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Mechanism-Based Thinking on Policy Diffusion

A Review of Current Approaches in Political Science

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MECHANISM-BASED THINKING ON POLICY DIFFUSION

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Abstract

Despite theoretical and methodological progress in what is now coined as the third generation of diffusion studies, explicitly dealing with the causal mechanisms underlying diffusion processes and comparatively analyzing them is only of recent date. As a matter of fact, diffusion research has ended up in a diverse and often unconnected array of theoretical assumptions relying both on rational as well as constructivist reasoning – a circumstance calling for more theoretical coherence and consistency. Against this backdrop, this paper reviews and streamlines diffusion literature in political science. Diffusion mechanisms largely cluster around two causal arguments determining the desires and preferences of actors for choosing alternative policies. First, existing diffusion mechanisms accounts can be grouped according to the rationality for policy adoption, this means that government behavior is based on the instrumental considerations of actors or on constructivist arguments like norms and rule-driven actors. Second, diffusion mechanisms can either directly impact on the beliefs of actors or they might influence the structural conditions for decision-making. Following this logic, four basic diffusion mechanisms can be identified in mechanism-based thinking on policy diffusion: emulation, socialization, learning, and externalities.

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1.   Introduction

A growing number of political scientists started to write about the interdependencies between countries[1] and the phenomena of policy diffusion. More specifically, empirical analyses on the spatial and temporal clustering of public policies are increasingly focusing on the underlying causal mechanisms that are driving policy transfer (cf. Elkins/Simmons 2005; Franzese/Hays 2008; Graham et al. 2008; Holzinger et al. 2007; Meseguer/Gilardi 2005; Simmons et al. 2007).

Causal mechanisms relate to processes of diffusion such as learning, competition, coercion, and socialization (cf. Graham et al. 2008).[2] They can be described as "sequences of causally linked [social] events that occur repeatedly in reality if certain conditions are given" (Mayntz 2004: 241). This means identifying diffusion mechanisms usually includes formulating a theoretical pathway, including not only the stimulus (the independent variable) and the response (the dependent variable), but also intervening steps linking cause and effect. Instead of conceptualizing diffusion as a dependent or independent variable, the majority of studies is following a process-orientated understanding of the empirical phenomena (Elkins/Simmons 2005).

Hence, the theoretical concept of policy diffusion can be described as "any process where prior adoption of a trait or practice in a population alters the probability of adoption for remaining non-adopters" (Strang 1991: 325). To put it differently, diffusion research usually[3] focuses on policy change and adoption as dependent variables, but follows mechanism-based explanations underlying the whole causal process. This includes not only the trigger of the adoption process, but its intervening causal steps as well as its outcome in terms of if and when the adoption of a specific policy takes places.

Despite theoretical and methodological progress in what is now coined as the third generation of diffusion studies (cf. Howlett/Rayner 2008), explicitly dealing with the causal mechanisms underlying diffusion processes and their comparative analyses is only of recent date (for example Boehmke/Witmer 2004; Daley/Garand 2005; Dobbin et al. 2007; Shipan/Volden 2008). As a matter of fact, diffusion research has ended up in a diverse and often unconnected array of theoretical assumptions relying both on rational as well as on constructivist reasoning. This circumstance not only calls for a less ideological approach when it comes to testing the (opposing) paradigms underlying theories of social action (cf. Fearon/Wendt 2002; Risse 2003),

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1   Other forms of interdependence refer to vertical interdependencies in multi-level systems (for example between international organizations and states or between federal and sub-national entities) or sector-related interdependencies (cf. Bönker 2008). The main focus of this paper is on intergovernmental linkages.

2   It is not always clear what kinds of processes have to be subsumed under policy diffusion. Some authors incorporate coercive adaption processes into the study of diffusion whereas others only apply the concept to mechanisms based on voluntariness.

3   More recent attempts try to discriminate between different aspects of diffusion processes regarding the overall outcome of these processes and mechanisms (for example in terms of temporal patterns like the speed or the duration of adaption processes). The underlying argument is that analyzing different temporal aspects of diffusion mechanisms can help controlling for and discriminating between causal mechanisms (cf. Grzymala-Busse 2011).

but also for more theoretical coherence and consistency (cf. Braun/Gilardi 2006; Meseguer/Gilardi 2005). Against this backdrop, this paper systematically extracts four basic pathways of diffusion from mechanism-based thinking on policy diffusion.

Several taxonomies and classifications of diffusion processes and mechanism-based thinking can be found in the existing literature. Still most of them lack analytical clarity. These classes of adaption mechanisms are to a great deal constructed according to research strands or methodological concerns rather than based on their theoretical background. As a consequence, diffusion research not only lacks a common wording and terminology (cf. Graham et al. 2008), but theoretical assumptions are often vague and overlapping (Meseguer/Gilardi 2009). However, conceptualizations that are not based on a distinct and precise set of causal propositions render the need to find observable and (preferably) distinct empirical indicators opaque (cf. Elkins/Simmons 2005: 38; Gerring 1999) – a serious obstacle for valid and robust empirical testing of theoretical models.

Existing work usually pinpoints diffusion patterns as being too complex to generate (simple) (dis-)equilibria for identifying the conditions of policy diffusion (cf. Braun/Gilardi 2006; Mooney 2001) and recent attempts to formalize diffusion processes are highly specific by theorizing only singular diffusion mechanisms like learning or competitive interdependence (for example Franzese/Hays 2008; Volden et al. 2008). Approaches trying to deal with the complexities of diffusion processes only provide simple threshold models that mix different constructivist reasoning under the framework of utilitarianism (for example Braun/Gilardi 2006).

In addition, mechanism-based approaches usually lack the integration of scope conditions and conditional variables. More specific, the contingent character of policy diffusion requires the explicit formulation of an interaction hypothesis (cf. Volden 2006). Although context is especially important in mechanism-based thinking as it encompasses several steps in a causal process (cf. Falleti/Lynch 2009), this approach is still underdeveloped in diffusion research.

Consequently, it is the objective of this paper to disentangle and review theoretical arguments by presenting a systematic classification of causal propositions on diffusion mechanisms. Relying upon insights from existing studies dealing with policy diffusion and related literature on similar concepts such as Europeanization, policy transfer, convergence, isomorphism, or learning (cf. Marsh/Sharman 2009),[4] I subscribe to a stricter use of the term diffusion relating only to voluntary processes of policy adaption.

Largely, mechanism-based thinking clusters around two causal arguments determining the desires and preferences of actors for alternative policies. First, existing diffusion mechanisms accounts can be grouped according to the rationality for policy adoption – what drives governments' behavior? Analytically diffusion mechanisms refer to rationalist reasoning based on instrumental considerations of actors or on constructivist arguments such as norms and rule-driven actors. Second, causal mechanisms differ according to their impact on the properties of policy choice. Whereas diffusion mechanisms can have a direct impact on the beliefs of actors, they might also influence the structural conditions for decision-making.

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4   The focus is still on a diffusion perspective, this means the interest is on processes on the macro-level.

