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# **‘We Nicked Stuff From All Over the Place’: Policy Transfer or Muddling Through?**

## **Abstract**

This paper explores current thinking about policy learning and transfer, using recent work on the ‘Americanization’ of UK active labour market policies as a focus of discussion. While it is clear that the UK *has* learned from the US in certain respects, academic debates about the US-UK policy relationship are marked by accounts of learning and transfer that depend on a highly rational interpretation of these processes. The paper reviews current debates in the policy transfer literature and applies a critical view of policy learning and transfer to key accounts of labour market activation policies before moving on to consider how useful the concept of policy transfer really is in an increasingly complex, plural and ‘de-institutionalising’ world.

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## Introduction

It has become something of an orthodoxy in recent discussions of ‘policy learning’ and ‘policy transfer’ that active labour market policies (ALMPs) in the UK owe a great deal to earlier innovations in the United States – particularly those occurring in the aftermath of Republican victories in Congress and the Senate in 1992 (Deacon, 2000; Daguerra, 2004). While there is clearly some evidence to suggest that the UK has indeed ‘learned from the US’, this paper aims to explore further the view that UK social policy – and specifically labour market policy – has somehow been Americanised. In the course of examining this question, the paper considers the wider issue of whether or not ‘policy transfer’ is a particularly useful notion. Does the concept pose an overly rational understanding of how policy is learned and transferred over space and time? And if it does *not*, then how much explanatory value does it really contain?

There is good reason to do re-assess current attitudes to policy learning and transfer on at least two counts. First, the wealth of recent work on this area indicates that these (separate but closely related) processes are extremely complex – the suggestion being that an explanation that relies too heavily on a one dimensional understanding of *international* policy transfer is likely to be overstating the case. It is clearer than perhaps it once was that a range of potential sources of learning and transfer exist, aside from the international dimension, that are likely to affect policy formulation in any particular national context. Recent research has illuminated some of the complexities associated

with a number of factors stretching from historical and institutional influences on policy making (Pierson, 1998, 2000; Béland, 2005), through the ever-significant role of ideology to issues concerning the influence of think tanks, pressure groups and non-state sources of learning (Evans and Davies, 1999; Stone, 2004).

A further reason for reassessing the idea that the US is somehow mainly responsible for the current stress on 'activation' and conditionality in UK welfare – and the implication that something called 'policy' can be learned and transferred in this way – has to do with the possibility that what were once conceived as institutionalised or embedded welfare arrangements are more fragile and open to transformation than they once were (Gilbert, 2002; Ellison, 2006). Paradoxically perhaps, the contention here is that, although institutional influences continue to play a role in shaping policymaking, de-institutionalising and 're-calibrating' pressures – both global and local – are adding to the complexity of policy learning and transfer in ways that undermine traditional welfare regime characteristics, and both pluralise and de-institutionalise sources of policymaking. For example, as the paper will demonstrate, it is becoming clear that the stress on 'work first' active labour market policies and the 'conditionality' that accompanies them is now less restricted to neoliberal welfare regimes than hitherto (Daguerre, 2007). Arguably, at least, the growing fragmentation and diversification of the sources of policy learning and transfer reduce the scope for 'rationality'. Despite Lindblom's (1959, 1979) classic insights about the 'muddled' nature of policymaking, policy transfer analysts too often underplay the complexity of the issues at stake. Too much weight is placed on the capacity for rational decision making about what

policies to transfer, when and how, at a time when welfare systems are becoming more porous and governance more 'recursive' (Bang, 2003; Crozier, 2008). These ideas will be considered in the concluding sections of the paper.

The paper is organised in the following way. An examination of the recent literature on policy learning and transfer will be followed by a critical assessment of the 'Americanisation' thesis. This, in turn, will lead to a discussion of the key similarities and differences between the US and UK understandings of activation and conditionality, and the policies deployed to develop 'activation' on both sides of the Atlantic. At this stage, the influence of other national governments will be considered in the context of a discussion that explores further sources and types of learning. The paper will not only make use of relevant academic literature but will also draw upon a series of interviews with four elite policy makers in the Department of Work and Pensions (DWP), each of whom has been centrally engaged in formulating New Deal policies in the UK since the late 1990s. Although the evidence from these in-depth interviews can only be indicative, or 'micro-representative', it serves to support some of the conclusions reached in the paper. The final sections of the paper will examine the case for diminishing path dependency in the light of extensive welfare state recalibration using the apparent export potential of UK labour market policies as an example of how measures once associated exclusively with neoliberal regimes are beginning to cross the 'regime barrier' (Esping-Andersen, 1990).

## **Policy learning and transfer in a complex world**

A brief overview of the core literature on policy learning and transfer suggests that it can be roughly divided into three levels of analysis – micro, meso and macro (see Evans and Davies, 1999: 363). Perceptions and understandings of policy transfer depend to a great extent on the particular level – or levels – chosen. As we shall see in the case of US-UK policy learning and transfer discussed below, micro-level analysis favours descriptive accounts of ‘who talked to whom and when’, from which conclusions about the relative strengths of particular influences are drawn. Meso-level analysis is primarily concerned with the roles of, and interaction among, policy networks and communities at both national and transnational levels, which opens onto the wider ‘immediate’ context of policy making. Macro-level analysis, finally, focuses on the broad backdrop to policy formulation across time and space, including for example, historical and cultural contexts, and the impact of large-scale social, political and economic change.

