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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Overseas and over here: policy transfer and evidence-based

AQ1 policy-making

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This article examines the relationship between evidence-based policy-making and policy transfer. The policy transfer framework has been widely employed across a range of disciplines in recent years, yet has also attracted criticism for its failure to adequately explain why policy officials engage in transfer at all. This article considers the changed political landscape after the election of New Labour in the UK in 1997 and argues that the policy transfer of welfare-to-work policy ideas from the USA was at least partly driven by pressure to develop evidence-based policy. In doing so, this article provides two new contributions to the literature. First, it asserts New Labour's injunction to use evidence-based welfare policy provides an important explanation as to why UK officials adopted US welfare approaches. Second, using a series of interviews and document analysis, this article finds that, in addition to welfare policy ideas, UK policy officials adopted policy evaluation techniques from the USA.

Keywords: policy transfer; welfare; policy analysis; evidence-based policy; policy learning

Introduction

Learning from overseas is not a new activity for policy-makers. Since the birth of the state, officials have sought to learn the positive and negative lessons from their counterparts elsewhere (see Evans 2009a, p.237). Yet, advances in modern technology and communications have considerably deepened the pool of policy know-how available to government officials. Increasingly, new and old information is digitised, indexed and made accessible through the Internet, creating a rapidly expanding repository of policy-relevant data that can be reviewed with limited effort for minimal cost (e.g. Van Waarden and Drahos 2002, p. 931). Some commentators have observed a concomitant increase in instances of policy transfer and attribute this rise partly to the ease of access to overseas and domestic policy information (Dolowitz and Marsh 1996, 2000, Evans and Davies 1999, Radaelli 2000, Pierson 2003). Others have emphasised how the pressures exerted by global social and economic forces produce common policy problems and an incentive to find and share common policy solutions (see Bennett 1991, Drezner 2001, Holzinger and Knill 2005). Whilst a number of authors have commented on the importance of policy success as a driver of transfer, few have gone further to consider in detail how

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evidence is construed and constructed by policy officials looking elsewhere. In their recent review of the policy transfer literature, Benson and Jordan (2011, p. 370) argue: ‘In general, the more empirical question of why and when certain types of transfer appear in particular settings and not others has still not been fully addressed’. This observation informs the substantive element of this article: to critically and concurrently analyse the recent trends toward policy transfer and evidence-based policy-making (EBPM).

Evidence-based policy (EBP) is certainly a firmly established component of UK policy development. It is a rare policy proposal that does not refer to the latest available evidence, or talk of generating findings from pilots or instituting policy evaluations. Over the past decade, for example, the Department of Work and Pensions (DWP) has undergone an extraordinary sea change in their use of research evidence in policy development and evaluation. Between 1996 and 2004, the DWP published between just 14 and 31 research reports annually. After 2004, the number of empirical research publications rose rapidly: 2004, 26 reports; 2005, 80 reports; 2006, 96 reports; 2007, 66 reports; 2008, 80 reports; 2009, 68 reports; 2010, 102 reports and 2011, 64 reports¹. Equally, over the past decade, the UK Government has been an active borrower of overseas policy ideas. Significant elements of UK policies contain ideas originating from elsewhere, notably welfare-to-work programmes, crime initiatives, family tax credits, social policy, early years childcare, and smoking regulations. Ostensibly, policy transfer and EBP share a similar focus on empirical data, experience, and tangible outcomes.

Since it is critical to examine how the use of research evidence affects policy officials’ strategy in reviewing and, perhaps, adopting policies from overseas, this article considers the theoretical frameworks of the policy transfer literature and juxtaposes these with the current trend of EBPM within the UK Government. My central assertion is straightforward: I suggest that policy transfer is fundamentally driven by the search for evidence of what works, therefore the pronounced resonance of EBPM in contemporary public administration facilitates the possibility and scope of policy transfer. I consider this argument through the lens of one of the most prominent instances of policy transfer of the past 15 years, the adoption of welfare-to-work policies from the USA to the UK. In doing so, I make two related claims. First, I argue that the injunction to develop EBP approaches was a key motivator for UK policy officials to adopt US welfare ideas. Second, I posit that narratives of the transfer of US welfare policy ideas fail to identify a key element of the policy transfer: the UK adoption of US policy evaluation instruments. Third, I argue that this key development in policy praxis has not only persisted but has become further deepened under the Conservative-led coalition government.

This argument proceeds with the following structure: first, I set out the policy transfer framework and draw out criticisms of the framework’s failure to explain why officials engage in transfer. Second, I turn my attention to the rise of EBP in UK policy-making and highlight its centrality to the ideas of the incoming New Labour government in 1997 and its persistence in the current Conservative-led coalition government. Third, I present a brief overview of the evolution of modern US and UK welfare policy alongside the findings from a series of interviews with UK policy officials and analysis of government documents. In so doing, I suggest that the policy transfer framework can benefit from a greater consideration of the role of EBP development.

Policy learning and transfer

Government officials have learnt from one another since the birth of the state (Evans 2009a). Learning is, by all accounts, a natural component of state administration or, indeed, any human undertaking. That policy learning is not new does not, however, diminish its significance: when governments implement a new or altered policy they affect the fabric of public life. Where governments borrow from other societies, it is clearly important that they do so in the public interest. Policy learning, on this view at least, is self-evidently significant. Policy learning refers to the transmission of policy knowledge between political actors. Although defining ‘policy’ itself is not without problems, here I follow Thomas Birkland’s parsimonious view of policy: a statement by the government about what it intends to do about a problem affecting **AQ5** (directly or indirectly) the public (see Birkland 2010, p. 9). There is very little new about policy learning, except perhaps that it has now attracted a burgeoning and rapidly evolving multi-disciplinary literature. Yet, the eclectic appeal of the policy transfer concept poses a danger. In their review of the policy transfer literature, Benson and Jordan (2011, p. 375) remark of the policy transfer conceptual development that ‘the real challenge associated with the scenario of ever greater evolution is how to develop its analytical contribution without “stretching” it to the point where it reveals less and less about more and more’.

