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REVIEW ARTICLE

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Policy diffusion, policy transfer, and policy mobilities revisited: A call for more interdisciplinary approaches in human geography

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Abstract

Geographers and urban studies scholars tend to rely on policy mobilities approaches to explain processes of policy spread, whereas political scientists and public policy scholars usually draw on either policy diffusion or policy transfer. I challenge this widespread scholarly practice of selecting approaches based on the association with a certain discipline. Instead, first and foremost, the specific research aim(s) and question(s) should shape the choice of theoretical lens. Analytical or policy outcome-oriented studies should rely on policy diffusion and policy transfer, while a policy mobilities approach is best suited for more (policy) critical analysis. The approaches can also complement each other to a certain degree. Analytical and policy outcome-oriented approaches need a stronger critical perspective while policy mobilities scholars need to underpin their critique with constructive suggestions on how to improve established practices.

KEYWORDS
critical studies, policy diffusion, policy innovations, policy outcome-oriented studies, policy spread, policy transfer, urban policy mobilities

1 | INTRODUCTION

This paper is the result of a studying, thinking, and reflection process that has outlived several research and academic qualification projects. What all these projects had in common was a focus on the spread of policies between cities, regions, or countries. Here, a particular challenge is the selection of the 'right' theoretical approach for the 'right' research object and research puzzle. In social sciences, several approaches to study processes of policy spread have been developed and modified in the past decades. Studying policy spread is highly relevant for human geographers simply because these processes always have spatial implications and since they have the potential to change places. The three most prominent approaches in this context are policy diffusion (see Gray, 1973; Karch, 2007; Rose, 1991; Shipan & Volden, 2008), policy transfer (see Benson & Jordan, 2011; Dolowitz & Marsh, 1996, 2000; James and Lodge, 2003)—both mostly applied in political science and public policy—, and policy mobilities (see McCann, 2011; Peck, 2011; Peck & Theodore, 2010; Temenos & McCann, 2013), which is more common among human geographers and urban studies scholars. While all three approaches focus on the spread of policies, I argue that they do not work equally well for all research questions and designs. Despite this, scholars tend to select the approach that is most closely associated with their academic discipline, with less consideration about its suitability (or unsuitability) for the specific research endeavour. Despite all the appeals for more interdisciplinary research in the social sciences (Kalenda, 2016; O'Brien, 2011; Salter and Hearn, 1996), research on the spread of policies still seems to run along strict disciplinary boundaries. This is unfortunate because it limits the available perspectives that are applied in empirical study and restricts the ability of researchers to reach out to new audiences with their findings. In this light, this contribution does not only aim to reach geographers and urban studies scholars but also other social scientists grappling with questions or issues of policy spread, particularly from the political sciences and public policy studies.

As a graduate student in human geography, my thesis examined the expansion of renewable energies in small and rural municipalities. I focused particularly on whether and to what extent solutions can be transferred between municipalities. My supervisor suggested choosing a policy mobilities approach. However, the policy mobilities literature did not provide a clear analytical framework or any other (clear) guidance on how to study such processes. Instead, I found myself reading and slowly understanding a body of thought-provoking critical literature on global neoliberal actors, hegemonic discourses, and power relations, which did not help me to address my particular research issue. My supervisor may have suggested policy mobilities because it was 'the' new fashionable approach in human geography at the time. Sometime later—after I had begun my doctorate in urban studies—I focused on policy learning among city practitioners and how such processes might facilitate the transfer of policies. Again, within my disciplinary 'bubble' I almost exclusively met scholars that suggested to consider a policy mobilities approach. Not fully satisfied with the lessons learned from this literature strand I started to taste the 'forbidden fruits' of policy diffusion and policy transfer literature that are rooted in the political sciences and public policy studies. I was already somewhat familiar with the latter approach in particular, since it is highly contested and debated in the policy mobilities literature (see McCann, 2011; Peck & Theodore, 2010; Temenos & McCann, 2013). I cannot say that policy diffusion and policy transfer initially convinced me or seemed to be terribly helpful for my specific research issues. However, what I soon realised was that the policy mobilities' critique of policy transfer has only focused on some—actually very few—aspects of the approach, and ignored many others. All three approaches have their merits but depending on the respective research aim, and the case(s) studied, their degree of utility varies significantly. Thus, this paper aims to provide guidance to scholars on how and when to choose which of the three approaches.