Following this causal logic, four classes of causal mechanisms can be identified in the current state of the art: emulation, learning, socialization, and externalities. Whereas learning and socialization coins behavioral change due to an update of actors' beliefs and preferences, emulation and externalities as understood here refer to theoretical assumptions based on structural explanations. All four of them can provide theoretical frameworks for empirically testing diffusion processes and their effects.[5]

The paper proceeds as follows: First, in order to analyze diffusion, differences, and intersections within mechanism-based thinking in diffusion research are highlighted. Despite ontological differences, theoretical developments seem to be more complex than the division between rationalism and constructivism suggests. To limit the scope of this paper, the main focus is on works in political science centering on empirical testing. Furthermore, the reader has to be aware of the fact that the paper does not conceptualize diffusion as a dependent variable, but follows a process-orientated understanding of policy diffusion. Rather than treating diffusion as a single causal factor or mechanism, the term diffusion refers to different causal mechanisms influencing the adoption of public policies. In doing so, one certainly has to acknowledge the importance of earlier works conceptualizing diffusion as an outcome and focusing on the overall patterns in the diffusion of (whatsoever) innovation (for example S-shaped spreading) (cf. Rogers 2003). Second, four classes of diffusion mechanisms are conceptualized. This also includes dealing with the conditional nature of each class of diffusion mechanism identified. Finally, possibilities for future empirical research based on this framework are considered.

2.   Differences and Intersections in Mechanism-Based Thinking on Policy Diffusion

Originally dealing with the spread of all kinds of (technological) innovations, diffusion research is nowadays analyzing all kinds of policy change and transfer – ranging from the adoption of specific approaches and policy instruments to more encompassing forms of policy transfer linked to the adoption of organizational forms and institutions (cf. Rogers 2003; Strang/Soule 1998). Overall, studying policy diffusion can be described by different spatial, temporal, and substantial foci.

As a matter of fact, the field is still organized according to the different sub-disciplines of political science (cf. Graham et al. 2008). A diverse array of diffusion mechanisms and corresponding classifications can be found in the existing literature (for example Elkins/Simmons 2005), but a general and clear-cut theory on the causes and effects of the different diffusion processes is still missing (cf. Braun/Gilardi 2006). From this point of view, mapping the different pathways of policy diffusion becomes a first step in making theoretical arguments less vague and in providing common sense on how diffusion mechanisms can work.

Mechanism-based approaches are forcing scholars to explicitly deal with theory as it is based on spelling out an underlying causal chain rather than merely formulating assumptions on covariates (Graham et al. 2008: 28; Gerring 2007). From this point of view, the focus of this section is on the question why diffusion

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5   Providing a mathematical analysis of formal models would go beyond the scope of this paper. We still lack considerable knowledge on diffusion processes, their interaction, and their effects on policy change and adaption to specify a fully developed formal model of several diffusion processes.

effects unfold rather than on how the overall pattern of diffusion looks like or through what informational sources (some would call it channels) policies spread (for example Jordana et al. 2011; Rogers 2003). More specifically, such an explanatory strategy gives different research designs and approaches a common theoretical ground. Furthermore, causal mechanisms do not only tell us about the intervening steps between a cause and effects. They are also based on a micro-foundation of causal relationships (cf. Coleman 1990). To put it differently, although the stimulus triggering an event to occur is often located on the macro-level of collective action,[6] theoretical assumptions also specify how these mechanisms operate through the individual level. From this point of view, research designs based on such mechanisms give the possibility to concentrate on different analytical levels (for example the micro- or macro-level) (cf. Kittel 2006) or on different steps in a causal chain (cf. King et al. 1994).[7]

However, the question how to map the different pathways of diffusion still arises. Scholars working on policy diffusion expect the different diffusion processes and the associated causal mechanisms to have –at least analytically– distinct empirical effects and outcomes (cf. Elkins/Simmons 2005). Reviewing mechanism-based thinking in studies dealing with policy diffusion, a vast number of causal mechanisms can be identified. Following a systematic mapping according to the underlying causal logic of diffusion mechanisms, existing theoretical arguments can be clustered according to two analytical questions (cf. figure 1).

Figure 1: A Venn Diagram of Policy Diffusion Mechanisms
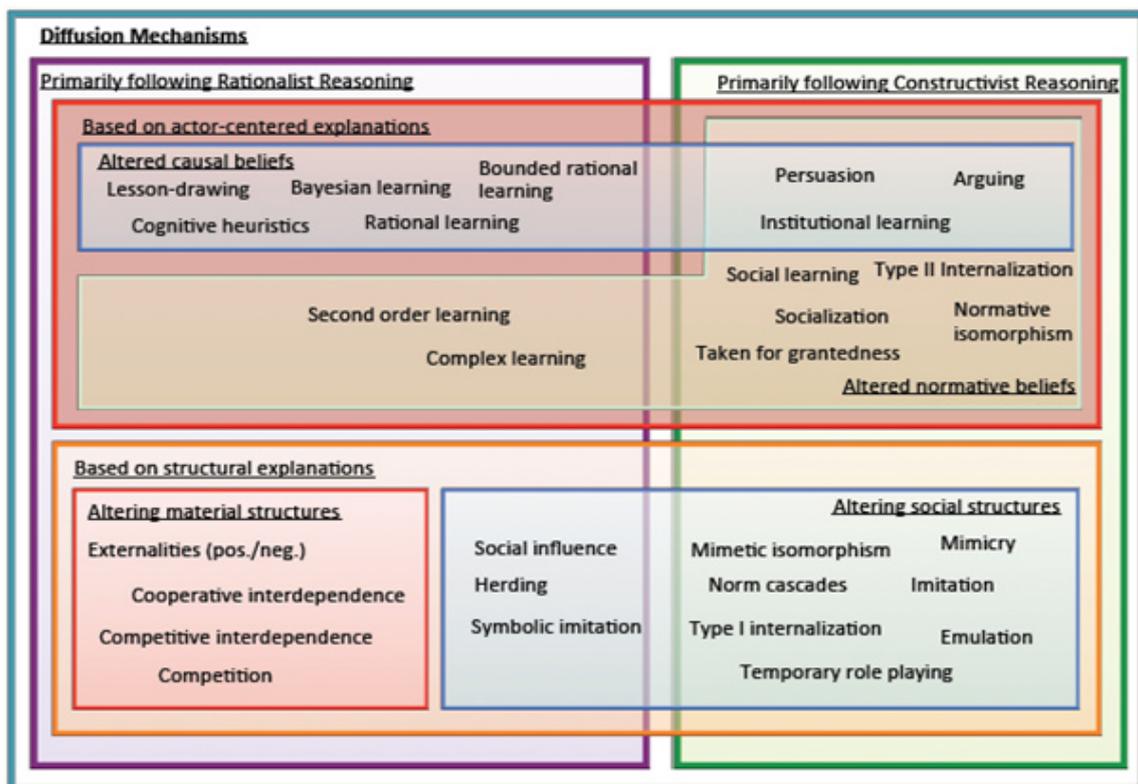
Source: own figure based on section three

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6   Or on the meso-level in case of a multi-level perspective.

7   That does not imply that a micro-foundation is a necessary condition for formulating a causal theory. For a more critical view on mechanism-based thinking see Gerring (2010).

2.1   Constructivist and Rationalist Thinking

First, regarding policy diffusion, one can ask what motivates actors to adopt a new policy. What is the underlying logic behind their actions? As for policy diffusion, it boils down to the question what logic drives government behavior. Reflecting the distinction between rationalist and constructivist arguments,[8] existing diffusion mechanisms accounts can be grouped according to the rationality for policy adoption. Actors might consider policy transfer and adaption due to instrumental or normative reasons and motivations, respectively. While the former primarily relates to material preferences, interests, and desires, the later logic is linked to actors' interest constituted by social expectations, values, and rule-driven behavior. This compounds the classical institutionalist reasoning by March and Olsen concerning the underlying logic of social action, this means the logic of consequentialism and the logic of appropriateness (March/Olsen 1989; see also Börzel/Risse 2003).

