



Whose authority? Exporting Canadian urban planning expertise to Jordan and Abu Dhabi



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 29 June 2012

Received in revised form 13 July 2013

Available online 12 August 2013

Keywords:

Knowledge transfer
Constructivist theories
Global ethnography
Policy mobility
An authority
In authority

ABSTRACT

This article incorporates a diverse set of approaches that draw upon mobility and diffusion in geography and urban planning, constructivism in international relations theory, and transfer in knowledge management studies in order to investigate: How do international planning consultants who hail from the developed world interact with their indigenous counterparts in developing countries? How do these international consultants navigate the local planning cultures? And how do the interactions between these international urban planning consultants and local planners impact the process of knowledge transfer–acquisition? A global ethnography approach facilitates a micro-level of analysis that elucidates the interactions between the transferring and the acquiring agents; explains the methods by which the transferring agents navigate the planning culture of the acquiring context; and also, explicates the outcomes of the knowledge transfer–acquisition process – i.e. the adaptation of knowledge. To achieve its objectives, this article compares two cases of the transfer of urban planning knowledge from Canada to the Middle East: from Toronto to Amman, Jordan and from Vancouver to Abu Dhabi, the United Arab Emirates. The combination of global ethnography and comparative analysis enables us to ascertain four key observations that explain the transfer–acquisition interactions, and which also challenge existing assumptions on transferring urban planning policies to developing countries. The first explains the links between possessing the necessary expertise and becoming ‘an authority’; the second addresses the ‘an authority’–‘in authority’ nexus; the third discusses building local capacity versus drawing on local authority; and the last concerns authority and the sustenance of newly formed knowledge.

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1. Introduction

The unprecedented extent of global interconnectivity at the turn of the 21st century has increased the cross-national exchange among urban planners (Healey and Upton, 2010; Sanyal, 2005b). This article focuses on a micro-level of analysis and examines the interactions between individuals by elucidating the role of international urban planning consultants who have been particularly involved in Middle Eastern cities, and asks: How do these international planning consultants who hail from the developed world (also known as transferring agents) interact with their indigenous counterparts in developing countries (acquiring agents)? How do these transferring agents navigate the internal politics of the acquiring contexts, which are dubbed by Sanyal (2005a) as the planning culture? And lastly, how do the interactions between these international urban planning consultants and their indige-

nous counterparts impact the process of knowledge transfer–acquisition?

We follow in the steps of other scholars who are concerned with the transfer of urban planning knowledge between non-Western contexts. Such research is often focused through a ‘socially-structured and discursively constituted space’ that highlights the complexity of social and political interactions in policy mobility/mutation (Peck and Theodore, 2012: 23). Therefore, we draw upon the geography literature that discusses the mobility of both policies and international experts. We also draw on the constructivist international relations (IR) theories in political science and on knowledge management studies, which facilitate an understanding of individual agency in knowledge transfer. By integrating these theoretical approaches, we complement our urban planning theoretical and empirical sources, which for the most part emphasize institutional arrangements and contextual compatibility. Based on these theoretical combinations, we propose a synthetic model that hones in on the micro-level of interactions between the transferring and the acquiring agents. Our model identifies four different levels of these interactions namely: (1) expertise and ‘an authority’; (2) the ‘an authority’–‘in authority’ nexus; (3)

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building local capacity versus drawing on local authority; and lastly, (4) Authority and the sustenance of newly formed knowledge. We then apply the proposed synthetic model to the work of Canadian urban planning experts who have been involved in Amman, Jordan and Abu Dhabi, the UAE.

Our methodology employs a global ethnography approach (Roy, 2012) that facilitates an investigation of what Lee and LiPuma dub as 'cultures of circulation' (2002: 192) in reference to the interactions between the international and the local consultants (i.e. the transferring and the acquiring agents). Depending primarily on in-depth interviews, the analysis and findings underscore the nature of the interactions between these agents of knowledge transfer. Specifically, the findings elucidate the processes by which the transferred knowledge is adapted (i.e. mutates) to suit the new context by focusing on each of the four types of interactions and pinning how each influences this process.

The following section introduces the various debates on the interactions between individuals during knowledge transfer. We begin with knowledge management, and then discuss the geography, urban planning, and IR literature, and then accordingly conclude with the proposed synthetic model.

2. Contextual compatibility and the hard transfer of policies

Stone (2004: 545) distinguishes between the transfer of 'hard policy' and 'soft norms.' The mobility of hard policies has been described in various terms including 'policy convergence, institutional transplantation, imitation and emulation, policy diffusion, transnational policy-learning, and lesson-drawing' (De Jong and Edelenbos, 2007: 690). The transfer of hard policy places the emphasis on the compatibility – or lack thereof – between the transferring and the acquiring contexts and whether the new policies will fit with their new context (Peck, 2011; Peck and Theodore, 2010). Cook (2008: 7–8) argues for more attention in empirical research to the success and appropriateness of transferred and adapted policies. In fact, contextual compatibility assumes particular importance in urban planning given the difficulty of translating some policies into the planning practices and institutional frameworks of other contexts such as with land use and land ownership (see for example Friedmann, 1967; Hall, 1996; Kunzmann, 1994, 2005; Leichter, 1979; Masser, 1990, 1986; Ward, 2000a,b, 2010).