I will proceed as follows: First, all three approaches are presented and discussed in detail, starting with the oldest approach, policy diffusion, and ending with the most recent one, policy mobilities. The following section compares the three approaches and concludes with recommendations for social scientists on the use of the different approaches. The final section summarises the main findings and recommendations.

TABLE 1 Key characteristics of previous research on policy diffusion, policy transfer, and policy mobilities.

	Policy diffusion	Policy transfer	Policy mobilities
Main disciplines	Political science, public policy	Political science, public policy	Human geography, urban studies
Emergence	Late 1960s	Late 1990s	Early 2010s
Key scholars	Richard Rose, Charles Shipan, Craig Volden	David Dolowitz, David Marsh	Eugene McCann, Jamie Peck, Cristina Temenos, Kevin Ward
Objects of spread	Policy innovations, for example, laws or regulations	Policy measures, for example, best-practices	Policy ideas and hegemonic discourses, for example, visions or models
Geographical reach	Mostly national, spread within federal states	Mostly international, spread between countries	Mostly international (global), spread between cities
Methods	Mostly quantitative	Qualitative	Qualitative

Source: Own interpretation.

2 | EXPLORING POLICY DIFFUSION, POLICY TRANSFER AND POLICY MOBILITIES

The following three sub-sections present and discuss policy diffusion, policy transfer and policy mobilities in greater detail, drawing on a large body of literature, mainly from the political sciences, public policy, human geography, and urban studies. Table 1 provides a comparative overview of some key features of the three approaches.

2.1 | Policy diffusion

Of the three approaches explored, policy diffusion that is rooted in American comparative state politics is the oldest. Policy diffusion approaches were already being developed in the 1960s to examine the dissemination of policy innovations among federal states (Gray, 1973; Lutz, 1986; Savage, 1985; Walker, 1969). Of certain importance here were and are until today questions of party difference (e.g. which innovations diffuse among conservative and which among liberal states). Policy diffusion subsequently received further conceptual and methodological development (Berry & Berry, 1990; Carley et al., 2017). It traditionally comes into use in quantitative research on policy and public administration (Boushey, 2010; Lutz, 1986; Mintrom, 1997). Nevertheless, there are now also several qualitative and mixed-method policy diffusion studies (Karch, 2007; Obinger et al., 2013; Starke, 2013). Policy Diffusion focuses on the spread of policy-related innovations (for instance, laws) within a political or social system (see Nicholson-Crotty & Carley, 2016; Pradeau, 2021; Rogers, 2003) and the exploration of dissemination patterns of policies, that is, its speed and the pathways taken (see Kern, 2000; Lütz, 2007; Rogers, 2003). Later on, however, the approach has in effect developed more broadly, such that the modifiability of policies is also taken into account (Bromley-Trujillo & Poe, 2020; Rose, 1991). Policy diffusion is applied across a wide range of topics (Graham et al., 2013; Shipan & Volden, 2012). One central area is social policy, including for example, welfare policy (Collier & Messick, 1975; Karch, 2007; Kemmerling, 2018; Obinger et al., 2013) and social services (Betz & Neff, 2017; Sugiyama, 2008). Other significant thematic areas are morality policy (Godwin & Schroedel, 2000; Mooney & Lee, 1999; Velasco, 2018), health policy (Gilardi et al., 2009; Shipan & Volden, 2012; Weynland, 2019), environmental policy (Arbolino et al., 2018; Kern, 2000; Kern et al., 2007; Matisoff, 2008), energy policy (Aglanu, 2016; Baldwin et al., 2019; Berry et al., 2015; Carley et al., 2017; Matisoff & Edwards, 2014), and climate policy (Bromley-Trujillo & Poe, 2020; Jordan & Huitema, 2014; Kammerer & Namhata, 2018; Kern et al., 2023).

