From global ideas to local action

Building capacity to reshape urban transport policy

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Publication date

2021

Citation for published version (APA):


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Rush hour can be a mesmerizing and exciting experience in many Dutch cities.

Weteringschans, Amsterdam, The Netherlands
CHAPTER 8

Epilogue: Applications for the practice of policy transfer

One aim set out in the introduction of this thesis is to generate applicable knowledge for practitioners engaged in the arena of urban transport policy transfer. After closely studying this practice for over four years, I would like to take this opportunity to deliberately reflect on the lessons learned, as part of a “reflective practitioner” process (Schon, 1983). As such, I attempt to capture knowledge that, outside of the substantive empirical chapters, risks escaping articulation. Therefore, in this Epilogue, I continue the conversation with reflections regarding practical applications for the practice of policy transfer which have emerged from a combination of the research in this thesis but also from simultaneous collaborations with practice (i.e., European Commission projects). This discussion is differentiated from the previous chapter’s section outlining policy and governance implications from the research (Section 7.4). Here, I aim to speak to those in the public sector but also consultancies, NGOs, social enterprises, advocacy, universities, and other entities whose ambitions at least partially include practicing policy transfer in one sense or another; that is, they are part of the cycle of acquiring, disseminating, or promoting knowledge on urban mobility, and particularly cycling, from one place to another. While this thesis has focused on the case of urban cycling, I expect that these insights could be transferable to other transport policies on the global stage (identified in Chapter 3), for example road pricing, bus rapid transit, or TOD.

To provide structure, I segregate the reflections into those targeting ‘importers’ of knowledge (8.1) and the ‘exporters’ (8.2). I fully recognize that these categories might overlap and that there might be other categories missing. For example, those who initiate or fund projects that specifically intend to promote the transfer policies from one context to another are not explicitly included; however, this group might find value in observing the reflections of the other two categories in their efforts to organize or fund
policy transfer programs. Specific recommendations for EU-funded projects involving policy transfer were developed in another publication I have co-authored (see Blake et al., 2020). The below reflections may also be limited in the sense that there are an array of contextual constraints and opportunities that influence this area of practice. It is beyond the scope of this chapter to achieve a high degree of comprehensiveness; as such, I focus on points most closely related to the research presented in the preceding chapters, augmented by practical experience (i.e., European Commission projects). By no means is this a “how-to” guide for planning or executing policy transfer, knowledge transfer, or even a study visit, but rather preliminary insights to consider, ideally before such endeavors. I also integrate insights generated from three publications I co-authored which were outside the scope of this thesis but nevertheless relevant for this discussion (Blake et al., 2020; Glaser et al., in press; Glaser & Krizek, 2021). Finally, I present a working self-assessment tool at the end of Section 8.2 (see Table 8.1), which can be used as a starting point for reflecting (individually or within a team or organization) on the recommendations provided.

8.1 Lessons for Importers

Fully recognizing a wide variety of individuals and entities are informally and formally involved in the shuttling of transportation ideas from place to place, I’d like to focus more explicitly on those participating in the conscious effort to import lessons or knowledge from outside “best practice” contexts. In my experience, this segment may be more reflective of advocacy or consultancy efforts, those relating to the identity of “policy entrepreneur” (Mintrom, 1997), “inside activist” (Olsson & Hysing, 2012), or “boundary-pushing practitioner” (Taşan-Kok & Oranje, 2017), including those pursuing sustainable mobility agendas from within public agencies.

Windows of opportunity

The temporal and transitory aspects of local, regional, or national political tenures may present unique “windows of opportunity” when key actors and stakeholders might be especially open to new ideas (Kindgon, 1995). On-going or up-coming alterations in the socio-political landscape can also act as windows of opportunities, such as policy changes in the pipeline, project implementation trajectories, and executive staff or elected official changes. For example, in this research, Austin’s
pending 2020 Mobility Bond provided a backdrop for the study visit to build alignment between the transit agency and the development of the “All Ages, All Abilities” on-street (bicycle) network. Similarly, New Orleans’ Mayor Cantrell’s explicit support has escalated bicycle- and transit-friendly policies to the top of the agenda. Alternatively, a public health crisis has also appeared to open a window for re-imagining how city streets could better serve residents wanting to walk, bike and exercise during COVID stay-at-home restrictions (Glaser & Krizek, 2021). Our research showed that “street experiments” were highly transferable, but more successful when linked to on-going sustainability policies. These very temporal conditions may provide an altered stage prior to policy transfer activities, such as study visits, one more accessible to new ideas but also one to contextualize the knowledge sought after.

