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The uncertain potential of policy-learning:
a comparative assessment of three varieties

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Abstract

This article reviews recent conceptual debates on cross-national and cross-sectoral policy-learning in the political science literature. It proceeds from the argument that the existing literature is characterised by the absence of a comparative assessment of the risks and potentials of different strategies of policy learning. This sin of omission does not only have significant implications for the study of policy learning but also for its practice. The authors use the normative concept of improvement-oriented learning to assess the risks and potentials of three learning strategies: imitation, Bayesian updating and deliberation. They observe that the distribution of risks and potentials is most advantageous in deliberative learning strategies, but that imitation is the most risky learning strategy, and Bayesian updating ranges somewhere in-between.

Keywords: policy learning; policy transfer; normative policy-analysis; imitation; Bayesian updating; deliberation

Introduction

Since the mid-1990s, concepts of policy learning have increasingly found their way into research on international relations and European integration where they are frequently used in the analysis of transnational policy transfer and the cross-border diffusion and convergence of policies (see Rose 1991, Dolowitz and Marsh 1996, Goldsmith 2003, Holzinger et al. 2007, Bandelow 2008). With the shift in research interest from domestic learning processes to the issues of when and how states learn

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from one another, less self-referential forms of learning have suddenly come to the fore. Learning is no longer seen as the result of reflections on one's own experiences. Instead, the experiences of other actors in other political contexts form the basis for policy learning. This goes to the extent that no longer experiences as such, but rather the orientation towards others is identified as the main factor behind learning, for example when the adaptive behaviour of states reacting to social pressure for assimilation and bandwagoning effects is described as social learning (see also Levi-Faur 2002, e.g. Chamley 2004).

Altogether this literature has led to a broadening of the conceptual and empirical basis of social science debates on the topic of learning. Policy analysis can profit from this, provided that it succeeds in more clearly identifying the learning advancements associated with policy change. From an analytical standpoint, it often remains unclear with regard to the described adaptation phenomena to what extent they are motivated by learning advancements or mere ideational trends, the formation of ideational hegemony or cognitive diffusion without learning advancements (see also Walt 2000, Nullmeier 2003).

However, uncertainties concerning the range and potentials of individual learning strategies cannot only be traced back to the inflationary use of the concept of learning. The conceptual shortcomings of previous learning theory debates have also contributed to this. In the past the focus was placed not so much on the actual core question how individuals and other political actors learn from one another; the identification of material levels of learning as well as various forms of learning success instead pertained to what is learned (see Bandelow 2003b, p. 304).[1] As a result, attention was seldom paid to the 'respectively taken "paths of learning", the differences between various processes or forms of learning as well as the learning-promoting (or -impeding) strategies and "learning figures" selected by the involved individual actors' (Maier et al. 2003, p. 12).

Against this background, we place the focus of our article on the comparative analysis of the risks and potentials of different strategies and processes of learning. We begin with imitation. Imitation is a particularly frequently discussed concept of transnational policy learning, which in part has to do with the fact that it is actively promoted as a learning strategy associated with soft governance instruments of the

EU. We assume that imitation can stimulate policy learning at a very basic level of trial and error. However, these learning effects are far from self-evident and require further explanation. Learning by imitation like all learning strategies bears not only potentials but also risks. This raises questions with regard to the specific form and scope of this strategy of learning. It is therefore useful to contrast imitation with other learning strategies, which can be described as more advanced with regard to specified procedural and quality criteria for learning. To this end, imitation will be compared with two other concepts of policy learning, Bayesian updating and deliberation.

Our article proceeds in three steps. First, we will explain the concept of learning, upon which our analysis is based. A comparison of the risks and potentials of different learning strategies needs to draw on an underlying understanding of learning, which functions as a kind of conceptual bracket for the different concepts of learning. This function will be assumed by the concept of improvement-oriented learning, which highlights the cognitive as well as evaluative and judgemental components of learning. After this clarification of the concept of learning, we will introduce quality criteria for policy learning, which enable us to define the risks and potentials of distinct learning strategies and processes. The main emphasis is then placed on the systematic comparison of the three learning strategies, the results of which we discuss in a summary. The conclusion seeks to highlight the theoretical contribution of our distinction to the study of policy learning and deliberative policy-making.

Policy learning as improvement-oriented learning

The various concepts of policy learning discussed in the policy literature generally assume that all learning has a strong cognitive dimension. Learning is based on gaining knowledge, which is manifested in the capacity to draw lessons from the experiences and problems associated with certain policy content, goals, and interventions (see May 1992, p. 333). To the extent that learning marks a form of policy change, which comes about as an expression of cognitive abilities, a minimum degree of intention and the political will for self-modification are required.