The policy transfer framework

Richard Rose is considered to be one of the early progenitors of policy learning, or lesson-drawing as he termed it (1991, 1993), while Peter Hall’s work on policy paradigms and learning (1990) is also regarded as a key influence. Standing on the shoulders of these early theorists, the policy transfer approach was pioneered by Dolowitz and Marsh (1996, 2000); see also Dolowitz *et al.* 1999). The framework they developed drew explicitly upon Rose and Hall’s notions of lesson-drawing and policy. More broadly, elements of policy transfer can be also found in descriptions of macro-level processes labelled policy diffusion (Shipan and Volden 2008) and policy convergence (Bennett 1991). Dolowitz and Marsh (2000, p. 5) define the policy transfer process as:

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 and ideas in another political system.

This early conceptualisation of the policy transfer approach has been the subject of theoretical development from a wide range of perspectives, including: international relations (Stone 1999, 2000, 2004), multi-level governance (Evans and Davies 1999, Stubbs 2005), policy evaluation (Mossberger and Wolman 2003), emergency policy-making (Legrand and McConnell 2012), agencification (Moynihan 2006), **AQ6** globalisation (Evans 2009a, 2009b), devolution (Cairney *et al.* 2009), EU governance **AQ7** (Bulmer and Padgett 2005) and policy mobility (Peck and Theodore 2001). Empirically, there are numerous studies adopting or borrowing from the policy **AQ8** transfer approach, inter alia: British employment policy (Dolowitz 1998), welfare policy (Walker 1999, King and Wickham-Jones 1999, Deacon 2000, Theodore and

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135 **AQ9** Peck 2000, Fergusson 2002, Daguerre 2004), constitutional change (Furlong 2000),
 National Health Service reform (Greener 2002), railway regulation (Lodge 2003),
 EU environmental policy (Jordan *et al.* 2003), social policy (Hulme 2005), non-
 government supplier diversity (Ram *et al.* 2007), smoking policy (Cairney 2009) and
 140 **AQ10** transport policy (Marsden and Stead 2010). Clearly, the policy transfer approach
 holds strong multi-disciplinary appeal.

On the original model, Dolowitz and Marsh claim that actors engage in policy
 transfer for any number of reasons. Principally, they claim: ‘as technological
 advances have made it easier and faster for policy-makers to communicate with
 each other, the occurrences of policy transfer have increased’ (Dolowitz and Marsh
 2000, p. 6). In addition, it is suggested that globalisation has compelled nations to
 emulate the economic policies of countries that have been successful in navigating the
 neo-liberal environment (2000, p. 6; see also Evans and Davies 1999, Evans 2009b).
 This international dimension is reinforced by the expansion of international
 institutions capable of orchestrating common regional policies, such as the OECD,
 the EU or the IMF (e.g. Stone 1999, 2000, 2004).
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An extensive array of actors is likely to become involved in the policy transfer
 process: elected officials, political parties, bureaucrats/civil servants, pressure groups,
 policy networks, policy entrepreneurs and experts, transnational corporations,
 thinktanks, supranational governmental and non-governmental institutions, quan-
 gos, and consultants (Dolowitz and Marsh 2000, p. 10; Stone 1999, p. 55). This
 exhaustive list embraces almost every sort of actor likely to get involved in any
 political process. As a framework, this is less helpful in framing research, since just
 about any actor or agency can be involved, yet it signals the plurality of interests that
 are exposed.
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Central to their concept of transfer is, of course, the substance of what is
 transferred. More than anything else, this feature of the Dolowitz and Marsh model
 lends itself to ambiguity through its catholic definition of what may be transferred.
 In their view, ‘policy goals, policy content, policy instruments, policy programs,
 institutions, ideologies, ideas and attitudes and negative lessons’ (Dolowitz and
 Marsh 2000, p. 12) can all be transferred. Dolowitz and Marsh contend that
 substantive policy content and lessons may be drawn from the international, national
 and local levels of governance (2000, p. 12). In so doing, they stress, policy transfer
 can also operate as an insular process whereby actors look within their political
 system for possible policy solutions. Finally, they argue: ‘Policy transfer is not an all-
 or-nothing process’ (2000, p. 13). For Dolowitz and Marsh, the gradations of Rose’s
 lesson-drawing serve as a convenient typology, albeit with a slight adjustment of his
 categories: (1) copying refers to direct and/or complete policy transfer; (2) emulation
 denotes a transfer of the underlying ideas of a policy; (3) combinations indicate a
 fusion of two or more policies and (4) inspiration occurs ‘where a policy in another
 jurisdiction may inspire a policy change, but where the final outcome does not
 actually draw upon the original’ (2000, p. 13). Moreover, as Rose stresses, the process
 of lesson-drawing is a contingent one, driven by instrumental actors seeking to derive
 suitable policy solutions from the number of case-examples available to them.
 Dolowitz and Marsh further note that the type of transfer likely to occur is subject to
 a number of preconditions, such as, the actors involved in the process, the resources
 and time they have available to them, the nature of the ‘problem’ they face and the
 point within the transfer process at which the transfer occurs (2000, p. 13).
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Why do policy-makers adopt from elsewhere?