Following the former, actors are usually supposed to be utility-maximizing individuals that choose goal-orientated solutions. Usually, actors are modeled as having fixed and sorted preferences and interests. These parameters are exogenously given (cf. Fearon/Wendt 2002: 62f). It is only preferences over means, actions, or strategies that are supposed to change, but not preferences over ends and outcomes. Actor's behavior then is instrumental according to their interests and preferences (or desires), their available resources and opportunities as well as their expectations and beliefs regarding the effects of their own behavior. To put it differently, acting takes place according to the expected consequences of actors' choices. That does not mean that actors are only following their self-interest, but they rather might also incorporate social and ideational values into their expected utility maximizations.

Yet, domestic policy makers might also choose certain policies as it seems appropriate to do so. Diffusion mechanisms referring to constructivist thinking are usually based on the assumption that actors' behavior is rule-based, meaning that actors are following mutually shared understandings and beliefs of appropriate behavior.[9] Thus, rather than thinking about the consequences of their choices, actors decide according to situational interpretations and upon the rightness of their actions (cf. Sending 2002; Sjöblom 1993).[10]

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8   I use the term „reflecting" as there seems no exclusive and clear-cut definition of rationalism and constructivism (cf. Fearon/Wendt 2002).

9   In this regard, some distinguish the logic of arguing (e.g. Risse 2000). As March and Olsen themselves subsume this logic under the "logic of appropriateness" (1989; 1998), I will not deal with mechanisms such as persuasion or arguing separately. Especially since arguing seems primarily about norm formation (Finnemore/Sikkink 1998), whereas the theoretical starting here is on policy adoption.

10   As a matter of fact, the constructivist program often aims at rules and social structures rather than at agency-orientation and individuals. In constructivist debates, the question about choice is not as straightforward as in rationalist approaches. Actors following the logic of appropriateness still have to interpret and decide upon the rightness of their actions. From this point of view, I deviate from March and Olsen's assumptions as it is questionable how far their constructivist reasoning allows for external impacts on actor's motivations to follow a rule or norm (cf. Sending 2002: 454).

2.2   Explanations Based on Changes in Structures and/or Agency

Second, causal mechanisms differ according to their impact on the properties of policy choice (cf. Braun/ Gilardi 2006; Schimmelfennig 2007; Simmons/Elkins 2004). Although diffusion approaches are dealing with all kind of interdependent decision-making, it is mostly the national government that constitutes the unit of analysis. The reason is simply that governments are usually the main actors who have to decide upon changing existing policies.[11] However, what determines the actual decision-making and actions of national governments? Regardless of whether governments follow a normative and/or instrumental rationality, action theory in its most basic form assumes that choices and consequent actions (if intentional)[12] are jointly caused by the actor's perceptions and beliefs on the policies in question as well as on their specific interest, desires, and preferences (cf. Fearon/Wendt 2002: 55; Searle 2001).

While diffusion mechanisms can have a direct impact on actors' beliefs, they might also influence the structures that are underlying decision-making. Both kinds of processes can determine the preferences of actors for alternative policies. In other words, mechanism-based thinking can also be clustered according to the assumption on what induces the diffusion of policies. Is the stimulus and/or the trigger of the causal mechanism changing the internal properties of the actor or leading to altered decision-making conditions? In the prior case, the functioning of the diffusion mechanism and consequent actions are based on changing internal factors and intrinsic motivations of decision-makers, whereas in the latter case actors are adapting their specific interest and desires to altered constraints and opportunities underlying decision-making.

In a more rationalist reading, actors base their decisions on the consequences of alternative policies. To calculate the consequences of their actions, agents have to cognitively link policies with their self-interest; thus, they simply have to know about the efficiency of alternative policy choices. This notion is carried in cognitive or causal ideas and beliefs over cause and effect relationships and strategies for the attainment of goals (cf. Goldstein/Keohane 1993; Schmidt 2008). Actors have to ask if the policy under consideration is effective for achieving their goals and desires. Several diffusion concepts are based on shared causal or cognitive ideas and beliefs. For example, lesson drawing is based on the assumption that actors update their causal beliefs on new information on the functioning of policies (Rose 1991). Actors share beliefs on means and ends and diffusion processes can influence these cognitive perceptions and beliefs on the policies in question.

Diffusion processes then can change the outcome of decision-making by influencing the conditions underlying decision-making (cf. Braun/Gilardi 2006; Schimmelfennig 2007; Simmons/Elkins 2004). Is there a change in the payoffs linked with different policy choices? If the actors' desire is to maximize the utility associated with policy choices, then they likely will adapt to new constraints and opportunities. Payoffs refer to the costs and benefits associated with a specific policy. Preference for a specific policy can be based on the expected electoral rewards, party politics or organized interests and lobbying. Sometimes, benefits are structured by the need to arrive at package deals or in bargaining situations (for example in government formation). Yet, payoffs can also be based on economic rewards and competition.

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11   I use the word "usually" as sometimes the national competencies remain on a sub-national level. Also, adopting policies might stem from coercive impacts as in the case of international law. The existence of veto players has also to be taken into account.

12   Some constructivist authors argue against the intentionality of rule-driven behavior (cf. footnote ten).

In a similar vein, constructivist thinking in diffusion research can be ordered according to its impact. Actions are based on rules, this means that actors are following mutually shared understandings on correct and appropriate behavior. However, what determines the appropriateness of rules? Like rationalist arguments on causal beliefs, actors have to cognitively link policies with their social and normative interest and desire to answer this question. Basically, this argument is about pairing action with a specific situation. What do I believe what are (non-) appropriate policy choices in a specific situation? Furthermore, what are the criteria for distinguishing the appropriateness of policies? Consequently, diffusion mechanisms are based on the assumption that actors' behavior is based on "normative" (Schmidt 2008) or "principled" beliefs (Goldstein/Keohane 1993). Rules are followed as long as actors accept them as true and natural choices. How do I have to act according to my identity and the role I am supposed to play? For example, certain rules are just taken for granted like abolishing slavery (Finnemore/Sikkink 1998: 895). Due to internalized values and norms, action becomes independent of material consideration since actors have an intrinsic desire to follow that norm (cf. Alderson 2001; Checkel 2005). This idea applies to concepts like persuasion or socialization.

Yet, diffusion mechanisms can also relate to a change in the conditions framing the agent's decision-making. For instance, the emergence of international norms can alter the normative structures underlying world politics and it can render the adoption of a specific policy as a more appropriate and legitimate choice (cf. Finnemore 1996). In other words, they are determining the normative value of alternative policy choices embedded in the institutional and cultural structure within the actor operates. Which policies are socially rewarding? Which norms are socially accepted in a given situation? This reframing in the interpretation and projection of the appropriateness associated with the adoption of alternative policy choices can be found in conceptualizations like mimicry or emulation when actors are driven by legitimacy pressures and/ or the desire for conformity (cf. Sharman 2008). Rather than becoming intrinsic to actors' identities, rules are followed as they are interpreted as legitimate and right.

2.3 Four Concepts of Diffusion Mechanisms

Both paradigms should not be interpreted too narrowly. Rationalist and constructivist thinking are partly overlapping. For example, the basic distinction sometimes drawn between normative and instrumental rationality does not fully intersect with the ideational versus material dichotomy and can turn out to be misleading (cf. Fearon/Wendt 2002; Klotz/Lynch 2006). Causal beliefs are usually linked with the material interest of an actor as they determine the expected utility of a policy (cf. Braun/Gilardi 2006) rather than the rightness of policy choices.[13] Still, causal beliefs about the effects of a specific policy is an ideational concept like norms or discourse and is part of constructivist thinking, too (for example in processes based on arguing). Actors might also incorporate social and ideational values into their expected utility maximizations.