By contrast, the evaluative-judgemental component of learning involved in the concept of improvement-oriented learning is less self-explanatory. The concept of learning is not always used in a normative sense in policy research. The relevant policy analysis literature on learning (e.g. Heclo 1974, Hall 1993, Sabatier 1993) precisely does not require learning to trigger an improvement (see Bandelow 2003a, p. 108). For example, Heclo defines social learning as a relatively stable change in behaviour, which results from previous experiences (1974, p. 306). Sabatier describes policy-oriented learning 'as a relatively stable change in thought or in behavioural intentions ...which results from experiences and has to do with the realisation or the modification of policy goals' (Sabatier 1993, pp. 121-122). Finally, Hall's concept of social learning, too, targets the cognitive dimension of learning, disregarding its evaluative-judgemental components. Social learning is defined as 'a deliberative attempt to adjust the goals or techniques of policy in response to past experience and new information' (Hall 1993, p. 278).

It therefore makes sense to distinguish a concept of improvement-oriented learning from the nominal concept of learning which focuses on mere change (also change-oriented learning). Improvement-oriented learning is learning which can be designated as an improvement on the basis of a certain criteria (Nullmeier 2003). Such an understanding of learning is analytically and normatively demanding. It is analytically demanding because, in contrast to merely change-oriented concepts of learning, it cannot be used in a general manner. Instead it is an evaluation and specification-based concept that can be refused as a description of certain kinds of policy change. Normatively speaking it must specify standards for evaluation, on the basis of which policy change can be defined as better or worse. Such an evaluation is notoriously difficult for reasons to be elaborated on below. At the same time, we cannot simply elude the difficulties posed by the evaluative-judgemental components of the concept of learning, as the evaluative component, which primarily comes to bear in the everyday usage of the concept of learning[2] cannot be neutralised for science. Political science in particular cannot shun it, as the evaluative component is also always an integrative element of democratic politics, in which decision-makers compete for political support and are put under learning pressure by voters when they promise policy-related improvements. Hence, the concept of improvement--oriented learning can at least gain standards for evaluation from the field of inquiry by

adopting the goals of certain political actors. Things become more complicated when a specific standard of scientific observation is set or presupposed as generally applicable. Here, the question arises whether and to what extent the concept of policy learning can elude such a standard. As long as the term 'policy learning' gives rise positive associations, it is only consequential to make the standards for an evaluation of policy change explicit.

Seen from this angle, the concept of improvement-oriented learning requires policy analysis research on learning to revert to normative political theory. However, the strong material evaluation of learning always bears a component of irrevocability. It is therefore to some degree incompatible with the inevitable incompleteness and context-dependence of learning, which is always of a preliminary character due to the epistemic boundaries of all knowledge. Information and opinions are potentially false and hence uncertain, even when they suggest certainty in the short-term. Policy learning is additionally bound to contextual circumstances, which are not guaranteed in every actual situation and learning environment. This concerns, above all, the fact that policy change is adaptable and customisable. The smaller the creative capacity of political actors, the smaller the probability that learning advancements will be made and/or be reflected in policy outcomes. One must also mention here that the involved actors' trust in the willingness to learn and change and their ability to compromise in view of the goals and strategies of learning are additional contextual conditions which facilitate learning. The contribution of normative learning theory to empirical policy research is limited, where such contextual conditions presupposed or demanded without consideration of the actual circumstances of policy learning. Its ideational claim may appear to be beside the point; especially when one brings to mind that normatively unaspiring concepts of change-oriented learning are already confronted with the accusation of being unrealistic assumptions, because they practically neglect conflicts of interest by conceiving 'politics as a cognitively harmonisable dispute, in which change is to be given priority over non-change' (Maier et al. 2003, p. 14).

This problem is particularly evident when we consider all the learning-impeding factors states are confronted with under the conditions of globalisation. These factors span from the limited state capacity to shape policy change, to increased uncertainty and lack of knowledge and the resulting inability to estimate consequences of political

actions on to problems with regard to effective intercultural communication and trust. If the concept of learning is not to be reduced to change-oriented learning or even entirely dispelled from policy analysis, it should at least be freed from the normative claims of the ideal learning theory.[3]

Paradoxically, the deterioration of the conditions for policy learning leads to an increase in the pressure on policy-makers to learn, because learning can become a means of assertion or even survival for policy-makers when faced with a loss of power.[4] The current fascination with benchmarking, best practices, evaluation, and 'learning through international comparisons of achievements' in politics reflects this dilemma. By more or less voluntarily exposing themselves to continual surveillance and regularly displaying their learning results in comparative assessments, rankings and other result-oriented comparative rituals, governments can demonstrate their permanent willingness to learn and thereby conceal their actual lack of capacity for self-determination and self-regulation (which is also signalled by these less self--referential forms of learning).