In practice these levels – and particularly the first two – are often conflated by analysts in an attempt to provide a comprehensive understanding of the plural nature of policy learning and transfer, but it is worth being aware of these different analytical stages because they act to remind us of the inherent complexity of the learning and transfer process. At the micro-level, assumptions about policy learning and transfer tend to be discussed in overtly ‘rational’ terms. Rose (2005), for instance, conceives policy learning in terms of a series of logical steps in which policy makers scan possible alternatives, settle upon particular sources of

learning, develop an understanding of how a specific model works, adapts it to the domestic context and so on. As Page and Mark-Lawson (2008: 54-55) suggest, however, policy learning of this kind is a rare phenomenon for a number of reasons, including the complexities involved in discovering how policies work in different countries, the intricacies associated with study trips and visits to potential sources of learning and, inevitably, the difficulties of applying lesson learned in different social, political and economic contexts.

In their policy transfer framework, Dolowitz and Marsh (2000) echo some of the issues outlined by Page and Mark-Lawson when they point to the multiple influences that can impact on policy making. They pay explicit attention, for example, to a number of core questions concerning the reasons why actors engage in policy transfer, who the key actors are, what policies actually get transferred, and the restrictions and constraints affecting the process. As they make clear, questions of this nature are not always easily answered. Even the ostensibly simple matter of 'who' is involved in policy transfer becomes complicated as different interests and institutions, differentially powerful actors and networks, and differentially influential time frames are added into the analysis. In their initial attempt to draw up their framework (Dolowitz and Marsh, 1996; see also Hulme, 2006), these commentators state that 'we identified nine main categories of political actors engaged in the policy transfer process: elected officials, political parties, bureaucrats/civil servants, pressure groups, policy entrepreneurs and experts, transnational corporations, think tanks, supra-national governmental and non-governmental institutions and consultants' (Dolowitz and

Marsh, 2000: 10). If, in addition to these categories, other contextual elements of the learning and transfer process are taken into account – such as the origins of particular policies, pressures to implement specific measures and structural constraints preventing implementation – the difficulties involved in coming to a comprehensive understanding of policy learning and transfer begin to become clear.

Adding to this pluralised perception of learning and transfer, Stone (2004: 549) suggests that 'learning is uneven and imperfect across different actors within a policy network' and consequently 'can be of different "orders": shallow, tactical or instrumental learning as opposed to deeper social or policy learning'. This insight points up the key difference between policy learning, on the one hand, and policy transfer, on the other. However universal the push towards a particular type of policy may be in terms of global policy trends, economic pressures and so on, there are likely to be a number of countervailing forces that conspire to mitigate their influence. So, for Stone (2004: 549), 'political and bureaucratic interests are constrained by electoral considerations, issues of feasibility, funding shortfalls, war or famine that prevent "harder" forms of transfer'. The argument, though, is that some form of 'transfer' can take place, but this is likely to be a 'transfer of policy knowledge but not a transfer of policy practice'.

Stone's distinction between 'soft' and 'hard' learning and transfer processes is important. Softer processes can be understood as those involving variegated sources of learning – sub-national, inter-national, supra-national, state and non-



state – that may contribute to knowledge in a particular area, which is subsequently developed into policy. The point is the degree of dilution. The softer the process the more likely it is that policies will be ‘inspired’ by, or at most ‘emulate’, those from elsewhere; the ‘harder’ the process, the greater the likelihood that attempts will be made to copy policies directly in ways that lead to more formal and possibly coerced institutionalisation (see Dolowitz and Marsh, 2000: 13). For present purposes, where labour market activation policies are concerned, the emphasis is upon soft processes that lead to emulation and ‘lesson-drawing’ (Holzinger and Knill, 2005) as policy makers attempt to incorporate a range of influences affecting particular policy areas. It is more difficult to find instances of directly imposed policy transfer amongst the mature capitalist welfare systems of the global North and West.

Although these micro- and meso-level considerations are highly important, not least because they point to the complexity of transfer processes, of equal significance are macro-level issues, which provide a broader understanding of the prevailing socio-economic and political contexts within which debates about learning and transfer are situated. One way of looking at the macro-level is to think in terms of paradigm shifts (Hall, 1993); another, not entirely unrelated, is to take note of historical institutionalist accounts of policy change (Steinmo, 1992; Pierson, 1998, 2000), which examine policy transfer through the lens of existing norms and arrangements that are held to constrain the nature and content of new measures. Both approaches inject a sense of ‘time’ into policy analysis while also attempting to account not just for the character but also for the speed of change.