**A nested strategy & gate-keeper**

Of course, a practitioner’s opportunity to travel to a place with best practice knowledge (along with a political official for example) could arise at a moment’s notice and, given the situation, one may not wish to elapse that opportunity. While a perfectly acceptable goal is hoping the official is inspired by the experience, anticipation and advanced preparedness for such opportunities could amplify outcomes. Recognizing that there are many types of policy transfer activities with unique goals, the question here is whether and to what extent these activities are or could be a part of broader strategy to build capacity, where the strategic aim depends on the context, including windows of opportunities described above. This research offers a rationale to systematically understand, document, anticipate, and develop insights regarding how policy transfer activities dovetail with broader (inter-)organizational and (local) institutional issues and limitations. Understanding existing organizational blind spots from the perspective of a public agency has been found to be a highly beneficial learning process (Blake et al., 2020). The operationalizations presented in Chapter 6 could be tailored and locally assessed as an initial exploration. One implication here is ownership over this knowledge and accountability for its process. From a practical perspective, developing this knowledge could entail cross-sectoral knowledge exchange to map institutional differences, for example key alliances and “sticking
partners”, and to identify practices with potential to overcome barriers. While certain individuals might be pinned for this role, this research suggests that formal acknowledgement, for example, through allocation of hours, pursues institutionalizing a “philosophy of learning” commonly seen in “learning organizations” (Chapter 2).

A focus on experience

This research suggests that individual and group experience of study visits could be important determinants of outcomes, such as building trust, familiarity, and cognitive learning (Chapters 5, 6). The size and composition of the group (i.e., diversity of backgrounds and professions), a combination of informal and formal activities, and plenty of opportunity to ‘experience the policy in action’ – in other words, lots of bicycling (as physically possible). Planning to ensure a positive individual and group experience might first entail knowing about or researching the individuals invited to participate; understanding their backgrounds, past experience with field or study visits, and gauging their openness to new ideas, motivation for learning, and potential interest in policy change and alternative mobility futures. One could ask themselves, who (singular) would benefit most from this experience? It would be important to recognize that some individuals might be uncomfortable or unfamiliar with the idea of bicycling for daily transport; therefore, one might consider the way a study visit is framed, in terms of its intentions, and to ensure that participants are aware of and prepared to ride bicycles (i.e., in terms of physical abilities, attire, etc.). For those unable to ride a bicycle, it will be important to mitigate and accommodate different needs to ensure a positive, inclusive individual and group experience.

From the individuals, a next step would be to conceptualize the group itself. The question here could be, who (plural) would benefit the most from an open conversation with each other? Exploring ways to enhance genuine interest in and relatability to the policy topic at hand but also cultivate social cohesion adds to the group experience. Adult learning theory would recommend activities that activate intrinsic motivation and control over their own learning. Knowing the audience is crucial here, as an engineer and a policymaker would likely be interested in different perspectives of a transportation system. The challenge for those involved is to envision how these various perspectives come together to offer an intersubjective
experience. Findings this research suggests a combination of programmed activities, such as guided bike tours, meals and group reflection, but also informal social activities which are not programmed but emerge more spontaneously. The practical implication here, for someone planning or leading a visit, is avoiding the tendency to completely book the agenda and loosening the grip of the ‘hand-holding’ approach. The other practical consideration is the duration of events themselves. The study visits in this research lasted four days. While not an isolated variable in this case, sustained social interaction and engagement in conceptual learning on one policy topic appeared as an essential feature of the learning process (Chapter 6), and not characteristic of normal office life.