Policy learning is context-dependent for a second reason that has to do with the orientation towards the common good democratic political decisions need to display. To the extent that politics is aimed at producing collectively binding decisions, it (sometimes more and sometimes less explicitly) asserts to produce decisions which are oriented towards the common good or at least compatible with the community's welfare. However, the claim to a single common good is difficult to justify. Whenever decisions aimed at a common good are addressed, touchy issues are broached, for example the social relevance and the planning horizon of policies and the substantial features and goods and values which are to be achieved or fulfilled by means of actions aimed at the common good (Offe 2001). In a strict sense, learning policy-makers are also faced with definition problems, which are aggravated to the extent that they are dealing less and less with culturally homogenous and introverted societies: a development to which normative theories of democracy typically react by proceduralising the concept of a common good.

Against this background, we advocate the middle ground of a thin normative learning theory. Instead of seeking a thorough material evaluation of levels of learning and advancements in learning, the normative dimension of policy learning is

accommodated by the procedural theory of learning, which evaluates strategies of policy change under the assumption 'that policy outcomes, which are the results of a certain procedure, are more likely to produce positive results ...than policy outcomes which were not subject to such a process' (Nullmeier 2003, p. 339). This raises questions about the quality criteria of learning processes.

Quality criteria of learning processes

In the following we assume that the learning potential of policy-makers varies according to the applied learning strategies. The different potentials for learning we assume are based on two quality criteria of learning processes: the incorporation of information and of difference, a relationship that is to be elaborated on.

The incorporation of information

We prefer the concept of information to that of knowledge, at least insofar as the latter is associated with the truth in philosophical terms. The spread of new information relevant to learning targets increases learning potential, because it potentially can correct previous (mis-)information. However, the spread of information also bears risks. Not only the experience of contingency and lacking knowledge increase with it, but also the risk of a strategically simulated information deficit. Examples are the dealing with information in a deliberately selective manner, the targeted downplaying and/or discrediting of certain information, or the denial of access to information relevant to learning goals (nondisclosure). There are thus at least two risk factors which can impede or prevent learning processes: (non-intended) misinformation and the risk of non-learning by strategically simulated information deficits.

The masking of conflicts of interest and power constitutes a weakness in learning theory, to which policy research with a strong cognitive focus appears particularly vulnerable (Maier 2001, Maier et al. 2003, p. 13). Thus one of the challenges of research on learning is to avoid the dichotomisation between policy learning as knowledge-driven policy change and knowledge and information-independent interest and power games. The particularity of the democratically legitimated will-formation process in the national framework for action consists precisely in the fact that the

institutions of representative democracy are aimed at subverting the rigid distinction between power-and idea-based politics. In Halls terms: 'most of the time, "powering" and "puzzling" (i.e. problem-solving) go together. Both are dimensions of the process whereby policy changes, especially in democratic polities, whose institutions tend to combine the two endeavors' (Hall 1993, p. 289). To this extent, international learning processes, which play out beyond the established democratically legitimated procedures of political will formation in the national framework of action, must be examined with regard to whether they have corrective mechanisms which can ensure that the spread of information leads to 'puzzling' rather than 'powering'.

Incorporation of difference

The incorporation of difference means that various sources of information are taken into consideration. The more information from sources which exist independently of one another is incorporated, the greater the likelihood that the corrective function of the spread of information is guaranteed. Information is not neutral and the production and spread of information is a social process which is influenced by different cultures of information dissemination. Just like interpretations of problems and proposed solutions, the processing and filtering of information is to a considerable extent culturally determined. As a quality criterion, the incorporation of difference emphasises the fact that one can always view and interpret things differently. It aims to ensure the social and thematic openness of strategies for policy learning, which is significant in particular with regard to the responsibility of policy-makers to promote the community's welfare. Viewed from this angle, the incorporation of difference increases the welfare-enhancing potential of policy learning.

Using both quality criteria, observed policy changes can be compared with the status quo and evaluated. We suggest to distinguish learning strategies which bear different potentials and risks. The greater the risk minimisation through the incorporation of information and the greater the potential for enhancing a common good through the incorporation of difference, the greater the learning potential is. We ideal-typically define three learning strategies (imitation, Bayesian updating and deliberation) and discuss their learning risks and potentials. For reasons elaborated

on in the following, we believe that imitation is the riskiest strategy of policy learning with the lowest potential for enhancing common welfare, while deliberative learning is a clearly less risky form of policy learning with a higher potential for enhancing common welfare and Bayesian updating can be found somewhere in-between.

