</td>
<td>“Individual members of organizations who are in a position to shape organizational behavior”</td>
<td>Wolman &amp; Page, 2002, p. 478</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Knowledge Transfer</td>
<td>“The process through which one unit (e.g. group, department, or division) is affected by the experience of another”</td>
<td>Argote &amp; Ingram, 2000, p. 151</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Policy Learning</td>
<td>“A process of exercising a judgement based on an experience or some other kind of input that leads actors to select a different view of how things happen (‘learning that’) and what courses of action should be taken (‘learning how’)”</td>
<td>Zito &amp; Schout, 2009, p. 1103</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Policy Transfer</td>
<td>“Knowledge about how policies, administrative arrangements, institutions and ideas in one political setting (past or present) is used in the development of policies, administrative arrangements, institutions and ideas in another political setting”</td>
<td>Dolowitz &amp; Marsh, 2000, p. 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sites of Transfer</td>
<td>“Ephemeral spaces of knowledge production and circulation...where encounter around ideas directs and invigorates policy circulation”</td>
<td>Temenos &amp; McCann, 2013, p. 346</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strategic Capacity</td>
<td>“The ability of an urban governance network “to anticipate and influence change through planned, intelligent, and coordinated decisions and actions”</td>
<td>Based on Honadle, 1981, p. 577</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Study Visit</td>
<td>“Short visits in which a delegation of people travels to another place to experience something with potential to improve their organizations”</td>
<td>Montero, 2017, p. 336</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Urban Cycling Environment</td>
<td>“Urban environment in which cycling is a dominant transport mode”</td>
<td>Nello-Deakins &amp; Harms, 2019, p.11</td>
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</table>

Source: compiled by author
1.1 Theoretical background

This thesis consciously incorporates an interdisciplinary approach to the study of transport policy, responding to calls in transport policy for the added value of such efforts (Bertolini et al., 2008; Pojani, 2020). Specifically, theoretical contributions are incorporated from fields more advanced in their awareness and application of processes around learning, knowledge production, and capacity building. While each substantive chapter in this thesis integrates these perspectives into cohesive arguments, this section summarizes literature embedded in the main concepts of this thesis: (1) learning in the policy process, (2) policies in action and ideas on the move, and (3) building strategic capacity. For the reader’s reference, Table 1.1 provides an overview of main concepts and definitions.

Learning in the policy process

Each chapter describes in more detail various theoretical backgrounds of this overarching concept. While it is outside of the scope of this introduction to fully detail this rich and vast body of knowledge (useful summaries include Dunlop & Radaelli, 2013, p. 599–601; Grin & Loeber, 2006), I outline several strands which brought focus to my research.

This research explores learning in the context of the policy process. Within the discipline of political science, there is a long history of questioning how learning occurs and can improve governing processes (for example, see seminal contributions from Hall, 1993; Heclo, 1974; May, 1992; Sabatier, 1988). Theoretical approaches to policy learning vary subtly, but most delineate “an improved understanding of cause-and-effect relationships in the light of experience” (Meseguer, 2006, p. 38). Learning is evidenced through change in behavior (Heclo, 1974) or in beliefs (Hall, 1993); such changes can occur on the level of an individual or also within an intersubjective process encompassing an organization or collective of individuals (Zito & Schout, 2009). One common denominator of the process is that it occurs among actors – individuals representing organizations or institutions, who are involved in decision-making or who influence decisions (May, 1992). In this way, policy learning denotes a social or collective process (Hall, 1993), often implicated by wider socio-political circumstances and institutional structures (Steele, 2011). Due to the rather widespread agreement that learning in the policy process involves actors themselves and valuably emphasizes change,
this thesis acknowledges the useful definition of policy learning provided by Zito & Schout (2009):

“A process of exercising a judgement based on an experience or some other kind of input that leads actors to select a different view of how things happen (‘learning that’) and what courses of action should be taken (‘learning how’).” (p. 1103)

This definition is relevant to this research due to its integration of two distinct phases in the learning process: one being an acquisition or input phase and the other being an action-oriented output phase. Due to this dynamic, among other reasons, many scholars are turning to disciplines with well-developed theoretical and empirical insights on learning, namely education and organizational studies (Dunlop, 2009, 2015; Heikkila & Gerlak, 2013; Wolman & Page, 2002). In the field of education (explored in Chapter 4), learning is conceived as a complex set of non-linear processes influenced by internal and external conditions and applied in daily life (for a detailed overview, see Loeber et al., 2007). A rich history of learning theories espouse various conditions through which an individual develops and becomes proficient at understanding and applying concepts in new situations; seminal contributions include, for example, experiential learning (Kolb, 1984), transformative learning (Mezirow, 1997), and self-directed adult learning (Merriam, 2001).

