



Learning heuristic or political rhetoric? Sustainable mobility and the functions of ‘best practice’



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ABSTRACT

In recent years, the notion of ‘best practice’ has become accepted into the standard lexicon of transport policy. Best (or ‘good’) practice approaches to the development, implementation, and evaluation of transport interventions regularly appear at all scales of policy-making, and seem to enjoy explicit and implicit support from a diverse array of political actors. Critical reflection on this trend has chiefly focussed on the spatial limits to policy transfer, highlighting the salience of institutional heterogeneity as a limitation to policy convergence. Drawing on a series of in-depth interviews with actors involved in UK walking and cycling policy, this paper explores two fundamental questions relating to best practices as they are directly ‘produced’ and ‘consumed’: firstly, how the notion of best practice is encountered and understood by policy actors and, secondly, why policy actors employ the notion in the course of their professional work. Despite its intuitive appeal, we argue that the notion of best practice in this context is characterised by substantial conceptual ambiguity and diverse functionality. Five distinct reasons why policy actors employ the term best practice emerge from the analysis. These we term *heuristic learning*, *discourse manipulation*, *self-promotion*, *affiliative justification* and *strategic articulation*.

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1. Introduction

The identification and dissemination of ‘best practices’ has become a widespread phenomenon in contemporary public policy. Within transport policy, diverse policy actors have embraced the notion of best practice in a multitude of ways. Academic researchers have for example advocated best practice approaches for urban transportation planning and employer mobility policies (Miller & Hoel, 2002; Van Malderen et al., 2012); non-governmental organisations have published best practice guidelines on cycling policy and the reduction of transport-related energy consumption (CTC, 2002; CLECAT, 2010); national governments have sponsored best practice schemes for achieving sustainable freight distribution and transport integration (Welsh Assembly, 2008; Northern Ireland Assembly, 2012); and supranational bodies, such as the European Commission and the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and

Development (OECD), have issued publications on international best practice in road safety and greenhouse gas abatement policies for transport (European Commission, 2010; OECD/IEA, 2001).¹

While its genealogy can be traced to 1980s management consultancy, the term best practice has gained much of its public sector legitimacy through its near-synonymous relationship to the concept of ‘policy transfer’.² That is, ‘the process by which knowledge about policies, administrative arrangements, institutions and ideas in one political system (past or present) is used in the development of policies, administrative arrangements, institutions and ideas in another political system’ (Dolowitz and Marsh, 2000, p. 5). The development and dissemination of best practice is frequently assumed to be an effective means of promoting policy

¹ See also Stead (2012) for an overview of European projects that have been instrumental in identifying a large and increasing number of best (or ‘good’) practice examples.

² ‘Best practice’ is defined by the Oxford English Dictionary as ‘a mass noun, chiefly used in business: the practice which is accepted by consensus or prescribed by regulation as correct; the preferred or most appropriate style’ (OED, 1989). See Macmillen (2010) for an overview of ‘best practice’ genealogy.

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transfer and learning, and has become ‘an accepted wisdom within national policies and programmes, as well as in international arenas and networks’ (Bulkeley, 2006, p. 1030). The supporting logic here is intuitive: information regarding successful policy initiatives may facilitate the efforts of those undertaking similar projects, allowing policy actors to draw conclusions as to what to do, what not to do, and hence aid their ability pursue a successful course of action themselves (*ibid.*; Rose, 2005). Moreover, the character of this information may well include highly valuable qualitative insights into pertinent situational and contextual issues – something that *ex-ante* econometric analyses cannot capture.

Much of the critical reaction in the transport, planning and public administration literature towards policy transfer has concentrated on the institutional limits to policy transfer (Gudmundsson et al., 2005; Güller, 1996; De Jong and Geerlings, 2005; De Jong, 2008; Stead et al., 2008). Here, the success of specific transport systems, processes or conventions that are thought to constitute best practices are shown to remain heavily contingent upon myriad socio-cultural, economic and political forces, which, by their very nature, are spatially constituted. De Jong (2008), for example, offers a comprehensive account of institutional structures’ effects on the viability of transport policy translocation across national boundaries. Stressing the significant differences between nations’ specific policy issues and the ability of governments to ably finance, legislate, and implement transport interventions, he largely attributes instances of policy failure to a lack of congruence between formal and informal institutional structures. Indeed, informal institutions – such as shared cultural conventions, moral codes, societal norms and attitudes to policy compliance – are argued to be major determinants of policy transfer outcomes. Such congruence resonates strongly with Gudmundsson et al. (2005) critique of the ‘Benchmarking European Sustainable Transport’ (BEST) thematic network, which was tasked by the European Commission to explore the potential of ‘benchmarking’ for the dissemination of sustainable transport best practices between European member-states. This research highlighted the constraining role of different policy-making ‘styles’ apparent in the EU: some modes of governance appeared relatively ‘reactive’, with others more ‘anticipatory’; some exhibited adversarial tendencies, while others were more consensual in character.³ Significantly, such limitations led the authors to conclude that as ‘policies are not directly comparable across contexts... attempting to benchmark sustainable transport policies against one another... is not advised’ (*ibid.*, p. 669).