Imitation, Bayesian updating and deliberative learning

In the following section, the three learning strategies will be presented and discussed with regard to their respective potentials and risks.

Policy learning by copying strategies for action: imitation

Policy learning by copying strategies for action is currently a particularly popular theme in policy research, which deals with learning by international comparison. Thus studies examine diffusion and convergence processes in which countries learn from the experiences of other, so-called model countries by imitating particularly promising strategies of achieving goals (best practices). In consequence, policies become more similar. Lesson-drawing, model learning (Rose 1991), social learning (Chamley 2004), cascading or bandwagoning (Lohmann 1994, Levi-Faur 2002) are terms used quite frequently to describe such processes of adaptation and convergence. Here we choose the superordinate concept of imitation, because it describes a process which is implicit to all these forms of learning.[5]

Policy learning through benchmarking and comparative assessments was already introduced in the early 1980s as a new source of legitimacy for public reforms. During the 1990s this learning strategy was discovered as a new form of communication-driven cooperation, for example within the EU or OECD framework (Holzinger and Knill 2005, Martens and Wolf 2006). By developing performance indicators, declarations of intent to achieve goals, time constraints as well as public recognition and disdain rituals (shaming and blaming) countries voluntarily and mutually expose themselves to pressures for adaptation. Examples of this are the open method of coordination in European employment and social policy (see Büchs 2007), the Bologna Process to create a European Higher Education Area (Heinze and Knill 2007), the orientation towards Finnish secondary education policy as a reaction to the so-called PISA shock (Toots 2007) or the emulation of American workfare

programs (Dolowitz 1998).

One positive aspect is that such imitation processes can trigger strong impetuses for innovation. From the perspective of individual countries the constructive potentials of imitation span from increased willingness to take risks to testing entirely new strategies on to uprooting structurally pre-established political anomalies by the so-called path leap (Pierson 2000, p. 262). Learning obstacles rooted in routinised patterns of behaviour, rituals and routines, cultural path dependencies and established power structures can be subverted in this manner. One example is the paradigm change in German higher education policy from the extremely bureaucratic state authorised instrument of curriculum framework orders, which were frequently reprimanded as being inefficient, to the institutionalisation of a decentralised semi-private accreditation system. This radical change of direction was substantially triggered by the domestically advocated orientation towards developments of quality assurance in other countries (Toens 2007).

However, the radical nature of the aspired reforms goes hand in hand with problems of adjustment. Whenever policy change is based on experience that gained was at other points in time, in other policy areas and/or other countries, it is particularly risky because wrong conclusions can be drawn from adopting ideas without deeper insights into the original contexts. Strictly speaking, the actual learning only begins when implementation problems are overcome, which result from the necessity of adjusting external policy models to local contexts (Rose 1991, May 1992, p. 333). Learning then becomes a time-consuming trial and error process, which to a certain extent contradicts the artificially produced time pressure under which international benchmarking processes are frequently carried out.

Empirical analyses of political benchmarking processes (e.g. Cox 1999, Stone 1999, 2000, Strassheim 2003, Bu¨chs 2007, Toots 2007) reveal that the learning strategy of imitation bears more risks than potentials. We will highlight three problems here. The first is the problem of context oblivion. In his frequently quoted essay on lessondrawing, Richard Rose already warned about the call of the siren (1991, p. 27). The more successful a measure, the greater the likelihood that other countries will be seduced into imitating it, even if undesired side-effects in their own social context and policy area are foreseeable. The probability of political shipwreck increases under

conditions of high uncertainty and intense reform pressure (Strassheim 2003, p. 229). This problem can be exemplified by Estonian secondary education policy (Toots 2007). The seductive impact of Finnish school policy, which was ranked at the very top in the comparative PISA study, triggered the Estonian government to imitate Finnish decentralisation policies. However, copying these policies, which granted schools more freedom in the development of curricula and in dealing with school students, proved to be extremely counterproductive, because it increased the social disadvantages of slow learners. The reason for this was a misfit in context. Unlike in Finland, slow learners in Estonia were often transferred to schools for mentally handicapped children instead of being given special support in regular schools. Given this, the increase in interschool competition gave an incentive to Estonian schools to get rid of slow learners instead of improving their learning conditions. The counterproductive effects of policy imitation would have been foreseeable if policy-makers had more thoroughly incorporated their own context and experiences into the decision-making process. Thus, this example also shows that imitation can lead to the neglect of one's own experiences (Toots 2007, p. 16).