Policy Diffusion is a fairly analytical approach that puts great emphasis on identifying causal relationships. Studies often assume rather robust patterns of policy diffusion (Boushey, 2010; Kuhlmann, 2021; Lütz, 2007; Rogers, 2003). Generally, the literature distinguishes between two patterns: direct diffusion (particularly between neighbouring

regions or states) and institutionalised diffusion (between countries) (Kern, 2000). Direct diffusion is characterised by a dissemination in concentric circles starting from a locus of innovation. Central here is geographic proximity (Kuhlmann, 2021) which leads to the so-called neighbourhood effect (Shipan & Volden, 2008), meaning that information required for the adoption of innovations is initially only available from the respective neighbouring states. Thus, direct diffusion usually results in an S-shaped diffusion curve, with a low rate of diffusion at the beginning and at the end (Boushey, 2010; Kern, 2000; Mitchell, 2018; Rogers, 2003). The significance of the neighbourhood effect has, however, seen a marked decline, since digitalisation has reduced the importance of spatial proximity for the diffusion of knowledge and ideas (Vrain et al., 2022). In the case of institutionalised diffusion, institutions provide individual states with information about the innovation from the outset. This normally results in a C-shaped diffusion curve, the slope being steepest at the beginning and gradually tailing off again later (Kern, 2000). The underlying assumption for policy diffusion is that policies are initially adopted by only a few administrative units, but the rate of uptake increases chronologically until a certain point in time (Kern, 2000; Lütz, 2007). Once a sufficient number of states adopt a policy, a critical mass is reached for a policy dynamic to be set in motion—although it is debatable at what point exactly one can speak of such a sufficient number (Granovetter, 1978; Lütz, 2007; Schelling, 1978).

Most policy diffusion studies relate to the diffusion among individual states (Rose, 1991; Savage, 1985). Especially in the case of comparative state politics, which is predominant in the USA, this pattern remains unchanged until today (Hearn et al., 2017; Meyer-Gutbrod, 2020). Increasingly, however, British and European researchers have also focussed on diffusion between nation states (Gilardi & Wasserfallen, 2019; Jordan & Huitema, 2014; Obinger et al., 2013; Shipan & Volden, 2008; Weynland, 2019), or between cities within a single country (Kern et al., 2023). In the early days of policy diffusion research, many scholars and practitioners were still of the opinion that diffusion mostly led to the successful implementation of policies and that details about the process of transfer from one context to another were therefore less relevant (see Gray, 1973; Walker, 1969). However, policy diffusion research has since begun to consider that policies are not necessarily transferred one-to-one, but rather in modified form (Bromley-Trujillo & Poe, 2020; Rose, 1991). Moreover, policy diffusion now also focuses on deliberate rejection of innovations, that is, when a conscious decision is made not to adopt a particular policy, even if it has proven 'successful' elsewhere (Theobald & Kern, 2011). In the American field of comparative state politics, in particular, deliberate rejection by individual states—often following landmark Supreme Court rulings—plays a significant role (Godwin & Schroedel, 2000; Mooney & Lee, 1999; Velasco, 2018). This includes both deliberate rejection of conservative policies by liberal states (death penalty or abortion, for instance) and of liberal policies by conservative states (such as same-sex marriage and gun control). In European policy diffusion research, van der Heiden and Strebel (2012) have coined the term *non-diffusion* for cases in which dissemination does not occur.

2.2 | Policy transfer

Originating in political science, policy transfer has provided an alternative approach in debates on the dissemination of policies since the mid-1990s. Central for its emergence was the question if and what nation states can learn from other nation states. This first led to the establishment of the lesson drawing approach that was later on further developed by policy transfer scholars (James & Lodge, 2003; Rose, 1991). Grappling with rather practical questions, policy transfer scholars have opened up a research field with high relevance for public policy practitioners and politicians (Evans, 2009) who can be seen as their main target audience until today. Besides, policy transfer largely arises out of a critique of certain elements of policy diffusion (Benson & Jordan, 2011; Bulmer et al., 2007; Dolowitz & Marsh, 1996). This criticism focused principally on the fact that policy diffusion had not taken sufficient account of numerous policy spread processes that accompany the dissemination of policies (ibid.). Policy transfer therefore relies not on quantitative but on qualitative methods (Bissell et al., 2011; Marsh & Sharman, 2009), since these can better capture such processes.