However, rationalist notions also found their way into constructivist thinking. For instance, at first internalizing new norms might be driven by an instrumental rather than a normative rationale (cf. Checkel 2005). Or diffusion mechanisms such as persuasion or arguing referring to scientific knowledge not only change

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13   Except when effectiveness becomes the appropriate norm Except when effectiveness becomes the appropriate norm.

normative beliefs, but can also persuade actors to link causes and effects with regard to distinct problem-solving approaches. Vice versa, one can also identify a few rationalist concepts like complex or second order learning that assume learning beyond strategies and conceptualize actor's preferences as endogenous (cf. Hall 1993).

Hence, the distinction between constructivist and rationalist thinking is not as sharp as often claimed. In diffusion research, both schools of thought evolved around altering beliefs and structures. Consequently, four ideal types of causal mechanisms can be identified: learning, socialization, emulation, and externalities (cf. table 1). Learning then relates to situations where national governments rely on experiences made elsewhere for domestic problem solving. The rationality for this behavior rests on searching effective solutions to given problems, based on the idea that the experience of others provides information to solve one's own problems. In turn, this will lead to an updating of causal ideas and to additional knowledge on the effectiveness of certain policies. In a similar vein, socialization relates to the internalization of shared beliefs due to the interaction of actors. In this regard, diffusion through socialization clearly frames the cognitive dimension of appropriate rules as this might lead to a redefinition of actor's identities and belief systems as well as the internalization of international norms.

Externalities then characterize diffusion mechanisms based on setting (positive or negative) incentives for the adoption of certain policies, probably stemming from competitive interdependencies which change the cost-benefit ratio of domestic actors or from the direct impact of international policy instruments on domestic actors and institutions (for example through capacity-building). Both mechanisms can put adaptive pressure on domestic actors by altering the conditions under which decisions are made. Actors' interests and desires to purse certain policies might change. In a similar vein, emulation describes the desire (or need) of domestic actors to conform to internationally widespread norms. Here, actors merely copy models found elsewhere to increase the legitimacy of policy choices. Usually, emulation relates to legitimacy pressures stemming from the misfit between internationally acclaimed norms and policies and their domestic counterparts.

Table 1: Ideal Types of Policy Diffusion Mechanisms

Impact on → What induces change? Type of explanation → What drives governments' behaviour?	Agent → altered governments' beliefs (normative/causal) about different policies induce change	Structure → altered constraints and opportunities (ideational/material) associated with the pursue of different policies induce change
Constructivist → Normative rationality (legitimacy-driven)	I SOCIALISATION Basic Idea: interaction leads to the development and internalization of normative ideas	II EMULATION Basic Idea: the desire of actors to conform to widespread norms and socially valued policies
Rationalist → Instrumental rationality (utility-driven)	III LEARNING Basic Idea: the experience of others provides new information on the effectiveness of policies leading to an update of causal ideas	IV EXTERNALITIES Basic Idea: the choices of other actors entail costs and benefits to be incorporated into decision calculus

Source: Own table based on section three

This approach does not imply that hybrid forms of diffusion mechanisms exist which cut across the causal logics presented (cf. figure 1). Causal mechanisms such as persuasion rely both on rational as well as on constructivist thinking. However, this does not mean that structural changes might not ultimately cause a change in actors' beliefs in terms of socialization or learning effects. For example, in case of institutional learning policy makers and civil servants in specific institutional settings might incrementally adapt their political values to the organizational norms (cf. Rohrschneider 1996).

Now, one could argue that it is the adaption of actors to their structural environment that leads to an update of their beliefs. From this point of view, structural conditions seem to lead to the internalization of norms. Yet, analytically, a structural change is not sufficient for norm internalization. On the contrary, the original desire to conform to altered structural conditions can indirectly and ultimately lead to a change of the actor's beliefs (cf. Checkel 2005). Consequently, it could be argued that structural and actor-based explanations differ in terms of the degree of change and the length of the causal chain under consideration. However, that would be a very bold statement to make. Here it seems helpful to remember that the ideal types constructed in this paper merely reflect different theoretical ideas about the main drivers for social action (actors' beliefs and the structural conditions). They should be used as labels and connotations, not as normative claims about the superiority of either agency or structure in determining social actions. This is an issue for actual empirical research rather than for conceptual work, but elaborating on each class of diffusion mechanism and (some of) its causal propositions in more detail could help to discriminate between the theoretical assumptions.

3.   Pathways of Policy Diffusion

It should be possible to subsume any mechanism found in the literature under distinct theoretical assumptions about the causal chain between triggers of diffusion processes and their effects (Elkins/Simmons 2005: 38). Yet, due to the prevailing problem of overlapping theoretical assumptions, it still remains a theoretical and empirical challenge to discriminate between different diffusion mechanisms. Consequently, this paper tries to disentangle theoretical arguments by providing a coherent and systematic mapping[14] of current conceptualizations according to the causal ideas described in the previous section.

The following discussion of four basic conceptualizations deals more specifically with the functioning of different diffusion mechanisms by taking both the trigger of the adoption process, its intervening causal steps, and its expected outcome in terms of policy adoption into consideration. In doing so, the section also deals with the contingent nature of policy diffusion by elaborating on the interaction between the different diffusion processes and their conditional variables.

As a matter of fact, the presentation is not a comprehensive list of explanatory factors to be found in diffusion research. Instead, the selection of theoretical assumptions discussed in the following section is rather informed by existing empirical records. Reviewing the relevant literature, one has to acknowledge that it is particularly the number of potentially relevant conditional factors that seems to be endless – especially, if someone is utilizing neighboring research strands like Europeanization and policy convergence (for example Mastenbroek 2005). Therefore, the following sections only deal with a selection of conditional variables.

3.1   *Conceptualizing Learning*

Policy diffusion due to learning refers to constellations where governments rationally utilize experiences of external actors in order to solve domestic problems. The rationality for this behavior rests on searching effective solutions to given problems, based on the idea that the experience of others provides information to solve one's own problems. Rather than changing the decision-making conditions by altering payoffs, learning relates to situations where national governments update their causal beliefs about the effectiveness of policies. Approaches subsumed under the notion of learning incorporate several theoretical concepts like lesson drawing (Rose 1991), Bayesian Updating (Meseguer 2003), or bounded rationality and cognitive heuristics (Weyland 2007).

Studies on diffusion are often unclear about the actual impacts of learning processes (cf. Elkins/Simmons 2005; Meseguer/Gilardi 2009; Mooney 2001). A program may be evaluated positively or negatively, or there may be simply no possibility to transfer it (cf. Dolowitz/Marsh 2000; Elkins/Simmons 2005; Rose 1991: 22). Furthermore, a main problem in applying the concept of learning is to answer the question

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14   From my point of view, these approaches just indicate that socializsation effects can also take place in a shorter time period than usually expected in theories relying on the logic of appropriateness.

about the results national policy-makers care for. Do they really want to find effective solutions for domestic problems? Or is it about economic benchmarks and political results (for example, in terms of payoffs at the ballot) (Meseguer 2005: 77)?

Still, existing empirical evidence pinpoints the assumption that governments tend to align themselves with policies that can be found in more successful countries (for example Elkins et al. 2006; Meseguer 2006; Simmons/Elkins 2004).. Epistemic communities or international organizations can serve as reference as well. Organizations like the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) frequently provide country reports, peer reviews, and identify best practices which then become powerful international policy instruments for further mutual learning processes (cf. Schäfer 2006).