Hall argues that the analysis of policymaking needs to be placed in the context of 'social learning'. Arguing that 'the process whereby one policy paradigm comes to replace another is likely to be more sociological than scientific' (Hall, 1993: 280), he distinguishes among first, second and third order changes, focussing in particular on the ways in which the different stages depict different characteristics of the policymaking process. So, for instance, first order change is restricted to elite civil servants and is incrementalist and routine, while second order change, similarly controlled by senior state officials, involves a more strategic analysis of policy, the development of new policy instruments and plans for strategic action. Third order change, finally, is concerned with a major 'paradigm shift' stemming from 'the accumulation of anomalies, experimentation with new forms of policy, and policy failures that precipitate a shift in the locus of authority over policy and initiate a wider contest between competing paradigms' (Hall, 1993: 280). Importantly, this contest 'may well spill beyond the boundaries of the state itself into the broader political arena'.

Clearly, Hall's piece was written some time ago and arguably before understandings of policy transfer in a complex, globalising environment had been given fuller consideration. There is certainly a tendency to regard first and second order policymaking as primarily the inward-looking activity of governmental elites operating within an autonomous nation-state (see Nordlinger, 1981) and it is no longer clear that even relatively minor 'intra-paradigmatic' changes can be understood in this manner. Be that as it may, Hall's third order change moves

towards what he calls a 'state-structural' position which accords 'interest groups, political parties, and other actors outside the state an important role in the policy process' (Hall, 1993: 276). In his main example of the paradigmatic shift from Keynesian to monetarist macro-economic policies in the late 1970s and 1980s, Hall notes in particular the rising influence of the financial markets, which forced ad hoc adjustments on Labour governments in the 1970s, and the 'vast expansion in the outside marketplace for economic ideas' (Hall, 1993: 289) that provided the first Thatcher administrations with an authoritative alternative economic strategy to increasingly discredited Keynesian solutions.

Elements of Hall's approach can be found in historical institutionalist accounts of policymaking. If institutionalists rely less heavily on the role of agency than does Hall, they are also generally more sceptical about the scope for radical policy change at any level. Embedded arrangements and mechanisms ensure that policymaking is essentially path dependent (Pierson, 1998, 2000) and this tendency to adhere to the 'path' reduces the significance of exogenous learning and transfer in favour of incremental adjustment. Support for an institutionalist interpretation of policy learning and transfer comes from Manning (2006: 164 *our emphasis*), who has written that 'a detailed study of social policy advice by the OECD, over 25 years to 16 countries, shows that in all these countries policy advice was almost universally rejected by countries *unless they were already in the process of looking for that particular kind of solution*'. Manning (2006: 164-5) goes on to argue that 'we might surmise that policies will only fit depending on their place in policy sequences, dependent paths and slow processes'. When

considering policy transfer, then, the suggestion is that ‘a transferred policy might have quite different consequences depending on how, when and where it is adopted into a particular setting, and this cannot be simply read off from...what has worked elsewhere in the past’.

‘Context’, then, is the thing – and this observation should act as a caveat to those engaging in micro- and meso- level accounts of policy transfer. While what they have to say is certainly important, as we shall see below, there is every reason to pay close attention to institutional context, while avoiding a too rigid determinism. While institutionalism has much to tell us about the nature of policymaking and the need to be cautious about the impact of specific instances of learning and transfer, policies *do* change nevertheless. One ‘dynamising’ factor that needs to be taken into account is the role of ideas and the ways in which these can lend institutionalist accounts a degree of motility. Béland (2005), for example, argues that ideas have a certain autonomy and can influence perceptions of existing institutional arrangements. Although political institutions will shape the ways in which policy makers construct and select policy alternatives, micro- and meso- level analyses of the role of ‘policy entrepreneurs’, particular political actors’ support for specific ideas and so on are clearly relevant to a broader understanding of how policies are ‘framed’ ideologically (Béland, 2005: 10-11) – and indeed insights of this kind are one of the strengths of the accounts of policy transfer discussed below.

The point, though, is that if ‘ideas’ are one potential source of institutional change, presumably it is important to be aware of the conditions in which they become ‘acceptable’. Here wider matters relating to paradigm change may be influential, including the play of global economic pressures upon existing institutional arrangements and the positions of business, organized labour and other interests in relation to specific aspects of policy transfer. Evans and Davies (1999: 371) argued that a structurationist perspective can both encapsulate and help to explain multiple and differential causal factors such as these in which, on the one hand, processes of ‘globalisation’ and internationalisation facilitate policy transfer – and vice versa – while, on the other, international regimes use epistemic communities to develop and process ideas and ‘promote global awareness of certain policy problems and policy options’. Certainly where welfare state change is concerned, while there is good evidence to suggest that welfare institutions do not simply collapse in the face of structural challenges such as global economic pressures and indeed can be highly resilient (Swank, 2002; Rieger and Leibfried, 2003), it is equally clear that they are increasingly vulnerable to the push and pull of ‘structure’ and ‘agency’ – in the course of which they are often ‘recalibrated’ (Ferrera and Hemerjick, 2003).