Most policy transfer contributions were published between the late 1990s to mid-2000s (Benson & Jordan, 2011). The starting point in this case was policy research in the United Kingdom (Bulmer, 2007; Evans, 2009; James &

Lodge, 2003). Policy transfer describes the process of knowledge dissemination from one place to another, most often a nation state, with the assistance of policy instruments, administrative setups, and institutions (Dolowitz & Marsh, 1996). The knowledge thus transferred is generated and tested in the location from which it is transmitted at a specific point in time and applied in the receiving location at a later time (ibid.).

While policy transfer had a certain influence on policy diffusion research in the United Kingdom, it left the American debate on diffusion untouched and discourse in the USA continued to focus on quantitative comparative state politics. As with policy diffusion, studies have applied policy transfer in a diverse range of fields, including social security and welfare policy (Daguerre, 2004; Hulme, 2005; Pierson, 2003), public education (Bache & Taylor, 2003; Normand, 2020), development aid (Hwang & Song, 2019; Stone, 2004), criminal justice (Jones & Newburn, 2006; Robinson, 2015), EU convergence policy (Adams, 2008; Bulmer, 2007), and environmental and climate policy (Betsill & Bulkeley, 2004; Pacheco-Vega, 2021; Swainson and de Loe, 2011). Moreover, policy transfer approaches have increasingly been applied to research on Europeanisation (Bulmer et al., 2007; Coman & Tulmets, 2021; Holzinger & Knill, 2005; Stead, 2012) and globalisation (Ladi, 2005; Stone, 2004) since the 2000s. More generally, good and best practice examples play a prominent role in policy transfer (Marsden & Stead, 2011; Stead, 2012; Stone, 2012; Stone et al., 2021).

While the focus in policy diffusion remains very much on the dissemination pathways of policy innovations, policy transfer instead foregrounds the concrete process of spread or adoption of a policy (Dolowitz & Marsh, 1996; James & Lodge, 2003; Marsh & Sharman, 2009). This includes not only the mechanisms of transfer crucial to such a process, but also its content and outcomes (ibid.). Additionally, policy transfer tends to focus more on policy spread occurring between nation states and less on those taking place within their borders. This internationalisation of policy research negated the previously dominant notion 'that public policies are related to domestic issues' (Porto de Oliveira, 2021, p. 1). A restrictive fixation on nation states has however seen something of a decline over time. Thus, in recent years, policy transfer has increasingly found application in research work on regional and local energy and climate policy (see Bößner et al., 2020; Hoppe et al., 2016; Shefer, 2019). A central problem for policy transfer researchers concerning transfer and adoption of a policy is whether the studied transfer is voluntary or (to a certain extent) coerced, for instance as part of a regulatory framework. Dolowitz and Marsh (1996) found that transfer that occurs voluntarily has a greater chance of success than those policies that have been imposed from above by higher authorities. Moreover, attitudes and priorities of the actors involved are often considered key factors in 'successful' transfer. Thus, Dolowitz and Marsh (1996) conclude that organisations are generally much more open to adopting novel approaches if they believe that existing strategies would be unable to address the problems they are designed to tackle.

The question of whether a policy that was transferred from one place to another might be viewed as 'successful' is of central importance in policy transfer research. The crucial evaluation criterion here is whether, as a result of transfer, a government's desired objectives were achieved or not (Dolowitz & Marsh, 2000). In a best-case scenario, this would mean that the policy leads to a desirable change in policy outcomes in the receiving place (Dolowitz & Marsh, 2000; James & Lodge, 2003; Marsh & Sharman, 2009). Dolowitz and Marsh (2000) nevertheless note that even in the case of a 'successful' policy transfer one might still experience a failure of implementation, or of the policy itself. According to Dolowitz and Marsh, this might be the result of 'uninformed', 'incomplete', or 'inappropriate' transfer (or any combination of the three). An uninformed transfer occurs when the receiving place has insufficient information about the policy that has been transferred to it, particularly knowledge about the (institutional) framework within which the policy is meant to be developed and implemented. Incomplete transfer occurs when central elements of the transferred policy have not been transmitted, especially those elements crucial to the functioning of the policy. Inappropriate transfer happens when, during the process of transfer, differences between the states involved (for instance in economic, social, political, and administrative areas) are either not taken into account sufficiently, or are completely ignored. Cases in which no transfer occurs whatsoever are referred to as non-transfer (Benson & Jordan, 2011; Dolowitz & Marsh, 2000; Evans, 2017).