Analytically then, governments are expected to change and transfer policies according to the policies implemented in reference countries (successful countries).In the 1990s, for example, Denmark and the Netherlands were quite successful in fighting unemployment what provided valuable insight on reforming labor markets (Barrell/Genre 1999). However, Lee and Strang (2006) as well as Mooney (2001) show that learning can work in both directions with negative experience also causing learning effects. Such processes seem to be at work when states abolished interventionist or Keynesian macro-economic policy in favor of deregulation and privatization in the last decades (cf. Meseguer 2005). Furthermore, short-term success seems to be more important to political decision-makers (cf. Weyland 2007) – a behavior perfectly fitting times where knowledge becomes out-dated quickly and where politicians think in terms of legislative periods and electoral payoffs.

Similar to the emulation mode, assumptions associated with learning are independent of the existence of an active promoter of policies (cf. Börzel/Risse 2009). That is to say, an updating of causal beliefs and learning about the effectiveness and performance of policies can be caused by mutual observations. Here, different assumptions exist regarding the question which problem-solving approach has to be adopted. In other words: Where do governments look for information and how do they weigh them? Usually, governments are only supposed to converge in their policy choices if all available information is considered and weighted to the same degree (cf. Holzinger/Knill 2005: 783).

For example, if governments differ in their information processing capacities, if they are neither perfectly rational nor do they collect all available information or if the considered experiences show ambiguous results, divergence may occur. Correspondingly, some learning frameworks are dealing with cognitive heuristics which emphasize certain short cuts in the governmental search for and evaluation of information (Friedkin 1993; Strang/Meyer 1993; Weyland 2007). Searching for policy solutions is still problem-driven, but causal beliefs are bound towards specific biases in the inferences and decision-making processes of individuals. So, if cognitive short cuts exist and policy-makers are rationally bounded, then learning still leads to policy adoption. However, this is a contingent pattern producing divergence rather than increasing similarity (cf. Meseguer 2005: 77).

One of the most questionable assumptions in the comprehensive versions of rational learning relates to the unrestricted availability of information and the costs for obtaining them (cf. Meseguer 2006; Weyland

2007). Although increasing informational linkages between countries exist, information is supposed to be spatially biased with information easier and more readily available from closer states and neighboring countries (cf. Grossback et al. 2003; Meseguer 2006; Weyland 2007). From this point of view, discovering regional clusters in learning effects comes to no surprise.

In a similar vein, learning effects can also depend on the recipient's information processing capacities (cf. Shipan/Volden 2008). National governments have usually different technical and administrative capacities at their disposal when it comes to developing, drafting, and implementing policy proposals (cf. Polidano 2000). For instance, some parliaments are supported by scientific services when it comes to drafting legislative proposals (cf. Mooney 1994). Even in situations where clear-cut information on cause-and-effect relationships exist, policy makers might not update their causal beliefs due to their limitations when collecting and processing information. In other words, useful findings do not always climb the "ladder of research utilization" (Landry et al. 2001).

In addition, inferential short cuts can refer to the influence of actor's prior beliefs and cultural factors that have an impact on learning outcomes (Meseguer 2005: 75; Weyland 2005). Learning is based on the processing and interpretation of information and the communication on causal relationships. The outcome of this process also depends on an actors' prior belief, meaning that an actor's cultural and ideological imprinting influences his decoding of information. In this regard, learning processes can be conditioned by country-group-effects (for example, "family of nations") as in the case of anti-smoking policies and the diffusion of second hand smoking restrictions in the English-speaking countries of the Republic of Ireland, Scotland, and England (cf. Asare/Studlar 2009). Following this argument, one can expect learning effects to be conditioned by the cultural and/or ideological similarity between sender and recipient.

Furthermore, Bayesian learning approaches assume that governments do not distinguish between different informational sources. Given a certain state of information, they rather search for the solution that is expected to yield the best results (the most appropriate solution in terms of their preferences). Correspondingly, the occurrence of a learning effect might depend on the similarity of the domestic problems with the observed ones (cf. Heinze/Knill 2008; Rose 1991). In such a case, insights derived from others' experience seem to be more comparable.

Last but not least, governments tend to incorporate policies of other countries into domestic political programs in situations of high uncertainty (cf. Rose 1991; Simmons/Elkins 2004). If the available policy options and the underlying causes and effects are hitherto unknown or not clear, conclusions have to be drawn on empirical evidence. The underlying assumption is that the uncertainty condition renders learning from peers and others' experience more likely than a prospective and systematic evaluation based on conventional research and experience (for example, in terms of pilot projects), which is often too time-consuming and costly. Time pressures can multiply this effect.

3.2 Conceptualizing Externalities

Externalities characterize diffusion mechanisms based on setting positive and/or negative incentives for the adoption of certain policies that are manipulating and influencing utility calculations of domestic policy-makers. From this point of view, externalities refer to the cost and benefits those external policies cause for decision-makers (cf. Abbott/Snidal 2001; Braun/Gilardi 2006; Elkins/Simmons 2005; Lazer 2001). Externalities put adaptive pressure on domestic actors by altering the material payoff structure associated with pursuing a specific policy. This will lead to an adjustment of the cost-benefit ratio and the decision calculus of actors that, in turn, will influence their interests and desires to which policy to adopt.

The two main concepts belonging to this category of diffusion mechanisms are competition and coercion. While the latter concept describes situations where governments are obliged to adopt certain policies (for example, in the case of legal requirements and the compliance with international law), diffusion research mainly focuses on processes of competition and their externalities affecting domestic policy-makers (for example Boehmke/Witmer 2004; Sharman 2008).[15] In this regard, externalities are supposed to relate to policy areas characterized by institutional and trade-related competition as in the case of economic policy (cf. Scharpf 1997b).[16]

Competition then describes pressures stemming from the growing political and economic interdependences between different economies (in terms of the mobility of capital, goods, and services) and their impact on the payoff structures associated with the pursue of different policies. Regulatory competition between different constituencies leads to the mutual adjustment of policies regarded as competitive. Rather than prescribing any institutional model, countries engage in a constant competition for international investments and therefore need to keep their economies competitive (cf. Drezner 2005). From this point of view, the actions of national governments create competitive pressures on each other to reform national institutions and policies, and to improve and enhance their effectiveness and efficiency. Consequently, one can expect government's decision-making to depend on the policies adopted by competitors. A prominent example refers to the impact of global integration on domestic taxation or social expenditures (cf. Jahn 2006).

In a similar vein, international factors can cause a redistribution of resources and domestic adjustment can stem from positive or negative incentives set by external actors. For example, federal governments or international organizations can use financial incentives[17] to promote certain policies (cf. Schimmelfennig 2007; Welch/Thompson 1980). Some of the most prominent examples are the World Bank (WB) and the European Union (EU). Both organizations provide conditional funding linked to carrying out specific

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15   Some authors also incorporate coercive adaption processes such as legal obligations, economic sanctions, or international political pressure forcing governments to adopt certain policies into the study of diffusion (e.g. Dobbin et al. 2007). Following our initial focus on non-coercive diffusion mechanisms, I do not deal with this kind of causal mechanisms.

16   Interestingly, this does not only apply to trade-related policies, but also to policies that have an economic dimension like moral policies (cf. Berry/Baybeck 2005) or higher education policy (cf. Heinze/Knill 2008).

17   This causal argument does not only apply to financial instruments. Competitive pressures and mutual adjustment can be increased with benchmarking instruments.

projects and/or policy reforms. The WB provides credits to promote economic development, but these often depend on specific measures to be implemented in the recipient country (for example, privatizing public sectors). The EU also runs financial action programs like the European Regional Development Funds (ERDF). However, another way of influencing domestic policies is its accession policy as complying with the *acquis communautaire* is a condition for granting full EU membership.