Context oblivion can culminate in a kind of fixation on abstract points of reference, which promotes the filtering of information. By drawing on the example of American workfare programs, Strassheim (2003) argues that benchmarking is a policy style which encourages the neutralisation of certain information instead of neutrality in dealing with information. Decisive for this development was the fixation of individual American states on the so-called caseload reduction. In the race for the lowest number of cases the actual policy goal of fighting poverty was neglected. Instead the only issue that counted anymore was whether they could succeed in getting people off welfare programs as quickly as possible. The policy thus created necessities, which were difficult to challenge in political discourse.

Third and finally, there is the danger of denial of learning results as a consequence of the pressure for conformity and prestige. Politicians are subject to constant observation. They tend to adapt and adjust to the expectations of others where it serves to protect their own reputation (Kuran 1989). The result of this is frequently (self-) delusion with regard to what is actually achieved. An example of this is the so-called stocktaking approach in European higher education policy (see

Toens 2008). A part of the Bologna process to reform national higher education policies is the agreement by the (meanwhile) 46 participating countries to regularly put the results of national reform efforts up to debate. Based on the data from national stocktaking reports, the country-specific policy results are compared with one another and designated by the colours of a traffic light as green (for good), yellow (for medium) and red (for bad) (Working Group on Stocktaking 2005). This resulted in a striking accumulation of good practices, which meanwhile are drawing lapidary remarks in Brussels such as 'too much green'. Thus, doubts have been cast with regard to the credibility of the results of the stocktaking reports of national governments.[6] The country reports on the state of implementation can only be regarded as reasonably informative in combination with the stocktaking reports of non-state actors. Altogether, we therefore must bear in mind that the learning strategy of imitation bears clearly more risks and problems than potentials.

Policy learning as adaptation to assessments of probability: Bayesian updating

A more demanding form of learning than pure imitation is the adaptation of probability assumptions in reaction to new experiences and information. The updating theorem stated by Thomas Bayes (1702-1761) constitutes an abstraction of belief-formation, which can also be assumed to exist in reality as a form of learning. While the imitation of policies is ultimately the testing of strategies according to the trial and error principle, Bayesian updating may be applied to the premises of decisions and strategies. Even if the Bayesian theorem can, in principle, also be applied to the adjustment of strategies, we are concerned here with updating as a way of forming premises for decision-making.

The classical model by Bayes assumes that actors begin a process of belief formation with a prior probability, which is assigned to a given proposition. This probability can assume a value between 0.0 (i.e. the proposition is regarded as definitely not true) and 1.0 (i.e. the proposition is regarded as definitely true). In cases of great uncertainty and little information a value of 0.5 appears realistic, which means that the proposition is held equally likely to be true or false. However, the prior probabilities people assign to propositions can vary for different reasons such as traditions, taboos or biased information.

The formula according to which actors update the probability assigned to a proposition is as follows:

$$p_{\Phi/X} = [(p_{X/\Phi})(p_{\Phi})] / [(p_{X/\Phi})(p_{\Phi}) + (p_{X/\neg\Phi})(p_{\neg\Phi})]:$$

$p_{\varnothing}$ is the prior probability, x is the experience or information, in reaction to which it is updated, and $p_{x/\varnothing}$ is the conditional probability that x occurs, given that the proposition $\varnothing$ is true. $p_{\varnothing/x}$ is the accordingly updated probability, or the probability assignment adapted to new experience or information (see Goodin 2003, p. 113).

When transferring the Bayesian model from individual to collective actors, thus to governments or even states, various problems arise. For example, what should one assume to be the collective prior probability: an average of individual probability assignments or that of a pivotal decision-maker? In addition, how does the impact of new information differ depending on how many members of the collective it is accessible to? Despite these difficulties, the Bayesian model can be useful as an approximation to real processes of collective belief formation. If one understands updating as a learning strategy, it consists in the targeted gathering and examination of information and in the systematic updating of existing beliefs and consequently of policies. However, Bayesian updating must be seen as a purely cognitive process of assessing probabilities assigned to claims about facts. Normative-evaluative attitudes, which can also be the subject of learning, do not play a role in this form of learning.

An empirical example of a policy area in which decisions are based on updating processes that may be seen as coming close to the Bayesian model are decisions over the financing of specific medical services. Here policy-makers are increasingly drawing on the results of so-called 'evidence-based medicine'. Evidence-based medicine compiles Health Technology Assessment (HTA) reports, which incorporate research results published in international journals and give evidence of the effectiveness and efficiency of treatment methods. Such HTA reports, which are generally compiled by commissioned expert institutes, increasingly serve as a basis for financing decisions. It is noteworthy here that the reports are all based on the same information: research findings published in top-ranking journals.

