

# **Are lessons transferable? The importance of research for policy on transitional justice mechanisms**

**Brandon Hamber\***

Paper presented at the “Empirical Research Methodologies of Transitional Justice  
Mechanisms Conference”, 18-20 November 2002, Stellenbosch, South Africa

3 July 2003

---

\* Brandon Hamber is an independent research consultant. He is an Associate of think-tank Democratic Dialogue in Belfast and the Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation in South Africa. All correspondence to [mail@brandonhamber.com](mailto:mail@brandonhamber.com).

## **Introduction**

This paper addresses the issue of whether lessons are transferable across contexts. It specifically considers research on transitional justice mechanisms in societies coming out of conflict. To explore this I will draw on my experience from South African and Northern Ireland. The paper is critical of the relatively simplistic way lessons are drawn between contexts, but at the same time is based on the assumption that comparative analysis enhances research and can be helpful in the peacebuilding process. I will approach the topic from both a practitioner and researcher perspective because this challenges one to think outside the academic paradigm and consider more carefully how research is used to shape public policy in transitional contexts.

## **Simple questions and complex answers**

When addressing the question, “Are lessons transferable?” (a different question to “are lessons both positive and negative being transferred?”), there are three simplistic answers: “Yes, lessons are transferable”, “No, lessons are not transferable”, and finally, one could say, “It depends”. An appreciation of the complexity of social reality obviously suggests the final answer. But what does this ambivalent answer mean for policy development?

Before exploring this, however, it may be helpful to delve into the topic of this paper in a little more detail. To this end, we need to ask more questions. Specifically: What research are we talking about when we speak of lesson-drawing? When are lessons transferred? Why are they transferred? Who is transferring them? How are they being transferred? Researchers often fail to ask these questions. Often there is very little reflection at the outset of a research project about exactly how, why and who will use the research, and if it can be applied cross-contextually. My experience suggests that transitional justice research is no exception to this. Having said that, the seemingly straightforward questions posed above, do not have simple answers.

## Issues of transition and context

When considering the questions of transferring lessons, it is useful to ask the basic questions: Is comparative research helpful? Are there universal issues or ideas that can be transferred between societies and cultures? Can we move lessons cross-culturally? Can we move lessons cross-contextually? These are particularly interesting questions to ask in the South African context. Ten years ago, many made the case (particularly South Africans) that South Africa was a unique situation. Now, the opposite is happening. South Africans are traveling around the world saying our situation is very similar to others and we have a lot to teach you. There is no doubt that lessons can be drawn from our transition, but obviously some healthy caution is needed. We need to be very clear about the contexts between which we are considering sharing lessons between.

In addition, in terms of this conference, we are dealing with so-called “transitional” societies. Do we know what we mean by “transition”? A literature review of different definitions of transition carried out by Noel Stott<sup>1</sup> reveals that much of this debate to date has focused on defining transition within specific historical periods and within the framework of movement between different forms of governance. For example, transition is often defined as the “institutionalisation of formal democratic processes” (Walden, 1999); or as the interval between regimes particularly as they shift from authoritarian to democratic rule (O’ Donnell, Scmitter & Whitehead, 1986); or as different types of transitions, such as political, social or economic (Tucker & Scott, 1992). The term has also become increasingly synonymous with negotiated political solutions to long-standing political conflicts.

However, as Ginsberg (1996) argues, linking the notion of transition with “élite pacting” or negotiation, brings the whole transition theory into question. Those talking about and theorizing on transition, he argues, are generally endorsing a particular (bourgeois)

---

<sup>1</sup> An unpublished literature review on transition was carried out by Noel Stott for the Developing and Implementing Public Policy Project. The section of the paper about differing definitions of transition draws on the review of Noel Stott. For more information on the Developing and Implementing Public Policy Project see <http://www.incore.ulst.ac.uk/home/research/ongoing/dipp.html>

version of democracy that clearly distinguishes between economic and political democracy (Ginsberg, 1996). Habib (1995) argues for a dynamic understanding of the transition process that does not pigeon-hole transition into one or other historical trend.

Then again, one could be provocative and say that the notion of “transition” is a socially constructed concept in and of itself. It has a (constructed) meaning in certain academic circles, and perhaps, albeit limited, social or public meaning. Its significance is contingent on particular cultures, and on the social and individual identities “being in transition” implies and creates. That said, whether we choose to load specific historical periods with definitional certainty attached to the concept of transition, or we opt for a constructivist view, what we do know is that countries undergoing some sort of political change are often making policy within a context of profound uncertainty and social instability.