2.3 | Policy mobilities

The emergence of policy mobilities in the early 2010s was largely driven by critiques of policy transfer and to a lesser extent policy diffusion, particularly from human geographers and urban studies scholars (e.g. McCann, 2011; Peck, 2011; Peck & Theodore, 2010; Temenos & McCann, 2013). Their critique focused on the nation-stated centredness of previous public policy studies: 'If it were really ever once, it appears that it is simply no longer possible to view the world through lenses that implicitly or explicitly locate the politics of public policy within national bounded systems, nor even to position them straightforwardly within nested scalar hierarchies' (Cochrane & Ward, 2012, p. 5). Key drivers that spawned the establishment of policy mobilities were debates on the variegation of neoliberal regimes in the context of an ever-increasing globalisation of economy, society and politics as well as the socio-spatial processes that followed from it (Baker & Temenos, 2015; Peck, 2002). Central to policy mobilities is the significance of the modifiability of policies, right from the beginning of the process (McCann, 2011; Peck & Theodore, 2010; Temenos & McCann, 2013). This perspective also criticises policy transfer for not sufficiently taking into consideration the importance of policy failure and its causes (see Temenos & Lauermann, 2020). Dolowitz and Marsh (2000) did, in fact, concern themselves intensively with policy failure, but this aspect received little attention within broader policy transfer research and appears to have been neglected in critiques by other political scientists prior to the emergence of policy mobilities (see James & Lodge, 2003). Nevertheless, policy failure is given much greater attention in policy mobilities research, although these scholars would use the term policy immobilities (Cohen, 2017; Lovell, 2019; Malone, 2019; McLean & Borén, 2015).

In contrast to policy diffusion and policy transfer, policy mobilities focuses more upon the role of non-state actors, such as NGOs, consultancies, or multinational corporations, and the way they operate with and influence governmental bodies with their mostly neoliberal policies (Crivello, 2015; Marsh & Sharman, 2009; McCann, 2011; Peck & Theodore, 2010; Prince, 2010). Indeed, Stone et al. (2021, p. 173) have labelled private consultants and policy advisory organisations as 'blind spot in policy transfer research'. Moreover, emphasis is more strongly placed upon the effects that policy discourse and implementation have on social life and practices (Schäfer, 2022). The critique of policy mobilities scholars clearly addresses the work of policymakers and politicians—that are responsible for the implemented policies in the first place—nevertheless, their main target group seem to be activists, social movements or third party organisations that oppose neoliberal policies (Hohmann, 2013; McKenzie, 2017). Particularly, because these actors are often the ones affected by public policies and its consequences. Lastly, policy mobilities has a stronger focus on cities and urban spaces, which has led to the emergence of urban policy mobilities as a sub-field (Baker & Temenos, 2015; Crivello, 2015; Jacobs, 2012; Lovell, 2019; McCann, 2011; McCann & Ward, 2014).

As with policy diffusion and policy transfer, the areas of application for policy mobilities are quite diverse. Of certain central importance are processes of financialisation (Baker et al., 2016; Chang, 2022; Robin & Brill, 2018; Ward, 2018), such that literature on policy mobility has been much concerned with dissemination of ideas on business improvement districts (McCann & Ward, 2014; Michel, 2013; Michel & Stein, 2015; Peyroux et al., 2012; Stein et al., 2017), smart cities (Crivello, 2015; Hýllová & Slach, 2018; Levenda, 2019; Rossi, 2016; Vanolo, 2014) or also housing and gentrification (Baker & Temenos, 2015; Lees, 2012). In recent years, however, consideration has increasingly been given to further topics such as education policy (Ball, 2016; Gulson et al., 2017; Williamson et al., 2019), social innovation (Coenen & Morgan, 2020; Füg & Ibert, 2020), urban infrastructures (Chang, 2022; Levenda, 2019), urban resilience (Coppola et al., 2021; Webber et al., 2021), and climate policy (Fisher, 2014; Haupt, 2021; Mattissek & Sturm, 2017).