Seminal theories from the disciplines of organizational learning and management (explored in Chapters 2 and 5) have merged with policy learning in recent years. These bodies of literature are vast, each with its own vocabulary and defining features, for example “double-loop learning” (Argyris & Schön, 1978), “absorptive capacity” (Cohen & Levinthal, 1990; Zahra & George, 2002), and “knowledge creation” (Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995). Generally, organizational learning is defined as the ability and capacity of an organization and its members to identify, examine, and resolve problems (i.e., Argyris & Schön, 1978). Problems and procedures can be corrected through knowledge transfer, “the process through which one unit (e.g., group, department, or division) is affected by the experience of another” (Argote & Ingram, 2000, p. 151). Organizations that can transfer knowledge effectively retain competitive advantage, maintain higher productivity, and are more likely to endure external pressures than organizations less capable of knowledge transfer (Argote & Ingram, 2000; Cohen & Levinthal, 1990; Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995). However, underlying organizational norms and values influence the process (Cohen & Levinthal, 1990; Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995; Zahra & George, 2002). Although the policy learning literature has used concepts from these disciplines to generate
valuable taxonomies and catalogues of learning in the policy process (i.e., Dunlop, 2009, 2015), a key complaint is that empirics of actual learning experiences of actors, or the transfer of learning to wider circles, remain largely unexplored (Hudson & Kim, 2014; Marsden & Stead, 2011; Moyson et al., 2017).

**Policies and ideas on the move**

Searching for policy solutions in other jurisdictions is an activity centuries-old; however, how that search influences the trajectory of policy reform garnered significant theoretical interest in the 1990s, mostly in the realm of public policy. One of the general assumptions outlined in this ‘first wave’ of theoretical work is that governments have limited capacity to solve complex problems and thus look to other governments which have, for example, attained a desirable outcome or have implemented a particular policy instrument(s) in light of a similar, related challenge (Rose, 1993). A notable milestone in this era is the widely-cited policy transfer framework put forth by Dolowitz & Marsh (2000). Policy transfer has been described as another type of policy learning, along with other derivatives (for a full discussion see Pojani, 2020). Their framework – a heuristic, according to the authors (Dolowitz & Marsh, 2012) – proposed a catalogue of concrete questions that define the process: why policies are transferred, who is involved, what is transferred, sources used, effectiveness, and barriers (see Table 1.2).

**Table 1.2 Policy transfer framework**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Why Transfer?</th>
<th>Who is involved in transfer?</th>
<th>What is transferred?</th>
<th>From where?</th>
<th>Degrees of Transfer</th>
<th>Constraints on Transfer</th>
<th>How to demonstrate policy transfer</th>
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<tr>
<td>Voluntary</td>
<td>Elected officials</td>
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<td>Lesson drawing</td>
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<td>Emulation</td>
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<td>rationality)</td>
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Source: Marsden & Stead (2011) as adapted from Dolowitz and Marsh (2000, p. 9).
The framework summoned a litany of debate, arguably launching another wave of scholarly work that firmly criticized the rationalist underpinnings (i.e., Evans & Davies, 1999; Stone, 2001). Critics argue that the framework presents an overly simplistic understanding of the process of how policies, sometimes in the form of ideas or knowledge, spread or move from one government to another. This wave instead emphasized the role of politics, arguing that socio-political factors, such as actor agency, power structures, and policy networks, give rise to certain policy models as do “transfer agents” mobilizing them (i.e., Meseguer, 2006; Radaelli, 1995; Stone, 2004).

Stemming from the ‘mobilities turn’ in the geography domain (i.e., Sheller & Urry, 2006), policy mobilities underscores aspects of power, politics, and relations in the movement of policy knowledge (McCann & Ward, 2012; Peck & Theodore, 2010). This perspective, also firmly rejecting the rationalist approach of policy transfer, positions learning in this context as inextricably linked to “sites of encounter, persuasion, and motivation” where policy “elites” play a crucial role to “condition,” “direct and invigorate” ideas (Temenos & McCann, 2013, p. 346). Learning is shaped by actors deploying expertise and truth claims in settings of learning that crucially promulgate social interaction between elite actors (Cook & Ward, 2012; Temenos & McCann, 2013). One criticism of the policy mobilities approach is the tendency “to downplay the importance of structures and institutions” (Dolowitz & Marsh, 2012, p. 343). Nevertheless, both camps agree on the benefits of deploying a variety of theories and conceptualizations to address the multifaceted process of learning inherent in the spread and development of policy ideas; however, the understanding of how actors learn about new ideas, policies, or programs from within the process and at “the sites of transfer” (Hudson & Kim, 2014, p. 496) remains underdeveloped (Moyson et al., 2017).