Rather than being a sufficient condition for policy change, vertical explanations can serve as necessary conditions that promote patterns of mutual adjustment. This assumption is supported by recent studies in diffusion research, finding only a modest influence of vertical incentives in terms of resource distribution (cf. Daley/Garand 2005; Sugiyama 2008; Weyland 2007). External actors like federal governments can merely propel subordinated governments to enact certain policies, but the actual implementation is not an automatism and depends on actor's motivations (cf. Sugiyama 2008: 212).[18]

Recently, authors point to externalities stemming from cooperative advantages when having compatible policies and common standards (Abbott/Snidal 2001; Braun/Gilardi 2006; Elkins/Simmons 2005; Lazer 2001). For example, as the US state of California adopted strict emission standards for cars, it became beneficial for other US states (and even European countries) to adopt these standards. The Californian market was important enough to gain cooperative benefits outweighing the costs for adopting to this common technical standard (Vogel 1997).

From this point of view, the standards of cooperative and trading partners seem to have a significant impact on one's payoff structures.[19] Furthermore, assuming that countries compete for shares on the same markets, some expect that countries trading with the same third parties are moving in the same direction. This triadic relationship simply spotlights that political decision-makers anticipate the policies of their competitors in terms of trade. If a developing country is concluding bilateral trade agreements with an industrialized country like the USA, this has implications for other trading partners of the USA in that region as well (cf. Neumayer/Plümper 2010). Though empirical evidence questions whether this kind of mechanism applies for other policies not directly related to trade (cf. Lee/Strang 2006: 900).

Externalities stemming from competition are supposed to lead to the introduction of more efficient and performance-orientated policies, whereas cooperative interdependence does not necessarily imply the adoption of competitive measures as usually the payoffs associated with the adoption of a common standard drive policy adoption. Nevertheless, in both cases, the overall adoption pattern can be described as "mutual adjustment" (Scharpf 1997a). Normally, diffusion research finds strong evidence for patterns of economically competitive pressure between governments (cf. Boehmke/Witmer 2004; Sharman 2008; Shipan/Volden 2008; Simmons et al. 2007). Still, this assumption is quite controversial and has led to formulating a variety of assumptions on what kind of factors condition the domestic impact of competition.

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18   This finding is also confirmed by studies on compliance and/or the Europeanization of domestic policies (cf. Mastenbroek 2005).

19   Cooperative advantages (and, in return, competitive pressures) seem to become even more pronounced as soon as a critical mass is reached and the number of countries with a specific policy is very high (cf. Sharman 2008). To put it differently, the size of the target market also matters.

For example, some authors believe that domestic problem pressure conditions the need for mutual adjustments and economic spill-overs (cf. Schmidt 2002: 898). Usually, it can be expected that economically stronger and more competitive states are less susceptible to transfer policies from smaller, economically less threatening states (cf. Shipan/Volden 2008). The economic systems of larger states are more diverse, thus, they can deal with competitive pressure in one policy field more easily. Moreover, the economic possibilities of smaller states to compete with larger states seem to be limited and, therefore, less threatening when it comes to economic competition.

Likewise, competitive pressure is supposed to be stronger in states that are economically integrated and more trade-dependent (cf. Holzinger/Knill 2005). However, this is not a necessity. For example, despite its open economy, Switzerland was very successful in dealing with global economic pressure due to its corporatist arrangements mediating domestic problem pressure (cf. Katzenstein 1985). The underlying logic is that competition alters the payoff structure, but the costs for keeping existing policies and ignoring competitive pressure will be much higher in times of economic and similar policy-specific vulnerability.

3.3   Conceptualizing Socialization

Normatively, rules might be followed as they are interpreted as legitimate. But they might also be followed as actors belief them as being true. For example, based on scientific knowledge or own experience, actors cognitively link problems and situations with distinct approaches (March/Olsen 2006). To put if differently, agents might internalize normative beliefs and practices as well as group affiliations (cf. Abdelal et al. 2006; Johnston 2005: 1032f). In such situations, actors accept the group norms as given and adopt their desires and identities to the ones of the community. In this regard, diffusion in terms of socialization clearly frames the cognitive dimension of appropriate rules (cf. March/Olsen 2006) as it relates to the internalization of shared beliefs. Choosing policies based on conscious instrumental calculation is replaced by a normative rationality.

Similar arguments can be found in concepts like normative isomorphism (DiMaggio/Powell 1991), social or complex learning (Hall 1993), taken-for-grantedness (Braun/Gilardi 2006), or type II internalization (Checkel 2005). Another way of changing normative beliefs is promoting ideas as legitimate or true through reason-giving as in the case of persuasion and arguing (cf. Risse 2000).

The basic idea behind conceptualizations based on the idea of socialization is that actors interacting with each other develop shared beliefs and internalize common norms. This, in turn, shapes actor's perceptions on the legitimacy of norms and policies and might lead to a redefinition of actor's identities and belief systems due to the internalization of norms (cf. Checkel 2005; Finnemore/Sikkink 1998). Although socialization does not directly lead to policy change, the outcome might be the adoption and transfer of specific policies. Similar to the assumption on cultural short cuts, actors have to decode situations and to interpret how to act accordingly. This process rests upon the actors' normative beliefs on the appropriateness of action and policies.

Research on socialization often highlights the role of international organizations in promoting policies (for example Finnemore/Sikkink 1998; Kelley 2004). International institutions like the EU or the OECD can exhibit influence on national actors in the policy-making process, eventually leading to norm internalization and community-based behavior, especially in processes dominated by expertise and technocratic aspects (cf. Radaelli 2000; Martens/Jakobi 2007). An environment characterized by regular and frequent interaction of people having a similar professional background seems to be particularly prone to develop common norms. A prominent example is the development of ideas on the European Monetary Union (cf. Verdun 1999).

However, the most prominent branch within diffusion research with regard to socialization deals with the role of international norm diffusion (cf. Graham et al. 2008). Here, scholars point to intergovernmental or transnational networks serving as a platform for joint decision-making and exchange between politicians, experts, bureaucrats, and private stakeholders (cf. Simmons/Elkins 2004: 10; Haas 1992). Such institutional configurations characterized by the exchange of information and experiences can cause persuasion and socializing effects, leading to a change of normative beliefs and expectations on the appropriateness of actions (cf. Eising 1999; Kohler-Koch 1999; Börzel/Risse 2003). Correspondingly, one can expect diffusion effects due to (shared) membership in groups and organizations, but also regarding direct, bilateral interactions between states (cf. Simmons/Elkins 2004: 180).

Existing tests of socialization and of the interaction hypothesis showed mixed empirical results. Whereas some authors are very skeptical about normative explanations (for example Weyland 2007) or could only find few effects linked to the interaction in communication networks (for example Simmons/Elkins 2004), others found evidence pointing to the importance of socialized norms and professional networks when it comes to explain policy diffusion (for example Lee/Strang 2006; Sugiyama 2008). Although prerequisites for successful norm internationalization are seemingly high (cf. Finnemore/Sikkink 1998; Zürn/Checkel 2005), a strong and sustainable ideational impact is usually associated with successful socialization. Its preconditions often relate to the institutional setting of the interactions and the properties of the recipient.

Usually, people expect a stronger impact of norms that are highly institutionalized in the international system, for example, in international law or international organizations. From this point of view, socialization effects might also be dependent on the degree of interaction (cf. Finnemore/Sikkink 1998: 900; Sharman 2008). Furthermore, with respect to norm internationalization, professions serve as powerful agents or entrepreneurs (cf. Mintrom 1997; Finnemore/Sikkink 1998: 900; Teodoro 2009). Especially in cases of frequent interactions involving joint working groups on technical tasks, trust as well as normative and political convergence is gradually generated (see also Holzinger/Knill 2005). From this point of view, one can expect that socialization effects depend on the kind of network actors are involved in. Professional and issue-specific networks should serve as a more suitable environment to develop and exchange shared understandings and beliefs on the appropriateness of policies.