Proponents of policy mobilities repeatedly emphasise the mobile and changeable character of policies (McCann, 2011; Peck & Theodore, 2010). Peck and Theodore (2010, p. 170) note that policies seldom circulate as 'complete packages', but are instead transferred between different places in 'bits and pieces'. In other words, they assume that ideas, discourses, or synthesised models often travel only selectively and in partial form (McCann, 2011; Peck & Theodore, 2010; Temenos & McCann, 2013). A crucial difference from policy transfer and, at least, the original form of policy diffusion is thus the assumption that—figuratively speaking—ideas are already subject to decisive

changes in the course of their journey and not only following their arrival. Moreover, the focus lies not only on spread or travelling of policies and ideas, but also on how these might change the places they are spreading to (see Peck & Theodore, 2010; Stone, 2004; Temenos, 2019; Temenos & McCann, 2013). This perspective is quite strong, most probably because policy mobilities emphasises the importance of hegemonic discourses, mindsets, and patterns of thought. Here, both direction and movements of policies are seen as an expression of power relations (Schäfer, 2017). Then again, in contrast to policy diffusion and policy transfer, classical policy innovations or instruments such as administrative regulations or laws are less important.

Central to policy mobilities, besides the modifiability of policies themselves, is the significance of failed policy spread. As mentioned before, policy mobilities scholars refer to it as policy immobilities (Cohen, 2017; Lovell, 2019; Malone, 2019; McLean & Borén, 2015). In that regard, Schäfer (2022, p. 267) emphasises, that 'the focus on failure underlines the fact that the mobilities of policies are no longer studied from an effectiveness or best-practice vantage point but rather in the context of critical scholarship seeking to unravel the hidden logics, power relations, and inequalities that can emerge through policy mobilities'. It is important to note here that policy failure does not automatically infer that no transfer has taken place. Rather, policy mobilities researchers are also concerned with drawing attention to what they consider 'harmful' or failed policies that can also travel from place to place (Lovell, 2019; Schäfer, 2017). While the critical perspective of policy mobilities is very pronounced, less attention is given to the methodological procedure involved in policy spread processes. Having said this, it must be acknowledged that methodological issues and challenges have certainly been discussed among policy mobilities scholars (see Cochrane & Ward, 2012; Peck & Theodore, 2012) and certainly have they called for 'the mobilisation of particular sets of methods, demanding a step beyond the relative comfort zone of case studies and semistructured interviews' (Cochrane & Ward, 2012, p. 7). However, the result was nowhere close to a clear framework or set of recommendations as compared to the other approaches, particularly policy diffusion.

3 | CONNECTING THE DOTS: WHEN TO CHOOSE WHICH APPROACH?

The previous section highlighted some similarities between policy diffusion and policy transfer, but little common ground between these two approaches and policy mobilities. Policy diffusion and policy transfer are rather pragmatic. More specifically, policy diffusion is very analytical and policy transfer is strongly effectiveness and policy outcome-oriented, meaning that the practical implementation of policies is often considered from the beginning on. In contrast, policy mobilities is a critical approach that fundamentally scrutinises the factors that shape common and current practices and actors of policy spread. Moreover, it sheds light on how transferred or diffused public policies affect society and individuals. Drawing on the observations presented and explained in the previous sections, Table 2 summarises some key suggestions for social scientists on the applicability of policy diffusion, policy transfer, and policy mobilities approaches. These are then again further explained in this section.

The analytical approach of policy diffusion mainly focusses on the diffusion patterns and speed of policies (mostly laws and regulations), while the policy outcome and effectiveness-oriented policy transfer asks if a certain policy was transmitted or not and the reasons for this outcome. A further key difference between both approaches lies in the type of empirical studies and the commonly used methods. Policy diffusion requires the consideration of a significant number of cases to draw conclusions about the diffusion patterns and speed of a certain policy (large-n studies), which is why many scholars use quantitative methods. Nevertheless, such processes can also be studied qualitatively, and this is becoming increasingly common. Policy transfer studies often examine one or very few cases in greater detail, normally using qualitative methods. Moreover, the effectiveness and policy outcome orientation of policy transfer make it relevant and (supposedly) useful for practitioners. Nevertheless, alongside the (common) policy outcome and effectiveness perspective, a more critical perspective on certain policies and practices might also be helpful and necessary for some practitioners (e.g. a stronger focus on the people and groups affected by their policies). However, neither the effectiveness and policy outcome-oriented policy transfer nor the analytical policy diffusion offer such

TABLE 2 Suggested areas of use for policy diffusion, policy transfer, and policy mobilities approaches.