The obvious gain from learning in terms of adjustments of probability assignments

by Bayesian updating lies in the optimised incorporation and evaluation of information. While in imitation, the success or failure of a strategy alone is decisive, a much larger basis of information can be employed in updating. It makes sense to assume that improvements in the premises for decision-making, i.e. beliefs that are more likely to be true, will also lead to better policy choices. Moreover, updating allows clues on the probability of still untested strategies to be successful. Thus, beyond the mere copying of strategies, creativity also becomes a possible result of policy learning.

At the same time, updating also bears risks, although they are smaller than in the case of pure imitation. These risks are primarily associated with the selection and quality of the information. First, there are cases in which the available information is simply insufficient or misleading: updating cannot make beliefs better than the existing evidence (Dietrich and List 2005, p. 187). An additional problem is that information, as a rule, is not based on one's own experiences and observations, but on the reports of other actors. Between such reports, interdependencies must be assumed to exist. This means that similar and compatible pieces of information stemming from the same source may be viewed as separate pieces of evidence: think of the numerous urban legends as an example.

One need not be a conspiracy theorist to be aware of the dangers of distorted communication and hegemonic discourses. Aside from the fact that it can of course be true or false, information is neutral. However, the extent to which dissemination and assessment of information are dependent on actors' material resources should not be underestimated. The example of evidence-based medicine illustrates this. The practice of research funding through the pharmaceutical industry has the effect that certain diseases and treatment methods are researched more frequently than others. Moreover, many methods, for example psychotherapy, are by principle more difficult to assess than others, e.g. oral anti-depressants, because factors of influence partially cannot be controlled for. Finally, negative results are much less frequently published in medical journals than positive results.

The benefit from learning strategies, which focus primarily on the gathering of information and the adjustment of probability assignments, for a (however defined) common good thus remains questionable in several respects. Under certain

circumstances, updating strategies can help to avoid mistakes and improve the selection of strategies, but policy goals themselves are hardly critically assessed. In consequence, policy choices are unlikely to do justice to the plurality and variety of interests, values and perspectives. The concentration on a purely epistemic concept of learning and a respective understanding of democracy frequently go hand and hand with the unjustified assumption of a consensus over particular policy objectives, to which all decisions are subordinate. An example of this is the purported consensus over the necessity to reduce employers' social insurance contributions in Germany. This frequently blurs out conflicts over objectives, frequently to the disadvantage of already underprivileged groups.

Policy learning as a means of reflecting on goals and decision-making premises: deliberation

In policy analysis and political rhetoric, the theory of deliberative democracy has come to enjoy great popularity beyond democratic theory in the narrow sense.[7] Here we are concerned not so much with our own independent definition of what deliberation means and requires or with a discussion of the democratic legitimacy of deliberative procedures of decision-making. Instead, we wish to demonstrate the potential of deliberation as a learning strategy and explain to what extent deliberative learning is superior to both the pure imitation of strategies for action and the updating of beliefs by means of information. Even if deliberative learning results in decisions that are better informed or more just, by whatever set of standards, questions still arise with regard to their democratic (input) legitimacy. However, we are here only concerned with the learning potential of deliberation.

Deliberation is to be understood, first, as a form of interaction, which either occurs spontaneously or is purposefully brought about by respective means of institutional design. The aim is for the group to engage in an exchange of ideas on what should be done collectively, i.e. drawing up and assessing strategies for action. Even if complex and normatively demanding concepts dominate in the literature, two features of interaction can be argued to be constitutive for deliberation: publicity and reciprocity (see Landwehr 2009, ch. 2). Publicity requires not so much a mass media public as the general accessibility of forums for outsiders. In interaction, this ensures

the generalisability of arguments and the justification of decision-making premises. By reciprocity we mean that actors acknowledge one another as rational decision-makers and assume that the reasons named by the respective other could in principle reasons for oneself, too.

Deliberation is frequently equated with arguing and contrasted with bargaining as a mode of interaction (Saretzki 1996). Even if the focus on generalisable arguments and transferable reasons for action is crucial for deliberation, it is not sufficiently defined by the simple distinction between arguing and negotiating. Situations can arise in which people do argue but the condition of reciprocity is not fulfilled, because actors do not recognise the motivating reasons of their interlocutors as potentially relevant. Many public debates are examples of this. Conversely, there are cases where institutional design seems to aim at bargaining but where interaction can in fact take on deliberative qualities, for example mediation. What is crucial for deliberation is that actors reflect on and question their own goals.