Despite conceptual disagreements, various theoretical strands seem to agree on the peculiar role of “experiencing a policy in action” (Rose, 1993), with actors traveling to “specific identifiable localities that have gained professional recognition as a model or ideal to follow” (Hudson & Kim, 2014, p. 497). Many argue that it is through such ‘study visits’ where actors “look, learn, and listen” (Cook & Ward, 2011, p. 2523) and gain “first-hand experience” of the policy (Rose, 1993). Rose (1993) called these visits an essential first step in “lesson-drawing”. A burgeoning base of literature (further described in Chapters 3, 4, 5) has begun to document and explore this seemingly increasing phenomenon, mostly in the policy and geography domains.
(Gonzalez, 2011; Hudson & Kim, 2014; Wood, 2015). Some hint that since the trips are “focused on work-related learning” (Cook & Andersson, 2018, p. 111), the experiences can unlock “potential to improve their organizations” (Montero, 2017, p. 366), insinuating that learning transfers from the individual into wider circles. Overall, however, insights have not been generated about effectiveness of study visits or specific characteristics that facilitate knowledge transfer to wider circles. This thesis seeks to uncover such characteristics, including details of learning processes and mechanisms, to enable a clearer picture of processes that facilitate learning.

**Building strategic capacity**

The *strategic capacity* of a (public) organization – or many connected organizations – to effect change, often through *strategic planning*, plays a central role in urban governance studies (Healey, 1998; Innes, 1996; Salet et al., 2003). The rise of strategic planning has at least partially satisfied the core aim of the practice of urban planning to connect and project urban visions with concrete actions and evaluate performance (Poister et al., 2010; Streib & Poister, 1990). However well-intended, many urban planning and public policy scholars debate the merit of such rational decision-making processes (Bryson, 2018; Healey, 2007; Mintzberg, 1994), and attribute continued fragmentation and tension in public sector management to the principles of strategic planning (Moore, 1995). In a desire to move away from the rational perspective, scholars conceptualizing strategic capacity propose an adaptive or deliberative approach to managing uncertainty and complexity in urban governance (Healey, 2007; Salet et al., 2013). Especially beneficial for dealing with uncertainties, shifting the focus from strategic planning to strategic capacity encourages a focus on “accepting adaptation as a necessary feature of planning process and using it to add value” (Giezen, 2013, p. 727).

Relative to the literature investigating strategic planning, that focusing on strategic capacity in urban and transportation planning pales in comparison (Giezen, 2013; Healey, 2007; Salet et al., 2003; Salet et al., 2013). This focused body of work recognizes the continuous interaction between context and process, and that decision making materializes from emergent dynamics embedded in this environment. A variety of important qualities that might enhance strategic capacity include dialogue and mutual learning (Innes, 1996; Mintzberg, 1994). Some describe strategic capacity as constructed through a
collective, unpredictable, “creative process of imagination and discovery” (Healey, 2007, p. 191). Others describe strategic capacity as the “way planning and decision-making processes are organized” (Giezen, 2013, p. 725). While definitions somewhat diverge, attention is directed towards actors engaged in the process. Perceptions of motivation and capacities are important not only “to see the potential in on-going processes, new initiatives, and new ideas” (Healey, 2004, p. 18), but also to act strategically. In this way, the “combination and recombination of actions” shape the process and its outcomes (Giezen, 2013, p. 727). These perspectives implicitly call for organizational learning capabilities and underscore the need for public organizations and their networks to engage in intentional, but adaptable change processes.

Management science offers valuable insights that can advance understandings of strategic capacity building. “Capacity building”, a concept popular since the 1970’s, cannot be rigidly defined but interpreted as a continuous, long-term approach to learning and development, supported by human and capital resources directed towards competence or capability development (Eade, 1997; Honadle, 1981). In this way, capacity building is linked to “an organization’s capability for strategic action” that “affect long-term growth and development” (Lenz, 1980, p. 226). The concept and its applications have a rich academic tradition, especially in social and organizational sciences, along with related concepts and derivations, including organizational learning (Argyris & Schön, 1978), absorptive capacity (Cohen & Levinthal, 1990), knowledge creation (Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995), and communities of practice (Wenger, 1998). Capacity-building frameworks continue to be relevant in examining contemporary issues of sustainability governance at the municipal level (Brown, 2007; Wang et al., 2012). Its applications are found in an array of disciplines, commonly public health, community development, and urban planning, however appear less explored within the transport domain.

