Book Review

Brendan Boyd and Andrea Olive, editors
Provincial Policy Laboratories: Policy Diffusion and Transfer in Canada's Federal System
Toronto, Canada: University of Toronto Press, 2021

Reviewed by Eleanor D. Glor

The edited book *Provincial Policy Laboratories: Policy Diffusion and Transfer in Canada's Federal System* explores policy diffusion and transfer both as concepts and in six current, qualitatively analyzed Canadian policy cases. The term "laboratories", possibly borrowed from the term "innovation laboratories", is not explored nor is it relevant to this excellent book. Typically, the term "innovation laboratories" refers to demonstration/pilot projects rather than government policy, the topic of this book. The book's title is therefore not entirely appropriate, although it is current. Of the editors, Brendan Boyd categorically distinguishes diffusion and transfer, while Laurel Besco suggests they are difficult to distinguish and indicates the difference has been much debated (p. 133).

The book does a good job both of framing the concepts in the Introduction and Conclusion, and of describing and analyzing the case studies. Edited books are sometimes not well integrated but this one is better than usual, in part because most case study chapters use a "common diffusion framework". It consists of competition, coercion, normative pressure, learning and imitation (Table 1.2). Case studies also use many of the same definitions, categories and references as those offered in the Introduction and Conclusion. Boyd, who wrote the Introduction, indicates that using many of the same references (see references in each chapter) was not deliberate. Since there is much more policy diffusion/dissemination literature than they reference, this seems odd. An explanation would have been appreciated.

Boyd indicates diffusion and transfer can be distinguished. He uses "adoption" interchangeably with *diffusion* (p. 4), defining policy diffusion as "the cross-jurisdictional spread of policies among governments in Canada's federal system" (p. 4), a definition also used by Meseguer and Gilardi (2009: 528), Obinger (2013), and Marsh and Sharman (2009) at the level of countries. Boyd defines policy *transfer* as a diffusion mechanism, "the process by which knowledge about policies, administrative arrangements, institutions and ideas in one political system (past or present) is used in the development of policies, administrative arrangements, institutions and ideas in another political system" (p. 11). He also mentions the diffusion mechanisms of learning and imitation. He is therefore using "policy" to include policies, programs and administration, as do many scholars in the public policy field. Besco, one of the case study authors, says "Though *policy diffusion, transfer*, and *convergence* are sometimes used interchangeably (as noted by Marsh and Sharman 2009, among others), here they are perceived as distinct parts of a process" (p. 118). In the Conclusion, Olive and Boyd define diffusion and transfer the same way (p. 155) as Boyd in the Introduction. This is useful, as literature that is

transparent about its definitions both allows further development of the field and permits others to agree or disagree with them. Should they disagree, this creates valuable debate.

Marsh and Sharman (2009) said:

literatures on policy transfer and policy diffusion are complimentary, but need to focus more clearly on five key issues drawing insights from both literatures. First, work in each area can benefit from a greater focus on the changing interactions between the various mechanisms involved in diffusion/transfer. Second, the diffusion literature privileges structure, while the transfer literature privileges agency, but we need an approach which recognizes the dialectical relationship between the two. Third, the diffusion literature concentrates on pattern-finding, while the transfer literature examines process-tracing, but any full explanation of transfer/diffusion needs to do both. Fourth, both literatures suffer from skewed case selection with, in particular, too little attention paid to developing countries. Finally, while both literatures need to be interested in whether diffusion/transfer is likely to be successful/unsuccessful, neither considers any criteria that might be used to establish policy success and failure.

Marsh and Sharman do not provide criteria for success either. Glor's study of 183 Saskatchewan implemented innovations identified the number of years the innovations survived, in an environment in which the dominant ideology changed (Glor, 2023a). Implementation and years of survival are potential measures of success. Another possible criterion could be whether the innovation disseminated to other governments and how many. This is difficult research to do in Canada, much easier in the USA at the federal level as a public record of organizations created and terminated exists. Nonetheless, Boyd and Olive's (eds) book successfully identifies diffusion among provinces and territories for six Canadian innovations. Provinces were usually surveyed or interviews conducted.

Glor's study addressed these criteria: whether and when implemented, date of termination, if terminated; whether the innovation disseminated and which governments it disseminated to initially. The case studies are more current than the 183 cases addressed by Glor (2023b) and could potentially be compared to the Saskatchewan innovations. They are all different from the six case studies in *Provincial Policy* Laboratories. Unfortunately, the cases in *Provincial Policy Laboratories* do not consistently identify when the case studies were implemented, whether they have been terminated or still exist. While Glor's study covers fifty years duration, *Provincial Policy Laboratories*' duration is small. It does identify which provinces and some territories the policy diffused to. Based on the data available in *Provincial Policy Laboratories*, whether and to which governments the innovations diffused is the only comparison that could be made. None of the topics overlaps, between Boyd and Olive (eds) and Glor (2023a). This is not, however, a particularly interesting topic.

The Introduction to *Provincial Policy Laboratories* and some of the cases reference diffusion of *innovation* literature rather than literature identified as policy diffusion or transfer literature. They especially focus on Walker (1969) and Gow (1992), treating the innovation literature as diffusion literature. None of the authors referenced the conceptual innovation literature, however. Moreover, no argument was made for the assumption that diffusion of policy

and administrative innovation is the same phenomenon as diffusion of policy. I would have liked to have seen this assumption explored and supported (see also Glor, 2021).

The case studies address six new policies, each adopted by several Canadian provinces. They are parentage policy diffusion, hydraulic fracturing regulation transfer, endangered species legislation convergence, factors influencing sales tax transfer, convergence and divergence of carbon pricing and aviation emissions policy replication, and Canadian cannabis legalization that replicated provincial tobacco and alcohol regulations. Jared Wesley, author of the chapter on cannabis policy replication, also uses the term "policy alignment". The authors thus use numerous terms for what Boyd and Olive call diffusion. Nonetheless, all the cases are relevant to policy diffusion and transfer.

Although a number of the case studies secured information by interviewing knowledgeable public servants, the information obtained in this manner is discussed at a higher level. As in numerous other studies, the person interviewed is a senior public servant; namely, someone authorized to speak publicly about the case but not necessarily someone who knows the case well. I would have liked to have seen working level personnel interviewed, possibly as well, as they are usually the best informed. This is not often permitted by public services.

This short book (182 pp.) contributes to the literature on policy diffusion/transfer. It makes a contribution to the literature, in fact, it may be the only literature, on the topics addressed in the case studies.

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Acknowledgement:

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