**Boundary work and arbiters**

This research showed the importance of establishing and promoting a safe arena conducive for honest exchange of experiences and perspectives, which enhance familiarity, trust, and cohesion. The implication here is to recognize the “boundary work” (Driessen & van Vierssen, 2010) that many policy transfer activities entail: a collective learning process with a neutral location and distinct identity. This does not suggest leaving all the ‘problems’ at home and unveiled, but rather acknowledging the concerns and perspectives of participants as valid, legitimate, and to authentically and explicitly ground the activities in a safe space of exploration, honesty, and openness. This is especially the case for group reflection and discussion opportunities. It may be the case that an organizer of the activity is not the right fit for the role of arbiter or facilitator due to their being ‘too close’ to the situation or representative of a certain perspective; perhaps someone else who is slightly ‘outside the circle’ can stimulate a more ‘unbiased’ and representative discussion of the concerns among everyone present. Just in the way cyclists themselves have been typified, city officials and transport professionals engaging in policy transfer may well be similarly “interested but concerned” (Dill & McNeil, 2013). Borrowing vernacular from Dill & McNeil’s (2013) research, this segment may be curious about more intently promoting or integrating, in our case, bicycling policies but they have concerns. For example, from this research, a policy maker may puzzle over how to appeal to their unique constituents; an engineer may have doubts whether local design guidelines permit necessary changes; a city attorney may have concerns about.
how alternative street designs impact liability. Realizations that lead to altered beliefs cannot be forced but this research suggests that perhaps characteristics of the design and delivery of the experience can be highly persuasive. For example, the location and atmosphere of meetings and group reflection sessions, and how these group sessions are facilitated might be impactful elements to consider.

8.2 Lessons for Exporters

It is also appropriate to recognize the role of cities which have achieved a ‘best practice’ status. In the case of bicycling, matured or more advanced cycling cities, may feel an obligation to share their knowledge, experience, and continued innovations. Matured cycling cities have an undeniable role to play in the exportation of cycling best practices and transfer of cycling knowledge. To augment a capacity-building approach to policy transfer, the following insights have been developed. Because this research did not assess existing practices of “exporters” these insights are not suggesting specific solutions or interpreting existing practices. It is written with a broad, practice-based audience in mind, but certainly those working at the intersection of ‘exporting’ and promoting best practice sustainable transport policies while simultaneously representing places which have achieved best practice status.

Recognize the value of the individual and collective learning experience

For those working at this very unique intersection, the study or site visit can be indispensable for disseminating knowledge, as this thesis argues specifically for cycling. Naturally, compared to secondary sources like reports, videos, or blogs, vivid experiences that study visits offer can play a persuasive role in facilitating knowledge transfer. Especially for cycling, there does appear to be a benefit to seeing cycling policy ‘in action’ and in a place that is ‘far ahead’ or matured, but also places that are recently advancing. In either context, this thesis concluded that the individual and collective experience was an important determinant in the learning process. For exporters, ensuring a positive experience first entails recognizing that for many international people, a study visit can be an intense physical, cognitive, and social experience. Many aspects cause fatigue, discomfort, anxiety, and stress – such as international travel, riding a bicycle, engaging with an unfamiliar policy topic, and socializing with high level officials from one’s own city. On top of these aspects,
there is a pressure to learn, to absorb, and to “make the most” of the trip. Accommodating these pressures and feelings means slowing down, allowing time to process, and making sure needs and comfort are met. Exporters might find value in critically evaluating certain programs and activities that use study visits. Examining the measures taken to anticipate a group’s needs and to overall provide a positive learning experience could unpack blind spots and highlight potential indicators of performance. Many variables of the design and delivery characteristics presented in this research could act as a starting point.

**Embrace different perspectives and different goals**

This research demonstrates that not only are there many different types of individuals learning about cycling policy, each with their own depth of experience and unique perspectives on transportation and urban challenges, but that these individuals approach policy transfer (and cycling) in discrete ways. In Chapter 6, we see that some individuals were keen to build relationships (among their own group) while others were focused on learning about rhetoric and storytelling. This suggests a rationale for ‘exporting’ knowledge in ways that are designed to target differing audiences, interests, levels of experience, and different trajectories of (cycling) policy implementation. Recognizing that it may be challenging to simultaneously meet numerous learning goals, it may be valuable to better understand and document the needs and backgrounds of participants and their ‘desired outcomes’ of the learning program. Although this knowledge may not necessarily be known and may be difficult to articulate, a broad understanding of these dynamics could provide valuable insights on the direction of the program, the activities, and topics for group reflection or discussion. At a minimum, an indication of the dossier of participants and their backgrounds or positions could help determine which speakers, hosts, sites or activities to include. Observations from this research suggest that some groups might benefit from a wider representation of diverse perspectives in the ‘exporter’ context (i.e., speakers and guides), including but not limited to gender, racial or ethnic background, culture, and differently-abled.
Explore intentions to partake in a collective learning process