To put it differently, the fit between existing domestic norms and normative claims seems to influence actor's openness to new norms and whether they are susceptible for socialization effects (cf. Börzel/Risse 2003). Here, one can expect socialization processes to be more successful if the interacting actors have

rather similar and homogenous cognitive frames, meaning the community is less heterogeneous. These arguments lead back to the initial argument that norm internalization is much more likely in professional contexts such as epistemic communities (cf. Simmons et al. 2007).

3.4   Conceptualizing Emulation

Emulation basically describes situations where actors simply copy models exemplified by others to increase the legitimacy of policy choices.[20] On an international scale, emulation relates to legitimacy pressures stemming from the misfit between broadly acclaimed norms and policies and their domestic counterparts. These may originate from the desire of national policy-makers to keep pace with others and to increase social rewards, but may also result from the need to legitimate one's structures and policies compared to international norms and practices (cf. Finnemore/Sikkink 1998; Meyer et al. 1997). In turn, the clash between international and domestic norms can create additional pressure finally leading to policy changes on the domestic scene, too. For example, even unconsolidated democratic regimes such as the Ukraine adopted the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) in 1994 for achieving a better international reputation (Cortell/Davis 2000: 82). So, instead of internalizing external norms as in the case of socialization, policy adoption in case of emulation results from the simple imitation and copying of norms and policy solutions found elsewhere (cf. Bennett 1991; DiMaggio/Powell 1991; Simmons/Elkins 2004).

In other words, rather than changing one's beliefs on the appropriateness of a specific policy, emulation patterns stem from a change in the reputational payoffs linked with the embracing of a certain norm and policy. Then, the altered ideational conditions influence the actors' desires to conform to a rule or norm. Following role-conforming behavior then results in adopting policies associated with the reference norms, but can also result in pure symbolism (cf. Gustafsson 1983) or blame avoidance (Bennett 1991: 223). For example, official commitments to the non-proliferation of arms often do not match the domestic implementation of these ideas (cf. Solingen 2007).

That means copying international models must not always stem from searching for effective solutions or an advanced understanding of the underlying causal relationships to given problems as it is assumed in the case of learning. Policy transfer in mimetic processes is rarely purposive and goal-orientated as explanatory rationales focus on peer pressure and reputation as drivers (Meseguer 2005: 78).

Mechanisms based on the logic of emulation refer to a bunch of concepts ranging from norm cascades (Finnemore/Sikkink 1998), mimetic isomorphism (DiMaggio/Powell 1991), mimicking (Johnston 2005) or type I internalization (Checkel 2005), symbolic imitation (Gustafsson 1983), bandwagoning, threshold or tipping point models (cf. Granovetter 1978; Schelling 1978) to herding (Hirshleifer/Teoh 2003; Levi-Faur 2002).[21]

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20 See footnote ten.

21 Some authors doubt that emulation is a mechanism on its own, but rather a mixture of socialization and learning (cf. Graham et al. 2008: 24). Still, it has different implications and underlying assumptions compared to a (rational) learning model or socialization.

Most scholars dealing with policy diffusion associate a strong impact of herding effects, geographically proximate peers, and global norms on cross-national policy adoption (cf. Daley/Garand 2005; Lee/Strang 2006; Shipan/Volden 2008). Nevertheless, empirical evidence also points to the limited impact of emulation in terms of the depth of change as policy adoption usually remains at the surface. For example, Cohen--Vogel and Ingle show that emulating policy adoption usually relates to the agenda setting and policy-formulation process, but dilutes in the domestic decision-making process (2007). In a similar vein, Boehmke and Witmer show that emulation can cause the adoption of a policy, but not its expansion (2004). In accordance with these findings, some authors refer to emulation as being a more short-lived diffusion process whose impact on the diffusion of policies diminishes with time (cf. Shipan/Volden 2008).

In relation to emulation processes, authors often distinguish reputational cascades depending on the standing of the sender (cf. Simmons/Elkins 2004). Broadly speaking, governments tend to emulate peers with which they share the same ideological (cf. Grossback et al. 2003), cultural (cf. Elkins/Simmons 2005), or regional (cf. Grossback et al. 2003) background, whereas other accounts refer to the emulation of pioneering states (cf. Lee/Strang 2006; Stone 2004),

Furthermore, international norms and standards might also serve as templates for policies to be emulated and transferred by national governments. The underlying assumption is that international norms prove to be of higher legitimacy than domestic ones and, therefore, change the legitimacy-driven behavior of national actors in favor of the internationally acclaimed policy (cf. Finnemore/Sikkink 1998; Meyer et al. 1997). International league tables can also result in adaption pressure on domestic arrangements as national governments have to legitimate the status not only in domestic politics, but internationally as well (Kern et al. 2000).

However, emulation processes are not necessarily dependent on the existence of a peer or the influence of an active norm promoter (cf. Checkel 2005). In this regard, countries often rely on the number of followers as an indicator for social acceptance in a given context (cf. Hirshleifer/Teoh 2003; Levi-Faur 2002; Meseguer 2005). Correspondingly, one can expect emulation processes to be triggered by the sheer number of countries adopting a specific policy. The changing number of policy followers serves as an indicator for the legitimacy of a policy in normative terms.

Some authors assume a saturation effect, except for constellations in which the number of countries that have adopted that policy is already on a very high level (cf. Knill 2005). In a similar vein, some authors assume that emulation effects become more pronounced as soon as a critical mass (Sharman 2008) or threshold (Finnemore/Sikkink 1998: 901; Simmons/Elkins 2004) is reached.

Still, a final evaluation of emulation mechanisms is difficult as some authors question the impact of global norms and symbolic and normative imitation at all (for example Grossback et al. 2003; Simmons/Elkins 2004; Weyland 2007). Additionally, theoretical expectations often overlap with assumptions on bounded rationality and cognitive short cuts in terms of learning. For example, the expectation that countries emulate neighboring states overlaps with the assumption that cognitive short cuts exist in learning as far as the language and/or nearness of countries to be learnt from are concerned (Weyland 2007). Furthermore, explanatory power seems to vary with other forms of emulation, for example, emulation due to cultural

similarity seems to have less explanatory power (cf. Elkins et al. 2006). Here, formulating hypotheses on the interaction between diffusion variables and conditioning factors could help to disentangle overlapping explanations.

Copycatting the behavior of others to increase the legitimacy of policy choices might have comparative advantages against more demanding forms of policy adoption, especially in cases characterized by a high degree of uncertainty concerning the effects of certain policy measures or high transaction costs relating to information gathering and time pressure (Bennett 1991: 223; Hall 1993). Such situations can relate to critical junctures and shocks, but also to high degrees of problem pressure or political uncertainty (for example, due to upcoming elections) (cf. Nicholson-Crotty 2009; Tsebelis 2002).

Authors also pinpoint circumstances limiting the impact of diffusion mechanisms such as the characteristics of the recipient. In this regard, one can expect bigger states to emulate less than small states as they usually consider themselves as referential for others (cf. Shipan/Volden 2008). In a similar way, the impact of reputational cascades depends on the standing of the sender (cf. Simmons/Elkins 2004). Governments have different degrees of international reputation. For example, a country often quoted to have a mixed reputation in the Arab world is the USA.