Overlapping somewhat with this ‘institutional critique’, a number of recent contributions to the literature have rescaled the discussion to address the manner in which best practices are ‘produced’ and ‘consumed’ by policy actors themselves (see for example Bulkeley, 2006; Vettoretto, 2009). Despite the overwhelming ubiquity of best practices, relatively little is known about how they are actually understood, produced and used in policy-making processes, transport or otherwise. As Ward (2007, p. 396) states, ‘the actual process by which that learning is sought and the technical, institutional and political filters that are applied to convert learning into lessons and actual policies remain remarkably uninvestigated’. Similarly, Wolman and Page (2002) conclude that, despite the enormous effort that has been devoted to disseminating good practices, knowledge regarding the extent of their use and usefulness is limited. Studies further indicate that the effects of spreading lessons and good practice are poorly

understood by those involved in the processes of dissemination, even when these processes are well-resourced and actively pursued (Bulkeley, 2006; Wolman and Page, 2002), and that a profligacy of best practices may result in information overload for researchers and policy-makers attempting to identify examples of effective policies operating elsewhere (Marsden et al., 2011; Marsden and Stead, 2011; Stead, 2012).

In this paper, it is this latter ‘actor critique’ of best practice, which we aim to advance. Our motivation stems from a growing recognition that, in the absence of any systematic analysis or definitive criteria with which to evaluate the merits of a particular approach to transport policy learning, the notion of best practice has become the *de facto* approach of choice. It is far from clear, however, that best practice thinking is inherently beneficial to the effective development, implementation and evaluation of transport policies. There is a pressing need to understand how this preoccupation with best practice has arisen, how and why it is used, and what implications this usage has for the viability of future decision-making. We structure our arguments around two underexplored and unresolved questions. The first concerns how the notion of best practice is encountered and understood by policy actors. The second question focuses on the reasons why policy actors employ the concept of best practice in the course of their professional work. The paper is divided into four main parts. First, we discuss some of the most prominent themes in the literature as they relate to best practices and policy actors. Second, we introduce the empirical research that supports our analysis. Third, drawing on our empirical evidence, we address the two main research questions. The final part of the paper contains our conclusions.

2. Re-scaling the best practice critique

Aside from contributions by authors such as Bulkeley (2006) and Vettoretto (2009), academic literature on best practice in public policy-making is slim, and almost non-existent in relation to transport policy. Nevertheless, the substantial literature on policy transfer and learning offers a useful means of framing the ‘practice of best practice’. This literature identifies a range of policy components and arrangements that can be used to conceptualise ‘practices’, best or otherwise. In a frequently cited article on policy transfer, Dolowitz and Marsh (2000), for example, identify eight different elements that may be subject to transfer: policy goals; policy content; policy instruments; policy programs; institutions; ideologies; ideas and attitudes; and negative lessons. Best practices can relate to any one of these and are not solely limited to policy instruments. Clearly, some of these elements may be more amenable to policy transfer than others. According to the OECD’s (2001) *Best Practices in Local Development*, for example, ideas, principles and guiding philosophies are difficult to transfer due to their ephemeral character, while the transfer of programmes, institutions, or modes of organisation is similarly problematic due to their unique and contextualised nature. Most amenable to transfer, they argue, are methods, techniques, know-how and operating rules. However, what is absent from this analysis is attention to the agency of policy actors themselves, and how interpretations regarding best practices are actually made on the ground.

Clearly, different sets of policy actors have quite different understandings and interpretations regarding the notion of best practice and its applicability to their professional work. Moreover, these varied understandings and interpretations exist in a dialectical relationship with actors’ reasons for employing the notion of best practice, as we discuss below. Consider for example different classes of actors from the policy transfer literature (e.g. elected

³ For useful account of the issue of policy styles across Europe, albeit rather dated, see for example Richardson (1982).

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