	Policy diffusion	Policy transfer	Policy mobilities
(Research) aims			
Exploring processes of policy spread	✓	✓	✓
Informing practitioners	X	✓	X
Exploring the spatial implications of hegemonic discourses	X	X	✓
Type of studies			
Analytical studies	✓	X	X
Policy outcome and effectiveness-oriented studies	X	✓	X
Critical (of policy spread and society) studies	X	X	✓
Non-empirical/conceptual studies	✓	X	✓
Scale of studies			
Single case studies	X	✓	✓
Small n-studies	X	✓	✓
Large n-studies	✓	X	X
Main addressees			
Researchers	✓	✓	✓
Policymakers and politicians	X	✓	X
Social movements and 3rd sector organisations	X	X	✓
Methods			
Quantitative methods	✓	X	X
Qualitative methods	✓	✓	✓

Source: Own interpretation.

a perspective. Indeed, scholars of both approaches rarely criticise the policies that circulate but rather aim at better understanding how such processes take place and function. The most extreme (and maybe disturbing) example is probably the diffusion of death penalty or abortion laws and regulations among American states. Here, the focus is not on the criticism of a certain policy but on understanding how it diffused and more specifically by which states it was adopted by which it was rejected. Nevertheless, in a way policy diffusion and policy transfer can be considered as critical too. However, as stated beforehand, only from an effectiveness and policy outcome-oriented perspective (e.g. what needs to be changed or improved that diffusion or transfer of public policies works 'better').

In sharp contrast, the policy mobilities literature may overcompensate for the lack of a critical perspective in policy diffusion and policy transfer (critical of policy spread and society). Policy mobilities scholars rarely underpin their critique with constructive suggestions on how to improve established practices or simply on how to do it 'better'. Nevertheless, especially from a practitioner's or policy outcome-oriented scholar perspective, 'good' or at least promising solutions also need to be transferable from one place to another. And they need to know how this might be done in the most effective way. However, as it stands now, policy mobilities does not offer such a perspective, since their target audiences are mostly social movements or third party organisations. A more critical view of certain policies might be helpful or even necessary for some practitioners though. However, reference to power relations or the hegemonic agendas of powerful actors—as often put forth from critical policy mobilities scholars—are not always helpful. At least not for those practitioners that are not acting in their daily work as suggested by policy mobilities theory. More specifically, it can be contested whether every practitioner who focusses on the spread of policies is doing that with questionable intentions following hidden (neoliberal) agendas or the like. Indeed, the thematic foci of policy diffusion and policy transfer studies is on public policies and by far not all of them are harmful and/or neoliberal. Policy diffusion, for instance, also focusses on the diffusion of progressive policy innovations (e.g. social security

programs, environmental laws, see Collier & Messick, 1975; Kern, 2000) and so does policy transfer (e.g. rapid bus transport systems, environmental water allocation, see Marsden & Stead, 2011; Swainson and Loe, 2011). However, policy mobilities scholars have so far shown little appetite for reaching out to practitioners with their arguments. Instead, their discourses seem to be restricted to the 'bubble' of critical geographers, urban scholars and some social movements and third party organisations. This still rather limited reach of policy mobilities also applies to academic circles and becomes evident when looking at how their arguments are received (or not) by political scientists or public policy scholars. Even though policy mobilities scholars have engaged with policy transfer and to a far lesser extent policy diffusion perspectives, political scientists and public policy scholars have not responded to these critiques at all; indeed, they seem to have completely ignored the policy mobilities literature.