185 The central concern of this article is to offer an insight into why policy transfer occurs. Ostensibly, the reasons why policy officials choose to adopt or adapt policy from elsewhere are potentially as varied as any form of social or political decision-making. In the original policy transfer framework, Dolowitz and Marsh make a distinction between voluntary and coercive policy transfers; a distinction predicated on power. Among voluntary transfer reasons suggested by Dolowitz and Marsh are dissatisfaction with existing policy (1996, p. 346) international obligations or alignment (1996, p. 338), political opportunism, similarity of language or institutional arrangements and ideological compatibility (1999, pp. 725–728). These identified voluntary mechanisms of transfer parallel Rose’s notion of lesson drawing. Yet, voluntary mechanisms of transfer are subject to agents’ perception and knowledge of their environment. In this sense, voluntary policy transfer is understood to be an intentionalist process whereby strategic agents seek to overcome structural obstacles to import policies that fit their requirements. The extent to which they are able to fully comprehend the contextual factors of transfer, however, is acknowledged to be potentially imperfect. Thus, rationality and bounded rationality play a key role in the model of voluntary policy transfer that Dolowitz and Marsh describe. They argue that paucity of information, incomplete knowledge of transfer mechanisms and inaccurate assessments of the ‘real’ situation affect policy-makers’ decision-making (2000, p. 14). Most policy-makers, they argue: ‘act with limited information, within the confines of “bounded rationality”’ (2000, p. 14). Coercive mechanisms, by contrast, imply that a power relationship exists wherein a policy official is forced to adopt a specific policy. There are two related points here. First, policy transfer in this sense does not necessarily imply an export/import relationship between two countries. Indeed, the imported policy may not necessarily have been implemented anywhere else before at all. Second, this form of transfer is distinct from policy transfer resulting from domestic imperatives or influences. Coercion clearly describes a two-way relationship where agency/institution/country A has the ability and resources to force country/agency/institution B to adopt a certain policy in one form or another. To reinforce this argument, Dolowitz and Marsh cite examples where international institutions have been able to enforce ‘conditionality’ on a developing nation, whereby economic aid is withheld until certain domestic reforms or policies are adopted (2000, p. 11).

210 This power-based explanation has attracted criticism. James and Lodge (2003, p. 179) in particular offer a critique of the policy transfer literature that is premised on two arguments: (1) policy transfer has yet to distinguish itself from conventional forms of policy-making and the processes involved can be adequately addressed via existing theoretical frameworks and (2) the policy transfer approach does not explain why transfers occur, as opposed to any other form of policy-making. As a result, they claim, ‘the concepts of ‘lesson-drawing (Rose 1991, 1993) and especially “policy transfer”, in their current forms, are of limited use for pursuing the aims of the

215 **AQ11** [ESRC Future Governance Programme] and similar research’ (2003, p. 180). James and Lodge maintain that Dolowitz and Marsh’s all-encompassing definition of policy transfer makes it: ‘difficult to disentangle not only from “rational” but also from a wide range of other concepts of policy-making’ (2003, p. 181). In addition, they add, the notion that countries learn from one another has been thoroughly

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230 explored by a number of authors. To reinforce this claim, James and Lodge refer to a
number of examples, from ‘the development of public services’ to ‘the cybernetics
literature about control in complex environments’ (2003, p. 182). They go on to
suggest a number of literatures that offer explanatory insights into the policy-making
235 process. First, they claim that institutional analysis: ‘offers insights into how
organisational structures affect learning processes’ (2003, p. 186). In addition, they
argue that the relationship between ideas and policy-making is explored more
carefully elsewhere and that ‘the “transfer” framework obscures rather than
illuminates differences between them’ (2003, p. 185). Moreover, they claim that the
240 literatures on globalisation and internationalisation offer better explanations of how
and why policy-makers are: ‘influenced by factors beyond the domestic context’
(2003, p. 186). As such, ‘Researchers interested in conceptual, non-domestic or
across-time influences on policy-making need not restrict themselves to using the
“policy transfer” framework’ (2003, p. 185).

245 Largely, the criticisms of James and Lodge focus on the early uncertain
explanatory power of the policy transfer framework. Indeed, in their early work,
Dolowitz and Marsh acknowledge that: ‘this continuum is an heuristic device that
allows U.S. to think more systematically about the process involved’ (2000, p. 14).
For Evans and Davies (1999, p. 363): ‘policy transfer analysis does not constitute an
250 explanatory theory but may be viewed as an analogical model in the sense that it
refers to the suggestion of substantive similarities between two entities’. In addition,
they claim, policy transfer research ‘is at its weakest when it considers the questions
of to what extent and why policy transfer has become widespread throughout
western democracies in the course of the past two decades’ (Evans and Davies 1999,
255 p. 365).

260 Partly in response to this early criticism, the policy transfer framework has
evolved in recent years to offer a fuller account of how and where the analysis adds
explanatory value to narratives of policy change. In a recent conceptual review of the
policy transfer framework, Evans (2009b) addresses the relationship between
globalising forces and policy transfer activity. In doing so, Evans analyses the
265 dynamics of policy change and, in particular, the question of why institutions engage
in policy transfer. Broadly, Evans claims, the recognised increase in transfer activity
is attributed to ‘global, international and transnational forces’, ‘State-centred forces’,
‘policy transfer networks’, and ‘micro-level processes of policy-oriented learning’
(2009b, p. 255). These dynamics are broadly representative of the levels at which
270 policy transfer occurs and is influenced. For Evans, the dynamics of policy transfer
are most appropriately captured by a multi-level analysis (MLA) suggested by Evans
and Davies (1999, p. 361) that adopts ‘a structure and agency approach with three
dimensions: global, international and transnational levels, the macro-level and the
inter-organizational level’. The MLA is distinctive from other approaches insofar as
275 it disaggregates the levels of transfer. The analysis is fixed at three levels: the macro,
meso and micro. These levels are applicable to the three arenas of policy (global,
state, and local), and, putatively, events at one level can help to explain events at
either of the others. Following Hall, Evans argues that policy is not a homogenous
concept. Rather, there are first, second and third orders of policies. First-order policy
refers to the settings and nuances of policy instruments used to realise policy goals.
280 Second-order policy refers to the policy instruments themselves; ‘the development of
new institutions and delivery systems’ (2004, p. 38). Third-order policy refers to the

ideological ambitions that are embedded in policy and systems of policy. In layering the processes of transfer, the Evans and Davies MLA attempts to accommodate multiple processes simultaneously: 'In this sense policy transfer networks provide a context for evaluating the complex interaction of domestic and international policy agendas forced through the interaction of state and non-state (transnational and/or international) actors' (Evans 2004, p. 24).