In the examples from social, education and health policy discussed above, a deliberative form of policy learning could therefore have had entirely different ramifications than imitation or the pure updating of beliefs. Instead of simply copying the school systems of the most successful countries in the PISA study, decision-makers could have addressed the question of whether to give priority to the advancement of underprivileged or highly-talented pupils. It would of course have been ideal if both could have been achieved with the same strategy. However, at the latest when resources have to be allocated concretely, conflicts between goals arise and should be made explicit. In decisions over the financing of medical services, deliberative procedures have repeatedly shown that cost-benefit evaluations alone are not sufficient for setting priorities and that conflicting goals like equal opportunity, help for the neediest, and personal responsibility are equally crucial.[8]

From a normative standpoint, the theory of deliberative democracy calls not only for public participation and reciprocity, but also for broad and equal inclusion in deliberation. Precisely here is where the risks of deliberative learning lie. The most important problem in this regard is the self-selection of the participants, which is a prerequisite for policy area-specific stakeholder processes and is continuously lamented in citizen participation projects. In the former case, questions arise with

regard to the general legitimacy and significance of decisions. In the latter, the problem is that the socially privileged are more likely to participate and also exert more influence in the procedures.

In this way, deliberative learning can lead to a biased consideration of information and reasons for action. Unlike the updating of beliefs though, the basis of deliberative learning processes consists not only of experiences and accounts of experiences, but also of arguments about more complex relationships. While in the cases of both imitation and updating, the learning mechanism takes place in an automated fashion, reasons for action and arguments are systematically scrutinised and justified in deliberation. Scrutinising and justification only require a sufficient number and variety of different positions and perspectives to exist within a forum (Dryzek and Niemeyer 2008). Insofar as at least one participant questions any argument that is named and demands justification, majorities in the forum are of subordinate importance for scrutinising it.

With regard to the promotion of a common good, the great strength of deliberative learning strategies is precisely that they do not assume or require a consensus on goals. Instead, the interactive process of reaching understanding on values and interests and the creative definition of shared goals and a common good are the great potential benefits from deliberative learning. To achieve them, it is crucial to appropriately deal with differences: by incorporating the broadest possible range of interests and perspectives and by considering and scrutinising them argumentatively. Under conditions of value and interest pluralism, the results of such scrutiny will be not so much consensuses on goals as compromises between goals. Compromises between conflicting fundamental values and interests always remain contingent to a certain degree insofar as they cannot be derived from subordinate principles. Nevertheless, they must be justified and their premises scrutinised.

Thus, in an ideal scenario deliberative learning processes and learning strategies not only promise the broader incorporation of information, but also the broader incorporation of difference in terms of contrasting interests, values and beliefs systems. Consequently, we would hope to find compromises based on legitimate values and interests. In some cases, however, a fundamental understanding of the inevitability of conflicts over and between policy objectives and of the necessity to

reach compromises can already be regarded as learning achievements.

Potentials and risks of learning strategies compared

Based on the identified quality criteria for learning processes, the comparison of the three selected learning strategies leads to the following results (see Figure 1). Imitation is the riskiest strategy of policy learning. Although this form of learning bears a particularly high potential for innovation, it also bears the risk of producing latent power potential and a kind of soft power (Stone 2000), which can limit or even hinder learning in terms of improvement-oriented learning. Empirical examples of policy change by means of imitation demonstrate the dangers of context oblivion and shutting out diverging realms of experience and different perspectives on the same political program. The selection of imitation as a learning strategy thus does not necessarily lead to better policy decisions.

Moreover, imitation frequently is aimed not so much at promoting a common good, but in practice often serves to increase the prestige of governments seeking quick success amid competition for best practices. This tendency is further abetted by the fact that international benchmarking processes promote the informalisation of policy-making (see Greven 2005). Therefore, we can no longer automatically

Strategy \ Assessment	Potential	Risk
Imitation	• Innovation by path leap • Breaking down learning obstacles	• Context oblivion • Downgrading one's own experiences • Shrugging off and neutralisation of certain information • Denial of learning results under pressure for reputation
Bayesian Updating	• Better cognitive decision-making premises • Creativity: testing entirely new strategies becomes possible	• One-sided or misleading information • Assumption of a non-existent consensus over goals
Deliberation	• Orientation of decision-making processes to common welfare • Rethinking targets and admitting conflicts over goals • Taking different interests and perspectives seriously	• Distorted communication • Exclusion of the socially disadvantaged

Figure 1.   Potential and risks of selected learning strategies.

presume that the balanced relationship between 'powering' and 'puzzling'. that is assumed to obtain in the institutions of representative democracy at the national level, still exists (Hall 1993).

