



Knowledge and practice mobilities in the process of policy-making: The case of UK national well-being statistics



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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the creation of the UK's 'Measuring National Well-being' statistical programme, drawing on accounts given of the creation of the programme in official sources and primary interviews. Focusing on the microspaces of public consultations and advisory panels, it argues that the construction of this statistical object was simultaneously the construction of a knowledge-object for academics and of a policy-object for policy-makers. As such, the statistic drew on and fed into domestic and international networks of statistical, academic and policy usage. The programme was shaped by the needs of these multiple networks, creating an object that they could hold in common but which did not necessarily fully satisfy any of them. Understanding the creation of objects in this way extends understandings around policy transfers and mobilities by showing how policy-objects arise through the transfer and mobility of things which are not policy. Simultaneously, what arises from policy mobility is not simply policy. Instead, what arises is multiple objects, which are the product of the intersection of travelling policy, knowledge and practice and they feed back into existing networks of knowledge, policy and practice. In doing so, the paper shows the inter-relations of knowledge and practice with policy, revealing them to be situated in place, contingent and compromised. It also contributes to the understanding of how official statistics, as a key technology of the state, are created.

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1. Policy mobilities and official statistics

Policies, in the sense both of the programmatic and the technical aspects of governance (Rose & Miller, 1992), do not appear from nowhere. This is true both in a conceptual sense, policies having intellectual contexts and antecedents, and in a spatial sense. Building on, and reacting to, work in the political sciences on policy transfer (see Benson & Jordan, 2011; McCann & Ward, 2012 for reviews), a geographical literature has been established around policy mobilities examining how policies travel across international and inter-regional borders (for example, Bebbington & Kothari, 2006; Clarke, 2009; Larner, 2009; Larner & Laurie, 2010; McCann, 2011; Peck & Theodore, 2010b; Prince, 2012; Stone, 2004, 2008; Ward, 2006). The focus on *mobility*, rather than the initial conceptualisation of *transfer*, attempts to capture the dynamism of moving policies, understanding them not as reified objects to be selected, relocated and applied by rational actors, but as variations on themes constructed by actors situated both in specific places and

within networks distributed across space (McCann, 2011; Peck, 2011a; Prince, 2012; McCann & Ward, 2012, 2013).

Policies which are mobile are translated, rather than transferred (Peck and Theodore, 2010a). That is, they are not picked up as complete objects and inserted into a new governance context but rather policies occurring in one context are interpreted by agents in another, this interpretation then being applied as an adaptation suitable for a new location. Often such interpretation is collaborative, with policy-agents emulating, learning from, and working with each other in the construction of policies in multiple places. The result is not a duplicated version of the original policy; the difference between the original and the applied context (in terms of local governance structures, resource allocations, legal infrastructures, and so on) mean that such duplication is impossible. Instead, as McCann and Ward put it, the policy which arises in the new locale is a mutation of the old. It retains a family resemblance, but in the mediation of actors between places, new elements will have been added and old elements removed (McCann & Ward, 2012, 2013; see also Peck and Theodore, 2010a).

This understanding of policies in movement has opened the space to consider the actors and networks involved in mediating

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objects and ideas. [Bebbington and Kothari \(2006\)](#), for example, have examined the role that international development organisations play in facilitating transfer and mobility across borders (c.f., [Larner, 2009](#)), while [Prince \(2012\)](#) and [Stone \(2004, 2008\)](#) have written about the roles of epistemic communities in supporting and enabling such transfers. [Larner and Laurie \(2010\)](#) have called for more attention to be paid to 'travelling technocrats', the individuals who make up networks of policy transfer and mobility, travelling between organisations and polities bringing policy with them. Such organisations, communities and individuals form what [Peck and colleagues](#) have called 'fast-policy networks' ([Brenner, Peck, & Theodore, 2010](#); [Peck & Theodore, 2010a](#); [Peck, 2002, 2011b](#)), formal and informal groupings of actors which translate policies between institutions of governance operating at multiple geographic scales.

From this starting point, that policy-making involves non-policy actors, the present paper develops the literature on policy transfer and mobility by recognising that it is not just policy which is being transferred when policies travel. [Peck \(2011a, p.791\)](#) characterises the field of policy mobility as "socially and institutionally constructed, being populated by a wide array of actors and institutions." By recognising that knowledge and practice communities, as part of a 'wide array of actors and institutions', serve their own ends beyond the construction of policy-objects it is possible to see both how a particular local tokens diverge from non-local exemplars but also how objects across different actor networks align. That is, [Peck and colleagues \(e.g., Peck, 2011a\)](#) argue that the apparent international convergence of policy-objects arises because the same or related actors create objects in multiple places. In the same fashion, it is possible to see connected policy-, practice- and knowledge-objects arising through the co-operation of actors from multiple networks. On this argument, epistemic knowledge is not drawn on by practice or practice communities, but is co-created as knowledge- and practice- and policy-object through the interaction of actors from across these networks.