Macro-level matters such as these need to be taken into account alongside explorations of micro- and meso-level processes of learning and transfer. Where the analytical mix is ‘right’ there will be a rich account of how a particular policy, or set of policies, has emerged in a particular institutional context. This account will involve macro-level scene-setting, including an analysis of structural or

'paradigmatic' changes and their likely influence on policy *learning*. Importantly, though, the impact of these changes needs to be traced at meso- and micro-levels in terms of how particular communities – pressure groups, transnational policy networks, transnational business communities – operate to push particular issues onto political agendas, and how significant individuals, or groups of individuals interact to produce particular policy outcomes. In this way, what gets *transferred* may well differ from what has been learned. Once the complexities involved in these different levels of interaction are taken into account, it is unlikely that the learning and transfer process themselves will appear to be entirely 'rational'. Taking labour market activation policies and the accompanying theme of 'conditionality' as the focus, what follows first examines arguments that suggest a predominantly US influence for the emergence of these policies in the UK before moving on to make the case for a considerably more plural, pragmatic and 'muddled' understanding of policy learning and transfer.

### **Methods note**

Alongside our consideration of theoretical debates about policy learning and transfer this paper utilises data generated in a small scale, qualitative study conducted with elite UK civil servants. The aim of the study was to explore the views of senior, non partisan, policy actors about how, and why, active labour market policies (ALMPs) had become a central and increasingly important element of successive UK governments' responses to unemployment and labour market inactivity. The study used qualitative techniques (Mason, 2002; Ritchie

and Lewis, 2003) to explore the views of top ranking civil servants in the Department of Work and Pensions (DWP) about the origins, influences and character of UK ALMPs. An appropriate elite respondent was identified and interviewed and other respondents snowballed from the initial contact. In order to protect the anonymity of respondents we cannot identify their positions within the DWP. However, all respondents had extensive experience of leading and delivering active labour market policies and research projects and were routinely involved in briefing ministers at the highest levels.

Four individual semi-structured interviews were conducted (by both authors) in Sheffield and at the DWP headquarters in London in July and August 2006. A semi structured question guide was used to focus discussions. Interviews lasted between one and two hours. All interviews were recorded on audiotape, transcribed verbatim and analysed using grid analysis and thematic coding techniques (Ritchie et al, 2003). A Nudist 6 computer software package was used to assist this process. Two basic ethical principles underpinned the fieldwork; informed consent and anonymity. As noted in the introduction the quotations of individual senior civil servants are used to illustrate and support discussions within the paper and they are indicative of shared views within our sample. Due to the seniority of their positions, and their location at the centre of the government's ongoing process of welfare reform, the civil servants who took part in this study were clear that any quotes used could not be attributed back to particular individuals. In order to protect the anonymity of respondents we do not, therefore, assign individual respondents with a particular contextualised alias/code name.

## **Labour market activation: The Americanisation thesis**

On the face of it there is much to support the view that UK active labour market policies, particularly those associated with New Labour's New Deals, were largely imported from the USA from roughly the mid-1980s onwards. Against a backdrop of social policy change and attempts at retrenchment (Pierson, 1994) beginning in the early years of the Thatcher governments, efforts to deal with rising unemployment moved quickly from attempts to adjust the unemployment figures to a sustained search for policies designed to keep unemployed people off 'passive' benefits and in touch with the labour market. In fact the shift towards policies that were commonly, if inaccurately, described as 'workfare' (i.e. work in return for benefit receipt) was fairly gradual under the Conservative government of the 1979-97 period. The Restart programme, which began in 1986, demanded that those unemployed for six months had to attend Jobcentres to show that they were actively seeking work – with non-attendance attracting benefit sanctions. As Peck (2001: 266) states, 'subsequently eligibility rules and "availability-for-work" tests were repeatedly tightened...the effect [being] to discipline those in the lower reaches of the labour market as well as the unemployed themselves'. So far as Conservative governments are concerned, this gradual move towards greater activation and conditionality culminated in the Job Seeker's Allowance (JSA), implemented in 1996, during the dying days of the Major government. Benefit payments under the JSA were based on insurance contributions for only six months before being means-tested, were conditional upon being available for, and



actively seeking, work, and signing the Jobseeker's Agreement – effectively a promissory note agreeing to take specified steps towards securing employment.

The advent of New Labour saw a dramatic enhancement of the principles that underpinned the JSA in the form of the various New Deals – particularly for those aimed at Young People and the long-term unemployed. As Dwyer (1998, 2000) has argued, New Labour made much more of 'rights and responsibilities', and enshrined an approach to labour market policy in particular – and to welfare in general – that has stressed 'conditionality'. Importantly, the right to passive benefits was removed and failure to take up one of the four work/training options offered made effectively compulsory by the imposition of punitive benefit sanctions. Subsequent initiatives (e.g. Job Centre Plus) have extended the reach of active welfare policy to other groups outside the paid labour market, with lone parents and sick and disabled people becoming a central element of the welfare reform strategy (Blair, 2002; see Stafford, 2003, 2005 for details). Whilst participants in the New Deal for Lone Parents (NDLP) are not yet compelled to seek work the social welfare benefits available to lone parents are becoming more conditional. Since October 2005 all lone parents with children aged fourteen plus who are claiming out of work benefits are required to attend compulsory work focused interviews (WFIs) at three monthly intervals (Stanley et al 2004) and the government has reiterated that lone parents have "a responsibility to engage more intensively with our employment advisers" (DWP, 2005a :8). As Allirajah notes a "significant extension of labour market conditionality for incapacitated claimants" which subjects them to "a workfare-style regime" (2005: 4) appears to have

occurred – and, moreover, enthusiasm for activation in governing circles shows little sign of abating. As the recent ‘Freud Report’ reiterates:

*The government has made a commitment to rights and responsibilities a central feature of policy... The report recommends maintaining the current regime for the unemployed, introducing stronger conditionality in line with the Jobseeker’s allowance for lone parents with progressively younger children and moving to deliver conditionality for other groups including people already on incapacity benefits (DWP, 2007 :9).*

Have these policies been transferred from the USA? If so, how and to what extent? That changes to labour market policies in the US *have* influenced UK policy makers is not in itself in doubt. The issue is the extent of this influence and what it may tell us about the nature of policy learning and transfer. An interesting feature of the Americanisation thesis is that debate divides between those who treat the US as the central source of policy inspiration (see King, 1995; Walker, 1998; Deacon, 2000, 2003; Peck, 2001; Daguerre, 2004) and others (Lødemel, 2004; Cebulla, 2005) who argue that, US policy, though important, has not been the primary influence on UK activation policy. Neither approach produces an entirely satisfactory analysis of the transfer process, although the latter certainly provides a more rounded account of it. We shall examine these approaches in turn.

### *US influence? The 'strong' approach*

Those who support this approach stress the longstanding nature of the US-UK relationship. As Daguerre and Taylor-Gooby (2004: 27) note, there has been a long history of 'policy contact, influence and transfer between the US and Britain as well as overlapping policy discourses'. They go on to argue that the relationship was strengthened during the Thatcher-Reagan years, Thatcher 'being especially interested in learning from workfare programmes experimented with in several American states in the 1980s' – and also note that, at the micro-level, 'Britain was heavily involved in joint visits at the administrative, academic and evaluation level to examine welfare to work programmes'. This history of transatlantic policy networks and 'epistemic communities' continued under New Labour – the Blair-Clinton relationship being particularly significant (King and Whickam-Jones, 1999). As Deacon (2000) has written, the work of particular American academics – notably Charles Murray, Lawrence Mead, Michael Novak and David Ellwood – on welfare dependency attracted first Mrs Thatcher and then Tony Blair to understandings of welfare that stressed the negative effects of passive entitlements and the importance of work. Certainly for Deacon, the ideas of these individuals helped to undermine what may be crudely described as the 'Titmuss tradition' in British social policy, which stressed the social significance of 'unconditional, non-judgemental welfare' (Deacon, 2000: 9), in favour of an approach that emphasised the centrality of paid work and the 'moral regeneration', social order and common values that were held to come from it (Deacon, 2000: 12).

Certain British scholars and politicians were apparently persuaded by these US arguments. Deacon points out that John Hills and Robert Walker, who produced research that confirmed the 'overwhelming importance of work' in the avoidance of poverty, were influenced by Ellwood's conviction that 'the long-term support system is jobs' (Ellwood, quoted in Deacon, 2003: 70). It is also well known that the Labour MP Frank Field, briefly New Labour's Minister for Welfare Reform, endorsed the view that responsibility and social obligation should be core principles of social policy. As Deacon (2000: 13) notes, 'there is an obvious similarity between Field's analyses and those of Charles Murray'. Similarly, Clasen (2005: 85-6) has stated that, 'the US debate with its emphasis on private responsibility and the notion of benefits potentially exerting a corrupting influence [has] resonated in speeches made by ministers in the UK since the late 1980s... [while] the perceived contribution of Clinton's welfare reforms to the electoral success of US Democratic Party played a relevant role in the development of New Labour's welfare-to-work agenda in the 1990s'.

At the policy level, the 'strong' approach argues that, although the target groups are rather different (single parents and minority ethnic communities in the USA, the unemployed, single parents and those of working age in poverty in the UK), there are clear affinities between the measures enacted. For example, in the USA the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA) (1996) introduced a severe work first regime and time-limited rights to welfare benefits in the form of Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) (see

Ellison, 2006; Daguerre, 2007). Meanwhile, New Labour in the UK introduced the various New Deals characterised, as we have seen, by increasingly demanding forms of conditionality, extended over time to a wider range of different groups outside the paid labour market (Dwyer, 2004, 2008; Clasen, 2005). As Daguerre and Taylor-Gooby (2004: 31) point out, this ‘evolution of the New Deal...suggests that a case for policy convergence between the UK and the US is becoming stronger’. They note (Daguerre and Taylor-Gooby, 2004: 32-3) how the formulation stages of the New Deal were characterised by Treasury-led expeditions to the US to look at various welfare reform policies – and also how the ‘consolidation’ stages were also accompanied by a continuing tendency to ‘draw lessons from new developments in American welfare to work programmes’ even after Clinton left office.