In 2000/2001, I, with colleagues Helen Brocklehurst, Gillian Robinson and Noel Stott, participated in a project called the Developing and Implementing Public Policy Project (DIPP).<sup>2</sup> This project was a partnership between the Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation (CSVr) in South Africa and the Initiative on Conflict Resolution (INCORE) in Northern Ireland. The project looked at how policy was made and transferred, and how lessons were drawn between contexts. The specific focus was on South Africa and Northern Ireland.

In the DIPP Project we defined ‘transition’ using the words of those interviewed, namely: that transition is generally defined as something more than mere ‘regime shift’, something less than transformation and certainly not merely a shift from authoritarian to democratic rule.<sup>3</sup> As Freidman states “...if there is a reasonable expectation among a significant section of society that the basic rules governing society could change, then

---

<sup>2</sup> For more information on this project and publications, see <http://www.incore.ulst.ac.uk/home/research/ongoing/dipp.html>

<sup>3</sup> Cited in Brocklehurst, Stott, Hamber & Robinson (2001), interview with Jackie Cock, Department of Sociology, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, 15 June 2000.

that society is still in a period of transition.”<sup>4</sup> He argues that ‘transition’ involves a change from one set of rules to something else and that policy, therefore, is therefore made in conditions of uncertainty.<sup>5</sup>

Presumably research is—if one is to adopt a more positivist view of science—a powerful tool and stabiliser which is supposed to provide objective conceptual clarity and direction in undefined and uncertain contexts such as transition. Comparative research—at least theoretically—is supposed to add weight to this, or as Haas argues “[i]nternational collaboration is an attempt to reduce uncertainty” (cited in Dolowitz & Marsh, 1996, p.347 cited in Brocklehurst, Hamber, Robinson & Stott, 2001). Lesson drawing in transition may be part of a broader strategy to attempt to reduce uncertainty in a complex and fast moving environment (Brocklehurst, Stott, *et al.*, 2001)

However, although the context of “uncertainty” might create a demand for research in times of transition, it is also this context that will shape how the research will be used, appropriated and transferred. Conditions of “uncertainty” may make policymakers more ready to use research. At the same time the political demands of the transitional context may mean that the research is used to bolster ideological and political positions, rather than to influence specific policies in a rigorous and empirical way.

For example, research demonstrating the utility of truth commissions (appreciating that this is only one mechanism of transition justice) in one context may readily be pounced upon by policymakers in another, not because the research demonstrates that the model is applicable between societies, but to augment a governmental position already unfolding. The reason for opting for a truth commission (or not) is a profoundly political decision and often related to the balance of forces at the time of regime change (Hamber, 1998). Generally—despite a growing amount of research on the utility of truth commissions—there is very little detailed exploration of the merits of such processes in countries

---

<sup>4</sup> Cited in Brocklehurst, Stott, *et al.*, 2001, interview with Stephen Freidman, Centre for Policy Studies, Johannesburg, 28 June 2000.

<sup>5</sup> Cited in Brocklehurst, Stott, *et al.*, 2001, interview with Stephen Freidman, Centre for Policy Studies, Johannesburg, 28 June 2000.

considering such approaches. My experience is that what largely takes place is a lot of sharing, lesson drawing and superficial comparative discussion (mostly at conferences). So-called “hard” comparative research or detailed comparative studies—or in terms of this conference, empirical research—are seldom undertaken.

The difficult questions of whether lessons are transferable between different structural, cultural, social and political contexts are also rarely interrogated by policymakers (and even researchers at times) in a comprehensive way. In fact, from a critical perspective, one needs to question whether this is even wanted at times. Often in transitional contexts, government policymakers are under extreme pressure to be seen to be delivering something. There is little perceived time for detailed and lengthy consideration of different options. This is one reason—amongst others—why large-scale public consultations have seldom featured in government decisions to implement different transitional justice mechanisms.

### **Policy transfer versus lesson drawing**

When addressing the issue of the transferability of lessons, it is helpful to make a distinction between what has been termed “lesson drawing” on the one hand, and “policy transfer” on the other. Although this sounds like a semantic debate, highlighting the differences between them is a helpful frame for thinking about the how transfers between contexts takes place. In the DIPP project, a clear distinction was made between the two concepts.<sup>6</sup>

The DIPP project drew on the work of Dolowitz and Marsh in this regard. Dolowitz and Marsh (2000) argue that lesson drawing is a subtype of policy transfer. For them policy transfer and lesson drawing is a process in which knowledge about policies, administrative arrangements, institutions in one context are used in another. Policy

---

<sup>6</sup> Much of the background research on this issue was done by Helen Brocklehurst, Northern Ireland researcher on the Developing and Implementing Public Policy Project—her work in this regard is appreciated and conceptual clarity specifically on the relationship between lesson drawing and policy transfer.

transfer takes place between and within nations, and specific policies are transferred as a result of strategic decisions (Dolowitz and Marsh, 1996). It is a conscious process, and the policies transferred can be “soft” (e.g. ideas, concepts and attitudes) or *hard* transfers, such as programmes and implementation (Evans & Davies, 1999 cited in Brocklehurst, Hamber, et al., 2001).