The MLA provides a convenient framework for the analysis herein. My principal concern relates to state actors and the impact of first-order policy as EBPM. Although I am less concerned here with the dynamics of the international arena and globalising forces these are clearly at play and form the background to international policy transfer, not least because globalising forces enhance the 'opportunity structures' for transfer to occur. Indeed, Evans hints at the prospect of evidence-based learning at the international level:

There is evidence, however, that some governments have started to emphasize the importance of governmental organizations being rational learning organizations engaged in an ongoing process of evidence-based learning (Evans 2009b, p. 260).

This prospect, I suggest, offers a potentially valuable contribution to explanations of why and how policy transfer occurs. Policy transfer, as defined above, is about knowledge, evidence and learning. It is apparent that policy officials seek lessons from policies with both negative and positive outcomes, and such lessons are grounded in evidence. Compellingly, indeed, learning from overseas evidence is frequently recommended in government policy guidance. The Cabinet Office's *Professional policy-making for the twenty-first century* advises officials to undertake 'policy making that learns lessons from other countries and takes account of developments in the European and international spheres' (Cabinet Office 1999b, Sect. 5.1). This advice is repeated elsewhere. Another Cabinet Office publication, *Using international comparisons in policy making* (2002), advises officials: 'International examples can provide invaluable evidence of what works in practice, and help us avoid either re-inventing the wheel or repeating others' mistakes'. Would-be policy adopters are counselled to 'find evaluations of the policy or programme you are interested in, whether in-house or the results of independent research' (Cabinet Office 2002). Moreover, a review of the use of EBP in government, *Analysis for policy*, elicited the following comment from a policy official:

It's using evidence from a wide range of sources because we're not the only people struggling with the same problem even if it is coming at it from different angles. And throughout all of this as well we've relied on the international as well as U.K. evidence to support what we're doing as well (2007, p. 22).

The notion that policy transfer might operate as a form of evidence-based evaluation is not new to the academic literature. Mossberger and Wolman (2003) have proposed a prescriptive reconciliation of policy-relevant evidence with the policy transfer process. To do so, Mossberger and Wolman suggest guidelines for policy officials on adopting policy from elsewhere as 'a means of improving their ability to predict the effect of a policy before it is put in place' (2003, p. 430). They propose a set of 'rational criteria' to assist policy officials in determining the suitability of an overseas policy for adoption: awareness, assessment and application. They state that the

diligent official should be aware of the different attempts to implement the policy under consideration and, moreover, have information on the associated policy goals, design and operation. Officials should ensure that their decision to adopt, adapt or reject a policy is ‘premised on adequate information about and assessment of the nature of the problem, policy goals, policy performance, and the policy environment’ (2003, p. 431). This approach to the use of policy transfer as a form of evidence-based learning is well-formed; yet, the approach remains prescriptive and does not shed light on how or whether evidence-based approaches operate, in fact, as drivers of policy transfer. Below, I turn my attention to the development of the EBP model and draw out more fully its relationship with policy transfer.

The trenchancy of EBPM

Over the past 15 years, the notion of EBP has becoming increasingly embedded in the lexicon and praxis of policy officials. Policy officials in the UK, particularly between 1997 and 2010 during the New Labour government, were pressed to ensure that policy initiatives were based on the most rigorous evidence available. The New Labour leadership distinguished this approach to policy-making from previous forms of ideological policy-making by appealing to its implicit rationality and what Finlayson (1999, p. 271) refers to as ‘the truth of certain social facts’. Policy, on this approach, leveraged value-neutral ‘facts’ and was articulated in the language of pragmatism.

The genesis of EBP is not absolutely clear, but there is much to suggest that the term derived from the practice of evidence-based medicine in the health professions. Evidence-based medicine is described as the ‘process of systematically finding, appraising, and using contemporaneous research findings as the basis for clinical decisions’ (Rosenberg and Donald 1995, p. 1122). The same authors, notably, observed that ‘the problem, ironically, is that the approach is difficult to evaluate. It is a process for solving problems, and it will have different outcomes depending on the problem being solved’ (Rosenberg and Donald 1995, p. 1124). The contemporary vogue of the empirical paradigm in policy-making, in the form of EBP, is most strongly associated with the election of the New Labour government in 1997. From the outset, the New Labour administration sought to forge an empirical framework for policy development. The Party manifesto set the tone for a new era of government, declaring:

We will be a radical government. But the definition of radicalism will not be that of doctrine, whether of left or right, but of achievement. New Labour is a party of ideas and ideals but not of outdated ideology. What counts is what works. The objectives are radical. The means will be modern. (Labour Party 1997)

For New Labour, then, the move towards EBP was a corrective to the ideology-laden policy frameworks of the past. The refurbishment of New Labour’s political philosophy was fundamentally influenced by Anthony Giddens’ ideas on the ‘Third Way’; a reconstitution of the contract between the state and the individual’s respective rights and responsibilities (Giddens 1998, 2000). The adherence to the pragmatism of the Third Way created a tension with the New Labour’s traditional commitment to ideological principles:

The vagaries surrounding the influence of the Third Way on practical New Labour policy-making is broadly reflective of a working compromise at the heart of the New Labour government between the last shackles of Brown's Old Labour idealism and Blair's pragmatism (Cerny & Evans 2004, pp. 57–58).