The general sense of the importance of US thinking for New Labour’s active labour market policies was clearly recognised by our respondents in the DWP. For example

*There was a lot more contact and interchange between this government and the US in the 1997 to 2000 period under a different US administration....I think there was certainly a strong perception here at both political and senior official level that the US under Clinton had demonstrated what you could do... that you could do rights and responsibilities, that is, in a way that you would get away with politically and would produce good results economically...So I think there was quite a lot of that general mood music.*

### *Overstating US influence?*

There is no intention to create a straw argument here. Each of the observers whose work has been discussed above make clear the political, social and cultural differences that exist between the US and UK. Even the concept of 'welfare' itself has different connotations in America, as is well known, and Deacon (2000) also acknowledges the significant differences between the US and UK political systems as well as their very different histories of welfare, and differing cultural attitudes to vulnerable groups like single parents. Daguerre (2004: 47) notes that reform processes in the UK have tended to be more incremental than they have in the USA and – significantly – that 'there is no British equivalent of PRWORA'. She also points out (Daguerre, 2004: 48) that UK active labour market policies have oscillated somewhat between a US-style emphasis on individual responsibility and self-help, and an attention to issues of equity and social inclusion that have their origins in Swedish social policy – and, we would add, in the UK's own history of welfare state development.

Even so, it is fair to suggest that the arguments set out above clearly favour a model of policy transfer that assumes an essentially *rational* process in which ideas and policies are first learned and then transferred from one national context to another, albeit not wholesale. The match is not exact and a good deal of adaptation takes place – but the drift is clear. Others take a rather different view, however, and one that stresses more clearly the complex and diverse range of

influences on (in this case) the development of active labour market policies in ways that undermine the 'strong' approach.

Andreas Cebulla (2005) has gone some way towards questioning the validity of an overly rational understanding of policy transfer. He suggests that US influence, though present, needs to be tempered by other significant sources of policy learning. For one thing, from roughly the mid-1980s onwards, the Labour Party was engaged upon a journey of substantial ideological change, important aspects of which had as much to do with the Party's colourful internal history as it did with exogenous factors. Thus, debates that were informed by new ideas about welfare on the other side of the Atlantic were equally informed by internal arguments during the 1980s about the nature and place of socialism in the Party's ideological canon, particularly how socialism could be made compatible with 'markets' (Hattersley, 1987; Le Grand and Estrin, 1989; Ellison, 1994; Shaw, 1996). In fact, the chronology suggests that ideological disagreements in the Labour Party had to be settled in favour of change *before* 'New Labour' could proceed with policies that drew (in part) from US inspiration. Symbolically, the Commission for Social Justice issued its report, *Social Justice: Strategies for Renewal*, in 1994 – a document that put access to paid work at the centre of plans for welfare reform (see Commission for Social Justice, 1994: Ch 5). Simultaneously, of course, the removal of Clause Four of the Party constitution that had committed Labour to wholesale nationalisation of the economy presaged a new relationship between an increasingly powerful Parliamentary Party and a

weakened trade union movement, which was to make so many of New Labour's welfare reforms possible.

Looking beyond New Labour's internal transformation in the early 1990s, it is also clear that New Labour politicians were looking abroad for inspiration – and not only to the USA. Ramia and Carney (2000) point to the UK government's interest in the Australian experience, particularly the mid-1990s 'conservative' coalition government's job search-work placement model embodied in the Jobs, Education and Training (JET) scheme. As Johnson and Tonkiss (2002: 9) claim, 'British Labour acknowledged its debt to the JET scheme in the similar policies it developed as part of the New Deal for Lone Parents'. They go on to note that 'these Australian policies not only pre-dated the raft of American welfare to work measures under the Clinton government in 1996 but were developed in a very different social welfare and labour market context'.

To this mix can be added the influence of other sources, particularly perhaps the work of national and international think tanks. New Labour's thinking about labour market policy was informed by work going on in the Institute for Public Policy Research and Demos, while the OECD was clearly a major influence because its perceptions of the role of paid employment chimed so closely with Labour's preferred 'work first' inclinations. Cebulla (2005: 39) argues that 'the most critical source of reference, certainly for DfEE/Employment Service policy thinking...was the OECD. Its Jobs Study was seen to provide crucial evidence concerning the



effectiveness of the new approaches to active labour market policy'. A view that resonated with the elite respondents in our DWP study:

*The UK focuses more on OECD stuff than most. We regularly have lots of networking that goes on with lots of OECD members. Just in the context of the OECD job study update published this week, I mean one of the things which we have done is drawn a lot on what that actually said in terms of what works in terms of labour market policy as well. Possibly because a lot of it fits in with what the government might want to do anyway. We do rely a lot on what the OECD says in evidence building and building a case.*

Another senior civil servant reiterated the importance of the OECD but also pointed to the mix of influences and sources that has gone into the making of UK active labour market policy:

*The UK analytical tradition has been largely associated with the OECD. But that is not to say that there were not any other influences. The Scandinavian countries, which had similarities to the UK in having universal welfare states. The difference is that they are more generous, but they are about as comprehensive. ..the balance between rights and responsibilities, that was from Scandinavia. We [also] watched Australia all the way through this time but we could never keep up with them because they change their system every two minutes!*