1.2 Knowledge gaps

Although each chapter presents its own perspective on the specific gaps in research that remain unfulfilled, and Chapter 3 provides an in-depth overview of research in transport policy transfer, I briefly synthesize several key gaps below that this research seeks to redress.
Unresolved understanding for how policy transfer contributes to wider learning

An expectation reckons that by engaging with policy transfer, decision making processes can become more efficient and unlock “potential to improve [their] organizations” (Montero, 2017, p. 366). This insinuates that learning transmits from individuals involved and assimilates into wider circles, such as networks or organizations. However, scholars posit this dynamic is conceptually underdeveloped (Ettelt et al., 2012; Hudson & Kim, 2014; Marsden & Stead, 2011; May, 2013; Moyson et al., 2017; Wolman & Page, 2002). Theoretically, the tendency to utilize the policy transfer framework to assess learning in policy transfer, while valuable, insufficiently addresses learning phases, settings or mechanisms in policy transfer that facilitate knowledge transfer to an organization or inter- organizational context (Wolman & Page, 2002). For example, policy transfer and learning are often bundled, not necessarily as one process but a lack of distinctions (for example, between phases of learning) muddle the ability to operationalize and measure learning. Pre-existing conditions, previous experiences with policy transfer, or other on-going dynamics of the learning party are often bypassed, overlooking potential underlying factors. Furthermore, by and large, this body of literature prioritizes policy adoption or implementation (including failure), as the primary outcome of policy transfer, while other ‘outcomes’ of learning remain obscured. If policy transfer is to remain a valuable “instrument” to governments, the role of learning needs clarification, at minimum.

This thesis pursues filling this gap with novel conceptualizations of learning through policy transfer (i.e., Chapter 4), testing seminal theories that aim to measure this particular phenomenon (i.e., Chapter 5), and adding a novel theoretical framework (Chapter 6) which embeds learning and policy transfer in broader capacity building processes. The intention here is not to undermine the value in understanding which policies or technical solutions are sought or transferred (or not), but by focusing attention on the learning process, mechanisms can be isolated and exposed. This extends previous work which has applied organizational learning theories to policy transfer (Wolman & Page, 2002) by focusing attention on the learning process, proposing mechanisms, and contributing outcomes beyond policy adoption.
**Lack of empirics from ‘on-the-ground’ actors and transport practitioners**

Despite the prevalent trend of ‘city-to-city visits’, knowledge exchange, and other means of policy dissemination and circulation, relatively scarce studies empirically examine these ‘sites of transfer’. As Chapter 3 finds, a main drawback of the current state-of-art in transport policy transfer research is that empirics often draw from ex-ante (or hypothetical) policy analysis or retrospective qualitative interviews (see Chapter 3). While these studies offer valuable insights regarding patterns of policy adoption, actual learning experiences of individuals or groups, or the transfer of learning from the individual to wider circles, remain largely unexplored. Cross-sectional, retrospective designs often miss temporal dynamics relevant for analyzing learning processes and have been described recently by policy scholars as “methodologically imperfect...for gaining leverage on learning” (Moyson et al., 2017, p. 174). Longitudinal, qualitative approaches, including ethnography, are needed for analyzing learning to better account for the dynamics of relationships, the time it takes for behaviors to change and new patterns to evolve (i.e., as found in Chapter 2).

In the transport policy domain, calls have been made to more actively engage “with real world policy” and “realities on the ground” in effort to tighten the distance between research and practice (Marsden & Reardon, 2017, p. 245). To confront this gap, this thesis empirically engages with the experiences of ‘on-the-ground’ practitioners and actors involved in the decisions and delivery of urban transport infrastructure. This thesis employs a mixed method approach explicitly aiming to expose individual and collective learning processes ‘as they happen’, including survey metrics, ethnographic fieldwork, and a longitudinal study. By accumulating these experiences, attention is paid to multi-level inputs to learning and a range of outputs. This is a main reason, and ambition of this thesis, to expand how policy transfer is researched in this field: to generate new understandings of learning that can further current research efforts and offer potential solutions for transportation planning practice triggered by experiences in other contexts.

**Lack of multi-disciplinary research on policy transfer and in transport**

Despite the many calls for multi-disciplinary studies in transport policy (Bertolini et al., 2008; Pojani, 2020), relatively few have filled this gap (Giezen et al., 2014; Gifford & Stalebrink, 2002; Vergragt & Brown, 2007). The complaint also resonates more broadly for policy transfer as a topic (McCann & Ward, 2013). Notable exceptions exist; for example, Ettelt et al. (2012) employ knowledge utilization...
theory, Dunlop (2009) draws from education literature, and De Jong & Edelenbos (2007) refer to Communities of Practice theory, all exploring the role of ‘transfer agents’ in policy transfer. To maximize insights for the transport domain, the thesis turns to conceptual knowledge from disciplines more advanced in their awareness and development of approaches to assess learning. Each empirical chapter in this thesis has explored disciplines outside of urban and transportation planning and experimented with alternative theories in order to pursue conceptual development and offer innovative pathways for future investigation. Chapter 2 generates a multi-disciplinary foundation for the rest of the research. Building on this base, Chapter 4 reaches to the education domain to employ ‘situated learning theory’ and Chapter 5 gathers insights from management science and organizational learning to examine knowledge transfer.