The Prime Minister Tony Blair and his cadre of advisers were at pains to emphasise New Labour's credentials as a utility-maximising administration, giving assurances about a pragmatic, problem-solving approach to the social and economic challenges facing the UK (Solesbury 2001, p. 6). New Labour's move towards a pragmatic, evidence-based approach has attracted considerable academic attention (see Temple 2000, Solesbury 2001, Pawson 2002, Sanderson 2002, 2006, Young *et al.* 2002, Wells 2007). For New Labour, the extensive collation and use of evidence was central to the 'what works' approach. The drive towards the modernisation of government was to be epitomised by a policy-making approach founded upon robust evidence. The Modernising Government White Paper (Cm 4310, 1999) was the first of several key government papers that set out the new 'vision' to be adopted by policy-makers. It specified an agenda of policy reform in which the government would: 'improve our use of evidence and research so that we understand better the problems we are trying to address' and assured that that 'all policies and programmes are clearly specified and evaluated, and the lessons of success and failure are communicated and acted upon' (Cabinet Office 1999a, p. 17). Another key text, *Professional policy-making for the twenty-first century* argued:

This Government's declaration that 'what counts is what works' is the basis for the present heightened interest in the part played by evidence in policy making. The White Paper makes it clear that policy decisions should be based on sound evidence. The raw ingredient of evidence is information. (Cabinet Office 1999a, Sect. 7.1)

This invocation of the 'sound evidence' was reinforced by *Better policy-making* (Cabinet Office 2001), which called for the use of 'high quality information and evidence' and asserted that modern policy-making required the 'best use of evidence, and the need to improve the accessibility of the evidence available to policy-makers' (2001, p. 25). Together these texts defined the enduring framework and praxis of EBP development. Less than five years after New Labour's election victory, David Blunkett, the Home Secretary, underlined New Labour's ongoing commitment to 'what works':

This Government has given a clear commitment that we will be guided not by dogma but by an open-minded approach to understanding what works and why. This is central to our agenda for modernising government: using information and knowledge much more effectively and creatively at the heart of policy-making and policy delivery (David Blunkett, Speech to the Economic and Social Research Council, 2 February 2000).

This evidence-based framework forged so solidly at the heart of the New Labour government over 10 years has shown staying power. The accession of the Conservative-led coalition government has done nothing to diminish the role of EBP and, in some respects, empirical approaches to policy have been boldly entrenched. The policy-making guidelines issued by government departments retain the same injunctions, formed during New Labour's tenure, to develop, manage and

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evaluate policy performance at almost every juncture. Significant publications that continue to inform policy development include *The magenta book* (Cabinet Office 2011), which provides guidance for policy-makers on evaluating policy and programmes (HM Treasury 2011); *The green book* (Cabinet Office 2003a), which
 AQ14 advises officials on policy appraisal and evaluation (HM Treasury 2011); *Trying it*
 AQ15 *out* (Cabinet Office 2003b), which promotes the use of pilots in policy development
 and; the *Practical guide to behaviour change models* (HM Treasury 2008), which sets
 out economic and social psychology models of behaviour change (Government
 Social Research Unit 2008). The outcomes in policy have been notable. The
 Department for International Development (DfID) has adopted a heavily empirical
 approach to aid distribution, a development signalled by the Conservatives ahead of
 their term in office. The Conservative's 2009 Green Paper on international
 development stated: 'We will collect and publish comprehensive information about
 the effectiveness and outcomes of all forms of British aid – allowing future funding
 decisions to be based on evidence, not guesswork' (2009, p. 14). The article sets out
 clearly the value placed on positivist approaches: 'We will be more scientific about
 how we evaluate the projects and programmes we support' (2009, p. 14). These
 assertions have directly informed current DfID policy. In 2011, a series of
 comprehensive aid reviews were undertaken to assess the effectiveness of humanitar-
 420 ian emergency response, bi-lateral and multi-lateral aid arrangements. The DfID
 Results Framework sets out the method by which DfID's (2011, p. 1) effectiveness is
 measured: 'By measuring results we can get a much better idea of what works and
 what doesn't and can refine our programmes accordingly. Monitoring results
 provides us with an incentive to look at the evidence, innovate and learn'. Clearly,
 425 under the Conservative-led coalition government, the surge toward EBPM shows no
 signs of abating.

The evolution of welfare to work

Next, I focus upon the development of welfare policy in the USA and UK. Here, the
 440 aim is to examine the link between the EBP agenda of New Labour and the transfer
 of policy from overseas. Against the background of New Labour's fondness for
 evidence-based approaches to policy-making, this next section looks directly at how
 UK policy-makers were driven by the pursuit of robust evidence in their adoption of
 US ideas. To do so, I discuss the evolution of the New Deal and draw from both
 445 government documents and a series of interviews conducted contemporaneously
 with UK policy officials who were connected to the process of the policy transfer
 between 1996 and 1998.