These comments, together with the views advanced by Cebulla and others, cast doubt on the USA as the primary source of influence for UK activation policy. Indeed, for Cebulla (2005: 47) 'lesson-learning [from the USA] has been at best

casual'. The key point, however, is that there is a greater recognition of complexity here, portrayed particularly in the recognition that 'history' can be an important factor in policy learning. There is also a stronger sense that policy can be derived from a diverse range of sources. Even so, this approach broadly relies on a meso-level analysis that is characterised by excessively rational explanations of, and expectations about, policymaking, with rational actors being regarded as the primary motors of learning and transfer. In the following sections the paper suggests that analyses of this kind need to be complemented by macro-level, contextualising accounts that problematise rationality and, in so doing, challenge contemporary understandings of policymaking. Of particular importance here is the (creative) tension, and changing balance, between institutionalist versions of the policy process and more contemporary ideas that advocate a less 'foundational' understanding of learning and transfer in contemporary societies.

### **Accounting for the past, looking to the future**

Although Cebulla, Deacon and others by no means forget 'history', the timeframes incorporated in, say, Deacon's account, are relatively short. On an institutionalist reading, while the 'Titmuss paradigm' may well have been undermined by ideas emanating from American writers and politicians, a look further back into the origins of the British welfare state suggests that these ideas picked up existing themes that had long been part of British social policy. After all, 'conditionality' and notions of individual responsibility were embraced not only by key architects of UK welfare like Beveridge, but also those who, in turn, influenced him. It has

been noted many times (see Timmins, 1995; Lowe, 2004) how notions of responsibility, desert and conditionality have characterised British social policy. One of our DWP respondents picked up this tradition, seeking to locate New Labour's emphasis on activation and conditionality within the guiding principles of the 'classic' welfare state:

*My reading of it is that it [conditionality] always was part of the welfare state from when it was set up in 1948. Between about 1948 and 1966 there was a very strong what is now called rights and responsibilities agenda... There is a question about whether the period from about 1966 to about 1986 was the norm or the aberration and I actually think it was the aberration.... From 1986 which I think is probably the seminal wave, there started to be a re-linking of the payment of benefits with the labour market... symbolised by the Restart Programme. The long term unemployed were asked not what can we do for you? But what are you doing for yourself? .... [that] then was maybe beginning to restore the situation from the past.*

Viewed in this way, the Titmuss paradigm was a temporary 'moment' in the history of UK welfare and both Conservative and New Labour governments have merely gradually reinstated the combination of Victorian and Beveridgean principles jettisoned in the late 1960s. According to this perspective, the notion that the unemployed could legitimately 'depend' on passive protection was an idea that developed only in the 1960s and was associated primarily with the 'poverty lobby' that emerged around key campaigners like Brian Abel-Smith, Peter Townsend (1965) and others – including the newly founded Child Poverty Action Group.

Perhaps the emergence of welfare-to-work policies in the 1980s and 1990s can be regarded as a move 'back to Beveridge', and indeed, according to some readings, also to T.H. Marshall's intended notion of citizenship (see Rees, 1995; Powell, 2002). It *could* be argued, then, that British social policy has returned to the conditional 'path'. While US and other examples of welfare reform may have facilitated this return, to say that they are somehow responsible for initiating the core principles of the policies themselves may be to overstate the case. As another respondent observed:

*You start by saying hang on a minute we need to get back to where we were ... That although what is being proposed now is different to where we are at present it is not necessarily a million miles away from where we have always been in the past. It is not that we are suddenly abandoning the concept of the welfare state.*

However, there really *is* a tension here – and we do not want to overstress the role of historical-institutional path dependence. While there are likely to be continuing 'institutional pulls' of the kind outlined here, it is also the case that a series of pressures – global economic, cultural (as a result of migration, for example), the rising influence of business and waning power of organised labour – are posing challenges to existing institutions that mean that policy learning is becoming less 'bounded' by past assumptions and arrangements *even as policy makers attempt to impose a rationality and logic on their actions and decision making*. There is no space to go into detail here but recent work on welfare state 'transformation' indicates that institutionalised principles and welfare mechanisms

are gradually loosening (Ferge, 1997; Ferrera et al, 2001; Gilbert, 2002; Ellison, 2006). Thus demographic issues associated with ageing populations across OECD countries are having quite dramatic effects on pensions policies in, for example, Sweden, Denmark, Australia and the UK (Mann, 2001). Again, there are clear indications that ‘activation’ policies, and specifically ‘work first’ policies, are growing in popularity not only in neoliberal regimes like the USA, Australia and the UK, but also in regimes that have not been previously associated with ALMPs of this kind – notably Denmark (Daguerre, 2007), the Netherlands (Finn, 2000) and now Germany (Seeleib-Kaiser and Fleckenstein, 2007). Although there are no signs of a ‘race to the bottom’, it appears that welfare arrangements are being recalibrated (Ferrera and Hemerijck, 2003) – and that the drift of recalibration is towards neoliberal welfare solutions.