Last but not least, actors have to link norms and policy choices (cf. Klotz 1995: 27; Checkel 1998: 337). As Levi-Faur points out – even if structural forces of change can be considered as global – domestic actors have to interpret and to project external stimuli (Levi-Faur 2005). Thus, in cases where reference norms are fuzzy or even ambiguous and highly contested, a clear-cut interpretation of social rewards turns out to be quite difficult (cf. Finnemore/Sikkink 1998; Wiener 2007). From this point of view, emulation effects already imply a certain degree of shared beliefs, meaning that socialization took place in the past.

4.   Concluding Remarks

This paper addresses theoretical issues concerning the causes and effects of diffusion processes. In this regard, several strands of research have been considered, namely literature on policy diffusion as well as insights and approaches on policy transfer, policy convergence, isomorphism, Europeanization, and alike. Based on a systematic mapping of diffusion mechanisms, causal pathways and factors accounting for diffusion effects have been presented. As a matter of fact, the paper does not only streamline and review the existing state of the art, but developed a systematic and comparative framework of diffusion mechanisms. This framework might serve as a starting point for future research. It can be easily used for analyzing any policy that might be subject to diffusion processes by extracting hypothesis on the link between variables triggering diffusion processes and policy adoption. All in all, four diffusion mechanisms and (some of) their scope conditions are discussed and identified.

In doing so, the framework reflects the perspective of most approaches regarding the analysis of processes and causal mechanisms while the purpose of this project is to explain the patterns and outcomes of diffusion and not the causal mechanisms as such. Nevertheless, we need to conceptualize these underlying

causal mechanisms to formulate adequate hypothesis on when and how international, national, and policy-specific factors influence diffusion effects such as policy change and adoption.

Here, the major problem comes from disentangling the multiple pathways through which diffusion might take place. As long as theoretical assumptions remain distinct from each other this does not necessarily cause problems when using statistical methods (cf. Braumoeller 2003). However, the literature on diffusion mechanisms is (partly) based on overlapping theoretical assumptions. Hence, to avoid theoretical confusion, diffusion mechanisms are constructed systematically according to a) the underlying logic of social action (normative or instrumental rationality); and b) the theorized impact on the constituency for actors' decisions (changing actors' beliefs or structural conditions). Causal propositions then refer to potentially explanatory factors plausibly indicating changing beliefs and conditions.

This paper joins many other attempts to conceptualize diffusion processes and their impacts in an integrative and systematic framework. Certainly, each of them has validity. For example, Simmons and Elkins have distinguished at least thirty diffusion processes in the literature (2005). Hence, the mapping provided is just a selection of the main mechanisms to be found in the literature. Of course, it is possible to classify differently since, for example, the notion of learning as applied here is quite instrumental. Other forms of learning such as social learning (Hall 1993) are subsumed under the heading of socialization.[22] Talking about quite broad and ideal categories, these could be split up into sub-mechanisms (cf. Checkel 2006; Zürn/Checkel 2005). Yet, it would also be possible to find different analytical dimensions to disentangle the mechanisms (cf. Braun/Gilardi 2006; Simmons/Elkins 2004; Schimmelfennig 2007). Furthermore, one could add other mechanisms leading to the diffusion of policies: Parallel problem pressure might independently lead to the same policy output (cf. Knill/Lenschow 2005) or governments might learn from their own experience in the past (cf. Volden et al. 2008).

The ultimate test for every causal argument is its application to empirical research. So, the question remains how to test the causal propositions empirically. How could a research design look like? Going into detailed discussion of issues such as case selection and operationalization would certainly go beyond the scope of this paper. Yet, recent attempts of other scholars have already demonstrated the usefulness of mechanism-based and comparative frameworks in statistical analysis (for example Boehmke/Witmer 2004; Daley/Garand 2005; Dobbin et al. 2007; Shipan/Volden 2008; Simmons/Elkins 2004). Still, it looks like that three methodological innovations are especially promising to contribute to the comparative analysis of diffusion processes. First, the rather statistically orientated research on policy diffusion is increasingly using computational simulations to deal with causal processes (cf. Mooney 2001; Braun/Gilardi 2006;). These simulations can be used to generate additional insights on how the parameters accounting for diffusion processes interact and what the overall patterns would look like. Second, studies on diffusion increasingly utilize a directed dyads approach to deal explicitly with the direction of policy change and relational variables by identifying potential senders and recipients of policy ideas (cf. Berry/Berry 2007; Gilardi/Fuglister 2008; Volden 2006). Third, some scholars try to strengthen causal inference by mixing different quantitative and qualitative methods in a complementary way. Here, plural methodological approaches usually try

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22   From my point of view, these approaches just indicate that socialization effects can also take place in a shorter time period than usually expected in theories relying on the logic of appropriateness.

to integrate statistics with case studies (for example Karch 2007) or formal models (for example Franzese/ Hays 2008).

Nevertheless, the paper already contributes to the analysis of policy diffusion processes in several ways. First, taking a closer look on the literature, several intersections between existing conceptualizations of causal mechanisms are demonstrated.

 Second, rather than constructing theoretical arguments according to research strands, the discussion aims at disentangling and reviewing systematically the relevant literature by referring to a causal logic. This is exemplified by the mapping of theoretical arguments according to the underlying assumption on the logics and the determinants of social actions and decisions.

Third, the approach aims at a broad theoretical approach by considering both rationalist as well as constructivist reasoning in explaining the effects of policy diffusion. However, rather than mixing different theoretical arguments under one framework, the aim is to be keep them apart and to be more specific by employing clear-cut expectations on when and how actors adopt external policies. If the rationalist– constructivist divide is more about choosing different analytical tools than opposing ontological interpretations (cf. Fearon/Wendt 2002), mixing both kinds of arguments under one single (utilitarian or constructivist) framework would foil analytical clarity, especially as no researcher can study everything at once.

Fourth, the paper avoids equating causal mechanisms with explanatory variables (cf. Gerring 2010). The discussion of the underlying causal chain allows for testing intervening steps (or variables) in future research. For example, examining variables on the micro-level of the causal chain could help to answer the question whether actors really changed their causal beliefs).

Fifth, the research design is very specific concerning its theoretical scope; that is to say, it is dealing with domestic decision-making and national governments as well as the adoption of policies due to voluntary diffusion processes. Often studies fail to theoretically clarify the causal mechanisms to be examined or mix diffusion mechanisms with more coercive forms of policy spread.

Sixth, the testing and the application of the described mechanisms will offer us more insights into the relationship between the considered explanatory factors, pointing to the question: What is the interplay between international, national, and policy-specific variables in determining patterns of diffusion? This will finally help to systematically integrate different theoretical arguments in an interactive model.

Of course, the proposed classification is no panacea. Some would argue that it does not make sense to analytically distinguish theoretical arguments that might not be disentangled empirically. It is probably right that certain explanatory factors partly overlap. For example, as three of the four described mechanisms have in common that their function mainly rests on communication and the exchange of information between national and transnational actors, it comes to no surprise that their conceptualizations refer to ideological and/or cultural arguments. A crosscutting assumption is that culturally similar actors decode information in a similar way.

Also, in some cases different levels of analysis exist. In some conceptualizations change is actually induced on the micro-level. For testing diffusion mechanisms based on altered beliefs one would preferably have data on actors' beliefs and attitudes over time. Therefore, it is correct that the proposed models still have to prove their applicability and robustness in empirical tests. However, from my point of view, this is rather an argument for analytical clarity. As causal propositions are the starting point of empirical analysis, they should fulfill formal criteria such as consistency (cf. Gerring 2005) as long as they can be empirically falsified. To put it differently, rather than adjusting theories to methodological problems, we should strive for better data.

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