1.3 Research objective & questions

With the backdrop presented above, the objective of this thesis is to empirically study and provide a better understanding of how actors engage in the complex task of acquiring knowledge and experience about sustainable transportation solutions from elsewhere; how they mobilize that knowledge with and through their networks and organizations; and how their learning experiences, triggered in foreign contexts, can build strategic capacity to engage with contemporary transport issues. Therefore, the main research question of this project is articulated:

How can learning through policy transfer build strategic capacity to reshape urban transport policy?

In exploring this overarching question, the thesis contributes novel conceptual frameworks, critical analyses and empirical evidence to the wider body of knowledge regarding policy transfer and learning processes. My research identifies policy transfer as a latent channel for collective learning and unearths potential mechanisms and conditions of the process that could be better leveraged. This project also consciously devotes efforts to understanding a policy area particularly relevant in contemporary transportation governance aimed at a transition to sustainable mobility –
bicycling. As such, the thesis is also cognizant of global initiatives to address the climate emergency, normative visions of the transition to sustainable mobility, and its own motivation to support (local) government processes pivoting away from car-dominance and towards sustainable modes.

This research project comprises of articles, as opposed to a monograph. A clear advantage is that the published chapters (2, 4, 5) have undergone the peer-review process, which has resulted in greater clarity of arguments and, overall, more refined products. A downside for readers of this thesis might be repetition of theoretical arguments and justifications of approaches. Unfortunately, this repetition cannot be avoided as each chapter has been uniquely tailored to meet requirements of particular journals. An additional challenge of the article-based approach is that over the course of four years, the topics addressed in this thesis and my own conceptual understanding have, inevitably, evolved. Such is the sinuous, evolutionary journey of learning. The challenge at this ultimate step in the trajectory, then, is to create a seamless whole of somewhat disparate halves (or fifths, in this case).

While the overarching research question serves as a foundation for the thesis, sub-research questions (described next) were identified to operationalize the main inquiry; an overview is provided in Table 1.3. Following this introduction, each substantive chapter tackles a sub-research question in its own way, progressively deepening insights towards the culminating chapter (6), which advances a theoretical framework illustrating how learning through policy transfer could build strategic capacity. Chapter 7 concludes the findings of the thesis and suggests further areas of research. The Epilogue rounds off the thesis by reflecting on the research, linking to current affairs and applications in practice.

**How is learning conceptualized and what conditions of learning are linked to building strategic capacity?**

Chapter 2 begins to construct the theoretical foundations of this thesis by examining how learning and strategic capacity building are conceptualized and measured in the domains of education, organizational development & human resources, environmental sciences, and business strategy and management. Through an extensive and exploratory literature review, the aim is to identify relevant theoretical constructs of learning and crucial organizational conditions of strategic capacity.
The findings feed as input to subsequent chapters.

*This chapter has been published as*

**To what degree does the literature on policy transfer in transport engage with learning and what factors of learning can be gleaned?**

Chapter 3 bolsters the foundation of the thesis with a *systematic literature review* of 53 papers in transport policy transfer research from 2011–2019. Using an adapted codebook methodology, the specific aims include to (a) critically assess the degree to which transport literature engages conceptually and empirically with the learning in policy transfer and to (b) identify of hierarchy of factors that drive learning in policy transfer. The findings provide further justification for the thesis’ research objectives.

*A revised version of this chapter is currently under review at the journal Transport Reviews.*

**How do transport professionals learn about sustainable transport policies at the ‘site of transfer’?**

Chapter 4 centers on actor learning and the acquisition of knowledge at the ‘site of transfer’. This chapter uses a mixed method design in order to (a) assess general trends in learning with transportation professionals and (b) isolate variables in the learning process that emerge as priorities at the learning setting. The empirics draw from a practitioner conference on cycling, located in the Netherlands. A questionnaire with participants (n = 293) is combined with ethnographic fieldwork to examine the types of activities and the level of engagement from participants. Seminal theory from the education domain, situated learning theory, is used to structure the chapter.

*This chapter has been published as:*
Which mechanisms at the site of policy transfer facilitate (or hamper) knowledge transfer?

Chapter 5 builds on and provides a counterpart to Chapter 4 in two regards. The chapter aims to identify and assess characteristics of study tours which effectively facilitate knowledge transfer to wider circles, beyond the individual. To do so, study visits are conceptualized as “trainings”, borrowing concepts and metrics from human resource development (HRD) literature on “learning transfer” (acknowledged in Chapter 2). A mixed-method approach involved a survey (n = 109) with US-based city staff and officials who participated in study tours on cycling policies plus in-depth interviews (n = 15) with a panel of local actors from Denver, Colorado.