Chapter 4 and 5 gained insights into the niche industry that plans and hosts international delegations to learn about Dutch sustainable transport solutions. Especially Chapter 5 noted that, both in the Netherlands and Denmark, international inquiries about cycling policies have risen so drastically that both Amsterdam and Copenhagen presently outsource many responsibilities to private or semi-private contractors. One could argue that this strategy, while perfectly logical given that the local governments have their own work to do, foments tension between the (business) development goals of private Dutch consultancies and a main premise of this research: simple replication of global best practices cannot be relied on to build local capacity. Although sharing best practices can be inspiring to the ‘importers’, knowledge transfer is much more complicated. This research gained evidence that city officials were not necessarily interested, even reluctant, to replicate best practices from the places they were visiting. Rather, there was a desire to discover what their own unique pathway would look like. The reflection here is to explicitly define the role of the ‘exporter’. At a conference (Chapter 4), expanding professional networks was a primary goal of many participants; whereas for a study tour, the focus was more inward, to deepen relationships among the group and “get on the same page” with policy goals (Chapters 5, 6). The implication here is to perhaps explore what role the ‘exporter’ or host shall play and to discuss expectations. Once again, this understanding could help anticipate the group’s needs and help guide the learning program.

On the other hand, findings from this research might suggest that the exporting host, guide, expert, etc., reflexively acknowledge their own position in the learning process. This might entail re- evaluating goals and objectives (as an individual, entity, etc.) in partaking in activities of policy or knowledge transfer, dissemination, or exchange. Deeper engagement with learning calls for a long- term, bi-directional, co-production process. One question to explore could be: is the goal to teach, to learn, to gain or maintain recognition? Understanding these underlying goals has implications on the process. For example, a study visit could aim to simply inspire participants, to provide knowledge (i.e., on a technical level), or also to co-produce knowledge among an ‘importing’ group. The implication for exporters is to recognize these differences and to consciously and authentically partake in a study visit as a learning process. Expectations outside of this may detract from the learning goals. What’s exciting is the potential to unlock that knowledge and to be included in that co-creation process.
### Table 8.1 Self-assessment guide for Knowledge Importers & Exporters

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Audience</th>
<th>Lesson</th>
<th>Guiding questions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Importers</td>
<td><strong>Windows of opportunity</strong></td>
<td>What up-coming or on-going opportunities could dovetail with policy transfer activities? e.g., policies or projects in the pipeline, organizational changes, executive staff changes, election cycles, impactful crises or current events that bring to light transportation issues</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>A nested strategy &amp; gate-keeper</strong></td>
<td>How can policy transfer activities be embedded in a broader strategy of capacity building? Who are key alliances and sticking partners? What practices have the most potential to overcome barriers? Who are the gate-keepers of this knowledge base?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>A focus on experience</strong></td>
<td>How can a positive individual and group experience emerge from a policy transfer activity? e.g., group composition, duration, etc. Who has potential interest in policy change and alternative mobility futures? Who would benefit most from this experience? Which institutional stakeholders would benefit most from an open conversation?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Boundary work and arbiters</strong></td>
<td>How can the policy transfer activity generate a shared understanding for and certainty in future decisions around the topic of interest? Who is in the best ‘neutral’ position to facilitate a dialogue with the group? What might be the concerns of those participating and how can those concerns be anticipated and responded to?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exporters</td>
<td><strong>Recognize the value of the individual and collective learning experience</strong></td>
<td>When engaging with professionals from abroad, what measures are taken to anticipate and provide an overall positive learning experience? e.g., consideration of personal and social needs such as comfort, abilities, feelings, fatigue, cognitive load</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Embrace different perspectives and different goals</strong></td>
<td>How does the learning program or activity meet a variety of backgrounds, perspectives and experiences? e.g., consideration of represented professions, genders, races, cultures, and differently-abled</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Align intentions to partake in a collective learning experience</strong></td>
<td>What is the role of the exporter, both from the perspective of the importer as well as exporter? What is the intention for the exporter to partake in the process? What is the learning goal for the exporter?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: compiled by author
References
Glaser, M., Krizek, K., & King, D. (n.d.). Accelerating reform to govern streets in support of human-scaled accessibility. Transportation Research Interdisciplinary Perspectives 7, 100199.