New Labour and the US beginnings of the new deal

Fifty-five years after William Beveridge engineered the UK's social security system,
 450 New Labour undertook a wholesale revision of welfare provision. The name of their
 flagship policy, the New Deal, had echoes of a different time and place. In 1933,
 President Franklin D. Roosevelt introduced the 'New Deal' for welfare into the USA
 to cope with the Great Depression that had swept the country. In contrast, for New
 Labour officials, their 'New Deal' was intended to combat the apparently lethargic
 455 and cumbersome welfare system inherited from the previous Conservative

460 government. The scene for welfare reform was established at the earliest opportunity
 of the New Labour government. After his election in 1997, Tony Blair's first speech
 beyond Parliament was set in Aylesbury Estate, a deprived area in Southwark,
 London. The setting was apt: his aim was to give notice of a fundamental reappraisal
 of the entire framework of welfare provision in the UK. In the course of the speech,
 Blair depicted the plight of the poor and jobless as a consequence of the negligence
 of successive Conservative governments. There existed, he said, 'an underclass of
 465 people cut off from society's mainstream, without any sense of shared purpose'.
 Government, he argued, 'should commit itself to using whatever means is the best to
 play its part without outdated dogma of left or right to hold it back'. Upon this
 platform of pragmatic politics, Blair's discourse in Southwark outlined his evidence-
 based approach to welfare policy development:

470 The last government did little serious evaluation of its policies for poverty, and didn't
 even know how many people had been on welfare for 10 or 20 years. Its policies were
 driven by dogma, not by common sense. Our approach will be different. We will find
 out what works, and we will support the successes and stop the failures... We will
 evaluate our policies, and improve them if they need to be improved. (Tony Blair,
 speech at the Aylesbury Estate, Southwark, 2 June 1997)

475 The injunction to learn about 'what works' signalled a shift in the orthodox notions
 of understanding welfare policy. Less than six months later, the House of
 Commons Social Security Select Committee undertook a visit to the USA to
 study welfare reforms in situ. After all, the UK and USA shared a common
 language, a history of alliance and had a well-documented history of mutual
 learning. Indeed, much of the early research on policy transfer cites the exchange of
 480 policy ideas between the USA and UK as an example of how transfer processes
 operate. Earlier welfare initiatives such as the Job Seekers Allowance and Project
 Work were ideas adopted from the USA during the Major government (Dolowitz
et al. 1999, p. 724).

485 New Labour officials made no secret of their admiration of the way in which
 the US Democrats, led by Clinton, revived their electoral fortunes in 1994. While
 out of office, they drew inspiration from many of Clinton's reforms (in policy and
 elsewhere) to make New Labour electable after 18 years out of office and the New
 Deal was nested among a suite of modernisations that New Labour officials
 instigated. The existing literature examines the form and degree of influence that
 490 US policy had upon the New Deal. For Cerny and Evans (2004, p. 62): 'the
 ideology of welfare from which subsequent welfare reform has flowed has changed
 and lessons have directly been incorporated from the USA'. For others, the degree
 and scope of welfare policy transfer is the key concern. So, comparing the USA
 and Europe, Daguerre (2004, p. 36) concludes that the UK policy was: 'heavily
 495 influenced by U.S. workfare models' (see also Banks *et al.* 2005). Overall, Peck and
 Theodore provide perhaps the best summary of the conclusions of this literature to
 date:

500 From America has come the language of welfare-to-work (minus the inflammatory
 word 'workfare'), the communitarian philosophy of 'rights and responsibilities', the
 analysis of 'welfare dependency', and innumerable components of policy and
 practice (2000, p. 82).

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If these insights indicate the content of what the UK has learned from overseas, there is an equally expansive literature that attempts to explain why they chose to do so, although, in fact, there is no neat division between the two issues. For many authors (e.g. Powell 2000, Driver 2004), Third Way ideology ostensibly provided both the explanation of why, and the description of what, Blair learned from Clinton. At the same time, other authors claim that Australia also provided the UK with welfare policy lessons (Pierson 2003) and pioneered some of the Third Way ideas attributed to Clinton (Pierson and Castles 2002). Fundamentally, however, there is neither consensus on where Third Way ideas first emerged (see McLennan 2004), nor on the key features of welfare policy adopted by New Labour from the USA. For some authors, the New Deal represents a typical American ‘workfare’ (welfare-to-work) approach, emphasising the importance of work, rather than education and training (Daguerre 2004, Driver 2004). Others are less forthright. For example, Deacon AQ16 (1999) claims that the UK approach only uses the USA ‘definition of welfare’ to the extent that benefits are seen as temporary measures, while the claimant acquires the proper skills and education to work (1999, p. 13). Here, we are particularly concerned with the transfer of two central elements of the US welfare policy strategy: (1) EBP ideas and (2) welfare evaluation tools. Next, I briefly review both.

US welfare: experimentation and evaluation

Experimentation in welfare reform has been ongoing in the USA since the mid-1980s. From 1987 onwards, Wisconsin had gradually implemented a series of active labour market measures under its Wisconsin Works, or W-2, programme. Amongst these measures were a number that are now recognised as orthodox welfare-to-work policies: for example, time limits on receiving welfare benefits, welfare benefit payments made only to individuals actively seeking work, and incentives made available to encourage counties (who are responsible for administering welfare rolls on a local level) to increase job placements.

The apparent success of Wisconsin’s W-2 programme piqued the interest of welfare policy experts in the USA – and, indeed, the world – and served as inspiration for the US Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunities Reconciliation Act (PRWORA) of 1996. PRWORA drastically changed the national landscape. In July 1997, the incumbent cash welfare system, entitled Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC), was replaced with Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), which introduced a rule that individuals, with few exceptions, must work after two years on assistance. In addition, individuals who had received assistance for five years (cumulative or not) were no longer entitled to assistance.