This chapter has been published as: Glaser, M., Blake, O., Bertolini, L., te Brömmelstroet, M., & Rubin, O. Learning from abroad: An interdisciplinary exploration of knowledge transfer in the transport domain. Research in Transportation Business & Management, 39, 100531.

How can learning through policy transfer build strategic capacity for municipal transportation agencies?

Chapter 6 unites findings from previous chapters to situate the concepts of learning, policy transfer and strategic capacity. I first propose a “drivetrain” theoretical framework that synthesizes and integrates the collection of concepts and interactive dimensions identified in the thesis, thus far. Three propositions offer analytical utility. I then apply the theory using longitudinal empirics from two U.S. cities (Austin, TX, and New Orleans, LA). Over three years, I follow learning trajectories of actors as they “learn from abroad”. Empirics include pre- and post-study visit interviews, combined with ethnographic participant observation during four study visits taking place in the Netherlands and Spain. The analysis highlights the strength of the framework and the original propositions are amended for clarity and precision.

This chapter has been submitted to the journal Progress in Planning.
How is learning Conceptualized and what conditions of learning are linked to building strategic capacity?

To what degree does the literature on policy transfer in transport engage with learning and what factors of learning can be gleaned?

How transportation professionals learn about sustainable transportation policy at the "site of transfer"?

Which mechanisms at the site of policy transfer effectively facilitate (or hamper) knowledge transfer?

How can learning through policy transfer build strategic capacity for municipal transportation agencies?

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<td>3</td>
<td>To what degree does the literature on policy transfer in transport engage with learning and what factors of learning can be gleaned?</td>
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1.4 Research design

Case study approach

With an article-based thesis, each chapter provides a detailed description of methodological choices and justifications. To avoid repetition, I define here the overall research design, the “case within a case” approach, followed by an overview of the methods chosen.
Learning and strategic capacity represent complex, non-linear processes which are not easily measured and where intervening variables are numerous and control variables difficult to hold constant (Duguid, 2005; Polanyi, 1966). To untangle intricacies, the empirical work in this thesis follows a case study approach (Yin, 1994, 2003). Case studies allow for the inclusion of many variables and facilitate an understanding of complex phenomena (Yin, 1994). However, a key methodological challenge is how to recognize those mechanisms and conditions within the context of policy transfer, attending to external validity and generalizability concerns and minimizing bias (Gerring, 2001). These concerns are more fully addressed in the methodological reflection and limitations sections in Chapter 7 (Conclusions).

Although I find it challenging to precisely locate a fitting classification, within the seemingly infinitude of case study types, I find “case within a case” an applicable descriptor (Gondo et al., 2009). While no single approach can provide complete guidance here, an appropriate pathway, in relation to the research question, is to trace a number of policy transfer activities (sub-cases) within a single area of policy interest (case). In this way, the scope of the inquiry is limited to allow for thorough analysis, enhanced reliability, and to generate theoretical insights (Gordo et al, 2009), which is the aim of Chapter 6. The illustrative policy area of interest is bicycling (i.e., the case); the policy transfer activities that the empirical work closely examines are organized (group) visits to other places (‘sites of transfer’) with the intention for learning about bicycling (i.e., sub-cases). In this thesis, these visits take the form of a conference (Chapter 4) and study visits or study tours (Chapters 5 and 6). Below I describe the case and sub-cases with more detail.

Case within a case: Organized travel to learn about bicycling policy

Urban bicycling provides a useful lens to simultaneously explore both concepts of policy transfer and strategic capacity building. As presented in Chapters 4, 5, and 6 more comprehensively, cities all over the world increasingly position bicycling as a key ingredient to achieve sustainable mobility policy goals, yet grapple with finding the right way to deliver or realize their ambitions. Research shows that the implementation of bicycling policies faces obstacles on multiple levels, from institutional resistance (Cox, 2008; Koglin & Rye, 2014; Lubitow & Miller, 2013) to lacking technical and managerial expertise (Dill et al., 2017; Pucher & Buehler, 2016). As such, knowledge on how to develop cycling policies and to design and
deliver infrastructure and other measures conducive for increasing cycling levels is in high demand (Pucher & Buehler, 2017). In these ways, bicycling represents an illustrative case from which to explore relevant considerations for how ideas, knowledge, and policies about bicycling travel and how capacity for policy implementation develops.