Learning strategies and learning processes oriented towards the model of Bayesian updating potentially optimise decision-making premises. Comprehensively scrutinising available information also makes it possible to probe entirely new political strategies, because worthwhile predictions on their potential for success can be made on the basis of rationally motivated assessments of probability. However, strategies based on Bayesian updating also bear the risk that misjudgements will occur due to one-sided or misleading information. Above all though, a prerequisite for the purely instrumental use of information is a consensus on goals, which can seldom be assumed to exist in politics. The greatest problem with this learning strategy thus consists in the insufficient incorporation of differences in terms of conflicting interests and perspectives on problems. However, since this strategy is aimed not so much at adaptation as at the improvement of decision-making premises, the learning risks are altogether smaller than in cases of pure imitation.

Finally, deliberation is the most promising learning strategy in several ways. Here, too, risks of distorted communication and problems regarding the appropriate

incorporation of socially underprivileged groups do exist. However, the superiority of deliberation over the other two learning strategies consists in the better consideration to differences in the form of conflicting interests, perspectives and value systems, in a political decision-making process oriented more towards a common good, and in the transparent management of conflicts over goals.

Conclusions

We believe that the understanding of learning as improvement-oriented learning and the distinction between imitation, updating and deliberation as different strategies of learning makes an important theoretical contribution to the study of policy transfer and policy learning in three different ways. First, it can help to organise the growing body of literature on policy learning/transfer. Very different processes and strategies are currently being described as learning, and these also require different explanations and evaluations. Terminological and conceptual clarity and differentiation are a first prerequisite for a better understanding of policy-learning (and by implication policy transfer) and its potential. The evidence provided by the already large number of empirical analyses could be better assessed if the types of learning authors refer to were more clearly distinguished.

Our distinction between the three learning strategies is of course not the only possibility, but we believe that it could, second, provide a useful guide for future empirical investigation. If observed instances of policy transfer are more adequately categorised, this also opens up the possibility for a better explanation of their success or failure. Far from claiming that what we have sketched in this article is exhaustive in this regard, we hope to have shown some useful points of departure for analysis and explanation. If, for example, as in the case of Estonian school policy, learning leads to apparently inferior results, this may be accounted for by the selection of the least sophisticated learning strategy, namely imitation. In addition, the selection of learning strategies itself should be accounted for by reference to institutional context conditions and constraints actors are faced with. Here lies a promising route for further research beyond the limited scope of this article.

Finally, our distinction could provide guidance for the evaluation of instances of

policy learning/transfer and thus constitute a contribution to normative policyanalysis. While we join in the ubiquitous call for more deliberative policy-making, we also want to make clear that while deliberation is the most promising learning strategy, it is also the one with the most demanding contextual preconditions. In terms of non-ideal theory, it is therefore essential to ask which learning strategies are in fact available to actors and weigh their risks and potentials for the given situation. Moreover, since each strategy promises different gains, it might under certain circumstances be possible to combine them in political practice. Our comparison is summarized in Figure 1 and provides an important reference point for an evaluation of which combinations bear the most promise.

Notes

1. See for example the distinction between simple learning (change in strategy in view of reaching goals), complex learning (modification of goals and target hierarchies) and reflexive learning (change in strategy in view of learning), which dates back to the organisation sociology of Argyris and Schön (1978). See also Hall's (1993) reference to first, second and third-order change, which is illustrated in the distinction between change in policy instruments, techniques, and goals.

2. For example, when it is claimed that learning cannot be wrong or learning is better than not learning.

3. See also the proposal for a differentiated use of the concept of learning, e.g. 'Policy learning is concerned with lessons about policy content-problems, goals, instruments, and implementation designs. Political learning is concerned with lessons about manoeuvering within and manipulation of policy processes in order to advance an idea or problem' (May 1992, p. 340).

4. In the words of K.W. Deutsch (1966) power means not to learn, if one can afford it. Conversely, pressures to learn increase with powerlessness.

5. We cannot do justice to the diverse forms of imitation here, which span from copying a policy to emulating selected elements on to inspiration by an idea (for details see Rose 1991).

6. See the counter-initiative of national students' associations who point out the bad practices in individual member states in their so-called Bologna black book (European Students Union 2005).

7. Examples of classic texts are Gutmann and Thompson 1996, Dryzek 2000, as well as the volumes by Bohman and Rehg 1997 and Elster 1998.

8. The best-known example of this kind of citizen involvement in health care priority-setting took place in the US state of Oregon (Fleck 1994).

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