Contextual incompatibility, such as when the economic and international political power are asymmetrical, is thought to yield imposition where the more advanced Western planning cultures establish a monopoly over the techniques and knowledge of non-Western contexts (Amin, 1976; Kunzmann, 2005; Masser, 1986; Ward, 1999, 2000a,b). For example, imposition supposedly occurs when former colonizing nations continue to diffuse their practices to their former outposts (Ward, 1999, 2000a,b), such as in Mwila and Lubamo's (2010) empirical study of postcolonial knowledge transfer in Zambia's water sector. Imposition also occurs when the former colonies that inherit colonial institutional practices continue to uncritically perpetuate them (Chatterjee, 1993; Said, 1979; Ward, 2010) as in Volait's (2003) study of Cairo's urban development at the turn of the twentieth century. Imposition may also take place when non-Western cultures uncritically copy and emulate the planning policies and practices of Western ones (Ward, 2000a,b, 1999) as in Vidyarthi's (2010) research on the adaptation of the American neighborhood to India. Blaut (2012: 1) defines uncritical emulation as 'Eurocentric diffusionism', whose advocates laud the merits of the flow of ideas and cultural elements from European to non-European contexts. In fact, embedded in most arguments is the assumption that transfer is a one-way process where urban planning policies and knowledge flow from

the more advanced into the lesser advanced context (Kunzmann, 1994, 2005; Masser, 1990, 1986). In contrast, exchange is considered a two-way process among equal partners (e.g. the EU institutions); (De Jong and Edelenbos, 2007). Friedmann (2010: 313) observes that notwithstanding this supposedly one-way flow, globalization is in fact not yielding homogenizing planning cultures and thus calls for planning research that offers 'thick descriptions' of contemporary cases of cross-national knowledge transfer.

Indeed, in discussing Asian cities, Ong (2011) builds on the rhizomatic connections of Deleuze and Guattari (1987), and argues for a view that transcends the binaries of both post-colonialism and of globalization. Ong (2011: 12) claims that 'If the city is a living, shifting network, then worlding practices are those activities that gather in some outside elements and dispatch others back into the world', and accordingly identifies three distinct styles for the transfer of urban planning knowledge through which non-Western contexts aspire towards distinguishing themselves, namely modeling, inter-referencing, and the configuration of new solidarities (Ong, 2011: 13–14). Notably, these types also range from the hard transfer of policy to the soft transfer of norms. To begin with, modeling certainly represents a hard transfer by replicating the policies and plans of other contexts such as in the diffusion and emulation of the Singapore model (Huat, 2011). In contrast, inter-referencing typifies the soft transfer of another city's achievement through 'citing, allusion, aspiration, comparison, and competition' (Ong, 2011: 17), as in the case of the inter-referencing of Hong Kong's urban form, firstly in Vancouver and then in Dubai (Lowry and McCann, 2011). Similarly, the absorption and diffusion of planning knowledge pertains more to the soft transfer of norms, and seems to be occurring among cities in Asia and the Arabian Gulf through forming new solidarities, such as in the prevalence of what Goldman (2011: 230) dubs 'speculative urbanism.' The latter represents an emerging form of 'transnational urbanism' that emerged from the influence of networks of globalizing financing actors whose urban development undertakings are yielding a 'string of overlapping practices, forces, and events' (Goldman, 2011: 230).

The soft transfer of norms depends less on the contextual compatibility and more on the interactions among the transfer agents – i.e. the senders and receivers who facilitate the processes of knowledge transfer and acquisition (De Jong and Edelenbos, 2007). González (2011) advocates for more emphasis on the constructs, both institutional and social, that facilitate the transfer of knowledge while simultaneously acknowledging the uneven power distribution among the involved actors. Similarly, in the cross-national transfer of knowledge, McCann (2011) argues in favor of research that underscores the individual roles played by transfer agents. Such individual human interactions play an important role in urban planning. According to Sanyal (2005a: 3), they actually define the planning culture, which is the collective ethos of professional planners. Likewise, Friedmann (1973: 171) underscores the role of individual planners in his transactive planning model where planning knowledge is converted into action through continuous sequences of interpersonal interactions among individuals, even where wider institutions are involved.

Freeman (2012: 13) identifies how these exchanges, which occur through oral and textual 'communicative interactions' either yield new policies or mutate ones that exist elsewhere. Drawing on Hecló's (1974: 316) wave analogy, Freeman likens the repetition of policies across contexts to 'a sound which endures even after its source is interrupted or removed, as waves bounce back and forth and across each other in a given space' (Freeman, 2012: 13). Freeman claims that Hecló's choice of analogy was intentional to underscore the similarities between the enduring nature of reverberations and policies; the irrelevance of the source after they both spread; and the importance of the movement for their sustenance as opposed to their source or direction. Certainly,

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