Especially examined in Chapters 4 and 5, several “urban cycling environments” (Nello-Deakin & Harms, 2019) have emerged as “best-practice models for cycling” (Sheldrick et al., 2017, p. 2740). Namely, many cities in the Netherlands, Denmark (especially Copenhagen), and Germany are known for their high rates of cycling and well-integrated policies (Bertolini & le Clercq, 2003; Pucher & Buehler, 2007). Other places have also begun to appear on the ranks of best practice, such as Seville, a moderate-sized city in southern Spain. Relatively recently, the city’s surge in cycling participation has been connected to its rapid implementation of a bicycle network – 164 km of ‘segregated cycle- tracks’ built in about 18 months – and the simultaneous roll-out of an extensive public bike-sharing system (Marqués et al., 2015). Based, for the most part, on the successes these places have experienced, they are sought for knowledge by those working on bicycling and transport-related issues in urban areas (Mild et al., 2013; Pucher & Buehler, 2008). Since ‘study visits’ have become an increasingly popular method to learn about the experiences of another context (Gonzalez, 2011; Hudson & Kim, 2014; Wood, 2014), it may not be surprising that seeking knowledge for cycling policy by means of study visits is a well-worn strategy.

It is from this angle that the empirical sub-cases unfold. Specifically, the empirics draw from visits of municipal staff and city officials traveling to urban cycling environments with an overall intention of learning about bicycling policies. Being based in Amsterdam, the Netherlands, has undoubtedly played a formative role in the decision to study these learning experiences. Furthermore, the choice to investigate the perspectives of U.S.-based informants is mostly guided by my own familiarity with American culture and urban governance as a native U.S. citizen.
Overview of methods

This research aims to extend the small but burgeoning body of academic work within the realm of transport policy transfer and to contribute empirics and theory with regards to learning in the process of policy transfer. A strength of the thesis is the variety and depth of the methods chosen to attend to these aims. Below I provide a brief catalogue of methods.

Literature reviews

Two extensive literature reviews serve as a foundation for this thesis. The exploratory literature review in Chapter 2 develops a database of learning and capacity building across various disciplines, with particular attention to mechanisms and conditions of building strategic capacity. The findings therefore crucially construct theoretical inputs and conceptual relationships. The systematic literature review in Chapter 3 uses an adapted codebook process to synthesize and assess critical factors for learning in transport policy transfer.

Large-scale survey instruments & statistical analysis

In Chapters 4 and 5, large-scale survey instruments are used in tandem with the application of qualitative methods. For Chapter 4, survey scales were developed as part of a larger conference evaluation instrument. I worked with the conference host, European Cyclists’ Federation, to distribute the survey at the end of the conference, of which I received 293 usable responses. Spreadsheets were used to analyze the data.

For Chapter 5, a digital survey instrument was adapted from previously-validated survey instruments to analyze how learning from study visits might have wider effects on “knowledge transfer” and “organizational learning”. The survey was sent to 312 transport professionals and city officials based in the U.S. who had previously participated in international study tours on bicycling policies. The survey returned 109 usable responses and data was analyzed in SPSS using correlation analysis and t-test. The variables returning robust correlation values served as input to subsequent foci in interview and ethnographic protocol for Chapter 6. For both surveys, open-ended, complementary questions were collated and coded with a narrative approach for content themes and patterns.
Pre- and post-intervention semi-structured interviews

Over the span of three years, Chapter 6 longitudinally documents and analyzes learning processes of municipal actors as they “learn from abroad”. The empirics include multiple pre- and post-study visit interviews with a panel of 12 actors from two U.S. cities, combined with ethnographic participant observation (described next). Interviews in 2018-2019 took the form of telephone interviews, while those occurring in 2020 were video calls. All interviews were recorded, transcribed, and deductively coded using software Otter.ai.

Ethnographic fieldwork

Ethnographic fieldwork in the form of participant observation was undertaken for Chapters 4 and 6. For Chapter 4, theoretical elements from situated learning theory supported the direction of about 50 hours of participant observation over the duration of the conference. Of predominant concern was sensorimotor, somatic, and social interaction within various conference settings. Findings served as a foundation for more intensive ethnographic fieldwork undertaken for Chapter 6. Empirics draw from 4-5 consecutive days of participant observation at separate study visits; two occurring in 2018 and two in 2019 (a total of 18 days). For all ethnographic fieldwork, case protocol, fieldnotes, audio recordings, and photographs supported data collection. Fieldnotes and audio recordings were transcribed immediately after fieldwork and coded using software (Otter.ai).

Desk research and secondary data

Research undertaken for Chapters 4, 5, and 6 included aggregating secondary data, such as records, reports, policy documents, and programmatic materials through desk research. For Chapter 4, the conference website and official program materials were included in analysis. Chapters 5 and 6 entailed gathering reports and policy documents from government and advocacy websites for case cities Denver (CO) in Chapter 5, and Austin (TX) and New Orleans (LA) for Chapter 6. Due to its longitudinal character, secondary data collection involved for Chapter 6 lasted from 2018-2021. Documents, policies, city council meeting summaries, updates published by advocacy and
government agencies, and local news media relevant to the research topic were systematically aggregated in a database.