States were permitted to exempt up to just 20% of their caseload from these measures and were allowed flexibility in the way they implemented the new legislation. As a result: ‘Each state [...] implemented a different TANF plan with unique objectives, funding priorities, time limits, and client bases’ (Lichter and Jayakody 2002, p. 119). The terms of engagement with welfare recipients, overwhelmingly single mothers (see Daguerre and Taylor-Gooby 2004, p. 29) changed significantly. Between the introduction of PRWORA in August 1996 and June 2000, the number of TANF recipients fell from 12,241,000 to 5,781,000: a fall of 53% (US Department of Health and Human Services 2007).

At the time of the introduction of PRWORA, it was considered almost procedural to adopt an evidence-based approach to new welfare programmes. A first-hand account of this approach is illustrative of the driving rationale in US welfare policy. In a 1998 testimony to the US House of Representatives House Committee on Ways and Means, an official of the US Department of Health and Human Services stated that, since the mid-1970s, ‘the application of experimental approaches to studying the effects of welfare reform has proven to be enormously important to finding out what is effective and what is not’ (Howard Rolston, Testimony to US House Committee on Ways and Means, Subcommittee on Human Resources, 19 March 1998). The principal evaluation tool, he added, employed by the states was the randomised controlled trial:

Because of its proven track record, in almost all cases ACF and the state agreed on experiments as part of the approval of their waiver demonstrations begun prior to enactment of the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (Rolston, 19 March 1998).

The favoured approach used a quantitative approach that attempted to posit the effects of the experimental welfare programme. In this experimental design, ‘States randomly assigned families either to continue receiving welfare under the old AFDC rules, the “control group,” or to another group that received welfare under the reform regime, the “experimental group”’ (Ralston 1998). Random assignment is a positivist methodology that seeks to measure the impact of a health or social intervention on a given population. The approach compares outcomes in a population (usually with a large N) of two sorts of individuals: (1) individuals assigned at random to receive an intervention or programme that addresses a pre-existing qualifying need and (2) individuals with the same qualifying need who do not receive the intervention or programme. Since the intervention is assigned to subjects at random, the researcher can assume that any characteristics of the population will be distributed fairly evenly across both groups. Any significant differences between the two groups, at the end of the trial, can therefore be attributed to the effect of the intervention. In terms of welfare evaluations, the random assignment method allows policy officials to observe the effects of a programme ahead of any wider roll-out. These evaluations, as the evidence above indicates, formed a core element of the experimental approach taken by the USA.

The transfer of evaluation techniques and findings

The extensive use of evaluations of welfare-to-work ‘experiments’ in the USA impressed UK policy officials. Interviews conducted contemporaneously with senior officials involved in the development of welfare-to-work policy in this period offer a telling narrative. Although the UK officials quoted below recognised the distinct demographic differences between the UK and the USA, they were impressed by the evaluation approach taken by US policy-makers to generate evidence on the effectiveness of policy and programmes. The preference for well-grounded evaluation methodology was illustrated in a rejection of the Swedish approach. For one official: [the Swedish] ‘methodology for evaluating the impact of their policies in this area is not very developed. What we are interested in doing is adapting what works and what

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doesn't' (Interview with Senior Department for Education and Employment (DfEE) Official, August 1999). It is important to note that the interviewee emphasised the adaptation element of the learning process; a recognition of the inherent differences between the USA and the UK. Nevertheless, the evaluation components were seen as an important step in the policy process. One official noted: 'One way in which the American practice did influence our thinking more directly was on the issue of evaluation' (Interview with Senior DfEE Official, August 1999).

US evaluation methods made an immediate impact on New Labour officials. The significance of the American-style 'what works?' approach was identified and viewed as intrinsically compatible with the pragmatism of New Labour. UK officials had already examined New Zealand and Swedish policy approaches, yet, according to one official, 'one reason why the U.S. was more useful to us was because the Americans were further advanced on this question of evaluating their programmes' (Interview with Senior Treasury Officials, August 1999). The putative effectiveness of US evaluation procedures drove the ministerial support for the New Deal and its associated programmes. In this vein, a member of the New Deal Taskforce recognised the influence that US evidence had upon ministers:

The reason why I'm actually quite keen that we do use the lessons of the U.S., once you accept that we're actually talking about apples and pears, is that what the U.S. have been very good at is a couple of things in the general area of welfare. One is that the programmes that they do run are very effective, they are very businesslike, very brisk, they're very intensive... Our advice to Ministers for two years has been to intensify and sharpen the whole delivery. It's very convenient to demonstrate that working well in the U.S. (Interview with member of New Deal Task Force, August 1999)

This is a crucial point because it lends weight to the assertion that the evaluation methodology of US welfare reform, in addition to the policy content, was implemented in the UK's New Deal. This is important because it indicates that the agents of transfer (policy officials) acted reflexively and strategically in the policy learning process. Thus, overall, the techniques and methods used in the USA featured heavily in the New Deal because they could be used to show the 'success' of policy. This reveals two major insights on welfare-to-work policy gleaned by UK policy officials from the USA: first, they were impressed by the range and quality of evaluation techniques and procedures for monitoring the effectiveness of the New Deal (such as random assignment) and secondly, they drew upon the evidence generated by the US evaluations to discern what worked effectively (such as the interview requirement) prior to developing the UK approach.

Adopting and adapting America's tests: the ERA demonstration

These findings add some valuable insights to the narratives and analysis of the adoption of US welfare policy. When Tony Blair addressed listeners in the Aylesbury Estate in 1997, he enunciated his priorities for the next term of government and made careful reference to the use of evaluations, finding out 'what works', 'testing out ideas' and running pilots. The interview findings demonstrate that Blair's injunction to deliver policy differently was taken up almost immediately. Indeed, just six months later, in December 1997, a UK House of Commons Social Security Select Committee

640 toured the USA to learn from the US reforms to welfare policy. The Committee, made up predominantly of Labour MPs, reported that the US approach to implementing new welfare ideas was flexible and emphasised innovation. Importantly, the Committee noted that the US approach to evaluating policy provided valuable lessons for the UK:

The United Kingdom would benefit from greater flexibility and experimentation. More pilot schemes and geographical experiments, particularly when focused on areas with low unemployment, might also allow for quicker, more focused evaluation and monitoring (House of Commons Social Security Select Committee 1998, p. viii).