So how could the approaches benefit from each other? How could analytical, policy outcome oriented and critical studies complement each other? First of all, I want to highlight that I do not believe this is always possible or advisable. Nevertheless, there are a number of complex and wicked political and societal challenges that could significantly benefit from a combined approach or at least from approaches that acknowledge the other perspective(s). Looking at the deteriorating climate crisis, probably only few scholars would disagree that measures should be taken and proven policies to combat this crisis need pathways to spread to other places. Policy mobilities scholars do not need to study diffusion patterns and speed of policy innovations within a political system (e.g. climate change acts, see Nash et al., 2021). This is already being done by policy diffusion scholars. Policy mobilities scholars also do not have to grapple with the question of how policies can be adopted most effectively by practitioners in the receiving location (e.g. urban greening, see Barthold, 2018). This is already being done by policy transfer scholars. However, since climate change is a wicked problem that comes along with several trade-offs, both perspectives are crucial, the public policy one but also the (critical) societal one. What if those generally desireable public policies lead to undesireable trade-offs such as energy poverty (González-Eguino, 2015) or green gentrification (Anguelovski et al., 2019)? Indeed, as stated beforehand, policy diffusion and policy transfer scholars sometimes tend to put less emphasis or even overlook the effects of their policies (beyond the intended main outcome). And this is exactly where policy critical policy mobilities come into play. Policy mobilities scholars need to add the voice of the people affected by these policies here. Indeed, this additional voice should not remain in the echo-chambers of critical scholars, social movements and third party organisations.

So far, we have identified that studies seeking an analytical or policy outcome-oriented approach on the one hand, or a critical approach on the other, should take these factors into account when selecting a suitable policy spread approach. Both options have their merits, and are relevant for social scientists in general and for human geographers und urban scholars in particular, but scholars should choose the most suitable approach based on their research question and object(s), rather than their chosen discipline. More critical approaches, such as those found in policy mobilities, can enrich the perspectives of practitioners and scholars from political science and public policy. At the same time, human geographers and urban scholars should not leave the more analytical and policy outcome-oriented studies to political scientists and public policy scholars, especially because those studies would benefit from a more critical perspective. Moreover, depending on the scope the approaches can and should also be combined.

4 | CONCLUSION

This paper has explored and discussed the applicability of three key theoretical approaches from the social sciences that focus on the spread of policies. These are: policy diffusion and policy transfer—mostly applied in the political sciences and public policy studies—and policy mobilities—mostly applied in human geography and urban studies. There are considerable overlaps between the analytical policy diffusion and the policy outcome-oriented policy transfer approaches. In contrast, policy mobilities is mostly used for critical (of policy spread and society) studies and—despite the shared focus on policy spread—shows little overlaps with the two other approaches. Nevertheless, analytical, policy outcome-oriented and critical approaches could—and also should—complement each other to a

certain extent. On the one hand, analytical and policy outcome-oriented approaches could benefit from a stronger critical perspective. This applies not only to scholars but particularly to practitioners, who are more likely to read studies that focus on practice and implementation such as those applying policy transfer. On the other hand, with a stronger policy outcome focus, critical policy mobilities scholars could increase their reach (without necessarily abandoning their critical stance). Policy mobilities scholars should be less reluctant to share their criticism with practitioners, particularly because such criticism is not so much coming from political scientists and public policy scholars and because the perspective of the individuals and groups affected by these policies is often underrepresented in their studies. Currently, it appears that policy mobilities studies have not resonated much, either with the political science and public policy communities, or with practitioners.

When studying the spread of policies it has been common practice that political scientists and public policy scholars mainly rely on 'their' approaches (namely policy diffusion and policy transfer) while geographers and urban scholars chose 'their' policy mobilities perspective. Although there is nothing wrong with choosing the approach associated with their own discipline, it becomes questionable if this is still done regardless of research question and issue(s). At this point, I would like to come back to the example presented in the introduction: exploring the expansion of renewable energies in small and rural municipalities, with a focus on the transferability potential of established solutions. For this focus, a stronger policy outcome-oriented approach or even better a combined approach (policy transfer and policy mobilties) might have been more promising. Nevertheless, back then I chose an exclusive policy mobilities approach because it had emerged from the discipline within which I studied: human geography. While I remain more strongly rooted in human geography and urban studies, I could well imagine that (particularly young) political scientists and public policy scholars might face similar problems but just from the opposite perspective. Their research might benefit from taking a more critical stance on policy spread, but they would first need to 'liberate' their minds from a one-sided, policy outcome orientation corset. I would therefore like to address all social scientists examining policy spread processes: study the approaches of related disciplines, develop your research interests and research questions and then choose your theoretical approach accordingly.

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