1.5 Additional research and collaboration with practice

The trajectory of this PhD has simultaneously included several opportunities to further develop and apply the knowledge I've gained, on a transnational scale. These collaborations also demonstrate that, unlike many of my PhD colleagues, I returned to academia with 7 years of practical experience in the field of urban and transport planning. Here I briefly mention the most important and relevant collaborations thus far.

Outside of and in addition to the formal PhD research obligations, I’ve had the unique experience of acquiring and leading the university’s efforts in two European projects, INTERREG CYCLEWALK (2017-2021) and CIVITAS HANDSHAKE (2018-2022), both of which seamlessly fit into my area of academic interest. Both projects’ objectives keenly focus on the transfer of sustainable transportation policy solutions, in efforts to shift planning practices and citizen behaviors towards these modes of transport. Similarly, both projects acknowledge and position the Netherlands as a primary “exporter” of “expertise” and “best practice” knowledge on cycling policies. Finally, both projects employ study visits as the main method of collecting knowledge of best practices from other city regions, where project partners and various influential stakeholders join in the ‘learning-by-doing’ process. As such, participating in these project activities has allowed for my own continuous interaction with practice, echoing calls for improved linkages between planning research and practice (Straatemeier et al., 2010). The engagement with practice throughout the research trajectory has allowed me to reflexively activate an ‘experiential learning cycle’ (Kolb, 1984), whereby “abstract concepts are tested and reflected upon in new situations” (Straatemeier et al., 2010, p. 582).

In CYCLEWALK, my role as an advisory partner focuses on providing scientific and technical knowledge on cycling, walking, and their integration into urban planning. Although officially outside of the CYCLEWALK project deliverables, I had the opportunity to support and supervise the conceptualization, research, and writing for a collaborative endeavor to investigate the process of “best practice” creation in the context of the project. The findings of the study address the role of best practices in learning, critique “off-the-shelf” models that best practices
From Global Ideas to Local Action

reinforce, and offer lessons back to practice in the EU project context. This article was published in *European Planning Studies* (see Blake et al., 2020).

HANDSHAKE (a large consortium of 13 city partners and several supporting partners) offers a formal academic linkage to study various moving parts of the collective learning and policy transfer process in practice. As ‘work package’ leader, I take a more evaluative function, where the findings from the present thesis – and the study produced from CYCLEWALK above – will be directly applied to assess collective learning processes, including several study visits taking place in 2022 and, together with another evaluation partner, the on-going mentorship program within the project. These studies are slated to be complete at the culmination of the project, in 2022.

Beyond Europe, and in an effort to continue collaborations in my native context, I have authored (along with U.S. colleagues) two other publications that apply knowledge from this thesis to examine a particular aspect of contemporary transportation challenges. Specifically, both publications are motivated, rather unapologetically, by seeing physical changes to streets and street networks that would enhance the safety and use of “human-scale mobility forms” – mostly bicycling, but also other smaller ‘vehicles’ that are increasingly in demand. One publication takes the form of a commentary outlining a (mostly U.S.) perspective of city street governance hampered by outdated legislation and procedures and points to “an automobile-dominated regime that restricts innovation, learning and change” (see Glaser, Krizek, & King, 2020). The viewpoint productively proposes three principles, and avenues of future research, to support innovation and accelerate transformation in how streets are managed, two of which leverage the knowledge from this thesis: “harnessing the power of local government” and “reflexive learning that draws from strategic experimentation.” This commentary was published in *Transportation Research Interdisciplinary Perspectives* as part of a special issue on transport governance (Glaser et al., 2020).

The second publication, an original research article, extends this argument by analyzing “street experiments” induced by the COVID-19 pandemic, whereby hundreds of municipalities on a global scale are changing the
allocation of street space to favor bicycling, walking, and other forms of “essential” activity. After inventorying street changes in 55 U.S. cities, we analyze to what extent COVID-induced “street experiments” can support a transition to paradigms that prioritize sustainable urban mobility. Using literature from sustainability transitions, I lead the efforts to devise a rubric to systematically assess and locate transformative characteristics of the experiments. The aim was to extend on-going work in this area (Bertolini, 2020), to create a baseline of evidence for further investigation, including a 6-month follow-up assessment, and to also test characteristics that jive with many findings from this thesis. For example, in cities with more advanced experiments (i.e., in terms of longevity and spatial extension) we found that support and commitment from elected officials and cross-departmental collaboration occurred concomitantly. This research has been published in Transport Policy as part of a special issue on COVID-related transport policy implications (Glaser & Krizek, 2021).

Although the above-mentioned activities have occurred alongside the research for this thesis, they have nevertheless been fruitful exercises of collaboration and reflection, undoubtedly supplementing this thesis with unique perspectives and application to practice. I therefore provide the abstracts in the Appendix.
References