645 The Department for Work and Pensions was responsible for the implementation of the New Deal. Subsequent to the instigation of experimental forms of the New Deal, evaluations were set up to monitor the policy effectiveness. A series of prototype areas were set up to monitor the initial impact of the New Deal for Lone Parents (NDLP) introduced in June 1997. In 2002, the DWP attempted to evaluate the New Deal for Disabled People. The evaluation was designed to use the same random assignment design so widespread across the USA. However, pressure from campaigners – who regarded the use of control groups as ‘discriminatory, unethical and demotivating’ (Prasad 2002) – saw the proposed evaluation scrapped. Yet, the deployment of random assignment in UK policy was not long delayed. In 2002, the DWP commissioned the UK Employment Retention and Advancement demonstration: the largest random assignment test of social policy ever conducted in the UK. Between 2003 and 2007, the UK ERA conducted three random assignment tests of the New Deal. It sought to establish the efficacy of combining employment counselling services with certain financial supports for specific target groups. Three random assignment tests were conducted: (1) participants in the New Deal for Lone Parents (NDLP); (2) long-term unemployed participants in the New Deal 25+ (ND25+) and (3) lone parents working between 16 and 29 hours per week and receiving the Working Tax Credit.

655 Crucially, the ERA evaluation was designed and operated by MDRC, a US-based organisation specialising in social policy evaluation. MDRC had already had been contracted by the US Department of Health and Human Services to conduct a US-based Employment Retention and Advancement (ERA) project, which used the same random assignment methodology. The UK ERA was directly informed by the research methodology used in the USA, as the UK ERA report states:

665 The development of the programme was inspired by a similar demonstration, the US ERA project, which was already being implemented in several U.S. states. Launched in 1999, the U.S. ERA demonstration tests a variety of retention and advancement programmes and has many features that are similar to the U.K. demonstration (2007, p. 25).

670 That the DWP employed both (US-style) policy evaluation techniques as well as a US organisation to implement a UK policy evaluation highlights this element of the welfare policy transfer. There was an unambiguous adoption of the random assignment evaluation techniques that accompanied the substantive learning about US welfare policy ideas. Indeed, the narrative of the transfer of welfare policy ideas is

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incomplete without acknowledging the adoption of policy evaluation techniques since such techniques were central, not incidental, to the implementation of welfare-to-work.

Conclusion

685 The primacy of the EBP process in the New Labour policy paradigm appealed directly to rationalist, instrumental sentiments. It was part of a broader effort to distinguish New Labour from old Labour, shaking off the class idealism of post-war politics, while presaging an era of ‘enlightenment’ policy. New Labour promoted itself as a party of pragmatism, connoting a reliable and trustworthy handling of
690 political issues in an era of public disenchantment with politicians. Social issues could be dissected and remedied through proper recourse to the correct methodology. From the outset of New Labour’s administration in 1997, there was a clear affinity with US policy solutions. Clinton had already successfully embarked upon a reformist social agenda, artfully deploying the Third Way philosophy as a kind of political compass. The US approach to ridding the welfare system of the long-term unemployed was marked by the substantial evaluation data supporting, and lauding, the success of the policy. Against this backdrop, UK officials had little hesitation in engaging with a host of US welfare policy ideas with a view to learning from ‘what works’. This case has important implications for the literatures on policy transfer, EBP and welfare policy. Theoretically, and primarily, this article has sought to strengthen a critical element of the policy transfer analytical framework: why policy officials adopt from elsewhere. The policy transfer framework has attracted considerable inter-disciplinary attention in recent years, yet there have been relatively few attempts to explore in detail the motivations of policy officials, particularly with regard to EBP. Empirically, this article contributes two important insights to the literature on the policy transfer of US welfare policy to the UK post-1997. First, it offers an alternative response to the ‘why transfer?’ question. In a challenge to existing narratives explaining what motivated UK policy officials to adopt welfare policy from the USA, the evidence presented herein posits that the injunction of ‘what works’ in welfare policy led officials to privilege the heavily evidence-based welfare policy regime in the USA. Second, this article has also suggested an alternative answer to the ‘what is transferred?’ question. The New Deal design was clearly influenced by US models of welfare-to-work, and this has attracted considerable commentary in both the media and academic press. Yet until now
715 very little attention has been paid to the adoption and use of US policy evaluation techniques, even though their deployment in the UK came as a critical element of welfare policy adoption from the USA.

720 The ascendancy of EBPM as a style of policy development in the UK has played a crucial role in shaping processes of policy transfer to the UK. The injunction to develop policy based on the latest available evidence creates an opportunity structure for policy transfer to occur from countries where policy outcomes evidence, of welfare-to-work efficacy in this case, is already available. It is perhaps just as likely that commitments to EBP – irrespective of the name – might play a similar role in other states. Already, the evidence-based approach has begun to percolate into other jurisdictions. The Netherlands, Germany, Denmark and Switzerland all have adopted elements of the UK model of EBP (Frey and Ledermann 2010), a trend

that suggests a neat reversal of the theme of this article: the policy transfer of EBP. With the current Conservative-led coalition government aping the rationalist, EBP approach of its predecessor, the opportunity structures for international policy transfer have never been more pronounced.

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1. Figures calculated from research reports made available at: <http://research.dwp.gov.U.K./asd/asd5/rrs-index.asp> [Accessed 2 February 2012].

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