One way of considering fast-policy networks is in terms of the actors who comprise them, as, for example, [Larner \(2009\)](#) and [Peck and Theodore \(2010b\)](#) have done. Another is to examine what [Larner and Le Heron \(2002\)](#) term 'globalising microspaces', the places in which such actors come together. Such spaces are both the physical (and, increasingly, virtual) locations in which discussions and debates occur, but are also the discussions and debates themselves. A conference, for example, bringing together actors from multiple locations to sell, explain, debate, lobby for, and learn about a policy is a globalising microspace in this sense. It is in such places that a policy instantiated in one location is translated for application in another.

This paper examines the construction of a programme of official statistics as it occurred within a globalising microspace. Official statistics can be thought of as a 'policy-object', a category introduced by [Peck](#) to indicate what is actually mobile when policy travels ([Peck, 2011b, p. 791](#)). An 'idea, innovation, technology or model' (*ibid.*), the policy-object is a more-or-less stable component of a situated policy, something self-contained which can travel unaccompanied and from which policies can be built. In practice, it is unlikely to travel alone, the object will generally travel with the idea which justifies it. In principle though, it could; as the context to which the object travels will be different from that of its origin, the object's original ecosystem of supporting objects may fall away, resulting in a very different object and a very different overall policy in its new location.

Policy-objects are constructed in microspaces, they influence and will be influenced by the networks which such microspaces join. These are not only networks of policy-making actors. As previous authors have observed, non-governmental actors

([Bebbington & Kothari, 2006](#); [Larner, 2009](#)) and members of epistemic communities ([Prince, 2012](#); [Stone, 2004, 2008](#)) are also closely involved in the formation of policy and policy-objects. As a coarse typology, such actors may be characterised as belonging to practice and knowledge networks. By a 'practice network' is meant a network of actors involved in the non-policy development or application of objects, those for whom the construction of an object has an impact on their practical activities. By a 'knowledge network' is meant a network of actors involved in the definition and discussion of objects as means to understand the world. Such a tripartite division is crude – it potentially does injustice to those involved in advancing cultural or social aims, for example – but has the advantage of simplicity in identifying non-policy-actors and so allowing an exploration of their actions.

A characterisation of this sort is necessary because if non-policy-actors are meeting with policy-actors in a microspace, then that microspace is not only joining policy networks together, but also networks of those involved in creating other types of object. Official statistics are made, simultaneously, as objects for the policy-makers, academics and statistical actors who created them, are fed back into their networks and become the basis for actions elsewhere. Similarly, the actors meeting in the microspace at that moment form not only part of their own networks involved in creating objects of use for themselves, but contribute to the networks of others. Academics become, albeit briefly, policy-makers, practitioners develop knowledge-objects, and so on.

2. The 'Measuring National Well-being' programme and statistics as policy-objects

To illustrate the argument outlined above, this paper explores the case study the 'Measuring National Well-being' programme, a collection of official statistics developed by the UK Office for National Statistics (ONS) between 2010 and 2014.¹

Covering the whole of the UK (see, for instance, [Office for National Statistics, 2014, 2015](#)), this programme brings together a diverse selection of statistics previously collected by the ONS and central government departments, and a small set of novel statistics developed specially for the programme, primarily those dealing with 'subjective well-being'. These latter are measures of how well individuals feel themselves to be doing and are collected through the *Annual Population Survey*. As something discrete and closed, a component which informs wider policy and sets the terms for practical and academic debates around 'well-being' (see, for example, [O'Donnell, Deaton, Duran, Halpern, & Layard, 2014](#)), the programme is a policy-object in the sense outlined above.²

The programme went through several stages of development, starting with a well-subscribed public consultation (*What matters to you*, see [Beaumont, 2011, p. 34](#); [Matheson, 2011](#); [Oman, 2015](#)), two different high-level advisory panels (the *Advisory Forum* and *Technical Advisory Group*) and numerous statistic-specific calls for views (for example, [Office for National Statistics, 2012a,b](#)). These stages, microspaces in which networked actors met, are documented in meeting minutes, consultation documents and official

¹ These dates represent the official launch of the programme by UK Prime Minister David Cameron on 25 November 2010 ([Cameron, 2010](#)) and the awarding of the 'National Statistic' kitemark for the programme by the UK's statistical watchdog, the UK Statistics Authority in June 2014 ([UK Statistics Authority, 2014](#)). While not marking the end of development, as official statistics continue to be adjusted throughout their lifetimes, this latter date represents the end of major development.

² It is not possible here to engage with the literature on the critical politics of 'well-being' which inform the statistical programme, but introductions to this can be found in [Scott \(2012, 2014\)](#) and [Tomlinson and Kelly \(2013\)](#).

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