We would suggest that this growing sense of ‘unboundedness’ allows policy makers greater freedom to draw upon different types of lessons in different ways while also, for the time being at least, continuing to take account of significant traditions and legacies. One of our respondents summed up this verdict in the following way:

*A lot of people say that we imported quite a lot from elsewhere and I think we did, we nicked stuff from all over the place. But we imported it into something, which in some senses was compatible with our history.*

This sense of ‘nicking stuff from all over the place’ is as important in the contemporary policy environment as ‘importing it into something’. In a world

where the parameters of policy learning and transfer are becoming ever more widely drawn – and pressures are mounting on policy makers to produce more individualised and customised policy alternatives to suit ‘consumer demand’ for high-quality public services, we can expect to see an ongoing shift from path dependent policy making towards more pluralised – possibly chaotic – processes of emulation and lesson-drawing. But how do we understand the concepts of ‘policy learning’ and ‘policy transfer’ in this context? Is it sufficient simply to conceive policy transfer in terms of emulation and lesson-drawing, and in so doing treat them as rational processes undertaken by rational actors? Possibly not: as Smith (2004: 89) has argued about policy transfer in the development of UK climate policy even at the relatively simple level of attempting to differentiate among potential components of particular policies, ‘teasing out the influence of transfer from domestic developments has proven difficult’. Much the same could be said for UK active labour market policies. Page and Mark-Lawson (2008: 53) acknowledge, for example, that while there may have been ‘some cross-national influence on domestic policymaking, this generally falls far short of the process of lesson drawing outlined by Rose’.

To go one step further, it is important to take account of the changing nature not just of policymaking itself, but of the overarching context in which policymaking – including possible learning and transfer – takes place. As noted above, Peter Hall (1993) has argued that policymaking needs to be understood as a process of ‘social learning’. This idea can be expanded in the contemporary world in ways that open onto explanations of learning and transfer that are less ‘agency-driven’

in the narrow sense of being guided primarily by elite politicians and bureaucrats, and also recognise the limits of institutionalist perspectives in a complex, dynamic policy environment. Echoing our comments about the plural nature of policymaking, Crozier (2008: 4-5) refers to new modes of governance which not only involve 'governmental and non-governmental actors in governance processes', but which 'rely on the interaction of multiple actors and their influence on each other rather than resting solely on the authority of the state'. One result could be that 'government may forfeit to varying degrees its capacity to maintain exclusive control of its own programmes', which is likely to weaken existing institutionalised arrangements. However, the real change may be contained in an increasingly significant move away from 'linear' to 'recursive' causation. As Crozier (2008: 12) suggests, linear causation is essentially inscribed in the traditional 'rational-technical model of policy chains'; recursive action, on the other hand, is a process in which 'each step...is fed back into the process itself such that effects are also causes'. One effect is that the policy environment becomes 'contingent and fluid', another is that 'policy processes and networks not only generate policy "content" in communication events, they also constitute themselves in these events' – the point being that 'recursive action generates "reality" as an emergent dynamic reality' (Crozier, 2008: 13) – presumably taking particular policies further from the path over time.

If this understanding of new forms of governance and the place of policy transfer within it seems rather esoteric, it is important nonetheless. The significance of Crozier's argument for present purposes is the promise it holds out for going

beyond the linear notions of transfer so apparent in the literature on US-UK activation policy learning to an understanding of learning and transfer processes that stresses not just their inevitably plural character but their self-constituting nature. It may be processes of this kind are particularly important in contemporary economic and political conditions that are conducive to welfare state recalibration. While macro-level analyses are important because they help to contextualise change for micro- and meso-level considerations of policy shifts, we should not be looking for rational, carefully considered forms of policy learning and transfer but rather for a protracted series of interactions among individuals and networks, both inside and outside the formal state, in a particular policy environment in which 'policy' made at one time becomes the starting point for further iterations and redefinitions as time goes on.

Taken as a whole, the complexities of these processes are virtually impossible to disentangle – hence the inevitably partial nature of the attempts to describe instances of policy transfer above. What can be observed, however, are the changing perceptions of policies as different (and differentially powerful) individuals and policy networks become involved, and the ways in which a particular set of policies (such as ALMPs) appear to 'start' in one place and time but are continually reshaped and reconstituted in ways that gradually reduce the significance of the starting-point.



## Conclusions

This paper has argued that it is important to take account of the significance of macro-level factors in analyses of policy learning and transfer. Micro and meso explanations of the emergence of ALMPS in the UK from the mid-1980s onwards may be correct to identify the US either as the primary source of inspiration or one influence among others, but there is a danger of assuming that learning and transfer processes are essentially rational activities. This tendency plays down the importance of factors that feed into policy learning at different and 'higher' levels of analysis. Institutional explanations of learning and transfer, for example, provide a corrective to an excessive reliance on linear rationality – however, institutional thinking is likely to be increasingly compromised as once-embedded structures and assumptions about (social) policymaking loosen. In a rapidly changing policy environment, any understanding of policymaking needs to look beyond traditional notions of learning and transfer towards more de-centred accounts of the policy processes. These rely less on linear logic and recognise, how the move towards pluralisation and deinstitutionalisation may be contributing towards new and recursive forms of governance.

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