Lesson drawing, on the other hand, is described as a quasi rational attempt to search for solutions to common problems across space and time (Bennet, 1997). It is part of policy transfer, but not the same as it. Drawing lessons can result in policies being transferred, but then again it may not. It is also difficult to trace who is drawing lessons, how they are using them and their final impact on any policies that are developed. The search for lessons can also have different motivations, ranging from a desire to legitimize a current policy by using external “evidence”, or a genuine attempt to learn from others integrating lessons into policy developments.

That said, although policy transfer on the whole should imply a more rational and empirical process—my experience of the policymaking process is that policy transfer and/or lesson drawing does not happen in a purely logical or rational way. Policy transfer, and lesson drawing, is generally not linear, and is complicated and disorganized. It is usually selective, and at times happens in an almost random or arbitrary fashion.

For example, with technology nowadays, I have little doubt that policymakers, at times, sit in front of a computer, type keywords into a search engine, and find a paper that seems interesting. This paper, perhaps chosen on the basis of its title, could start a process of thinking about a specific concept or issue. This could in turn be developed and end up in a policy document often in a form very different to what the researcher who published the paper on the internet even intended. Ironically, a concept or technologically accessible idea, rather than the detailed empirical work behind it—coupled with the creativity and application by a single policymaker—could alter or influence policy long before policy research is transferred methodologically and carefully. I say this not to pass a value judgment, but to highlight the process of policy development. There is no evaluative

research to suggest that either method (if you can call it that), no matter how chaotic the former, is more or less successful than other in the long run.

Chance meetings, stumbling across snippets of information, as well as individual policymakers and researchers—particularly those who are connected to government structures, or who are good at “marketing” their work—can have as much, if not more, impact than carefully developed networks and policy exchange processes. South Africa has a unique corporate image of a ‘miracle unfolding’ and successful transition, as such it attracts attention (Brocklehurst, Stott, Hamber & Robinson, 2001).

The pressure created by “transitions” on policymakers to be seen to be acting and shaping the new environment heightens the likelihood of unstructured policy transfer and lesson drawing taking place. My experience of Northern Ireland and South Africa is that following a change of governance (in Northern Ireland when the Assembly was first set up in 1998 and in South Africa following the first democratic election in 1994) there was an initial frantic period (albeit enthused and excited) of looking around to develop new policies that demonstrate a break with the past—everything and anything, from any context, was up for grabs.

That said, engaging in a process of lesson drawing can also have other functions not necessarily aimed at actual concrete policy transfer. Firstly, lesson drawing can be a simple exchange between different societies to create more policy vision and widen the scope for different ideas, thoughts, attitudes and concepts. Lesson drawing can be a method for stimulating thought.

Secondly, lesson drawing might take place as a way of symbolically marking time. For example, merely talking about the possibilities of different transitional justice mechanisms is a way of implying that a society has reached a certain point in the development and resolution of a conflict. This can help create psychological milestones that may be important for an emerging peace process.



Thirdly, lesson drawing could be used, as the DIPP project noted, in a “surrogate” fashion.<sup>7</sup> That is, where issues are particularly sensitive, for example, policing a divided society, “it [lesson drawing] enables players to discuss reforms by alluding to the exporter environment and its parallels without using the highly charged identities and issues of the potential importer country” (Brocklehurst, Stott, *et al.*, 2001, p.91).

### **Turning research into policy**

Policymaking is a process that is influenced by a variety of factors besides research and empirical evidence, and research is not always used as the basis of policy changes (Pillay, 1999). The role of research in the public policy transfer process has been shown to be limited in Northern Ireland and South Africa.<sup>8</sup> These findings concurred with my experience of working on a number of comparative policy initiatives. Public policymakers do not always use research in a consistent, deeply evaluative and empirical manner, whether the research is qualitative or quantitative. Equally, researchers do not always market their results effectively and share their results with a wide audience (Pillay, 1999).

In addition, the value of research for many government policymakers often comes in its ability to support a current policy direction, rather than to fundamentally change a government’s approach to an issue. Therefore, we should not give too much weight to how our research will be used. We need to approach the issue with modesty and humility, as our rigorous work finds itself misrepresented and distorted by the pressured policymaking environment. If it is used, we should, in turn, be very wary about how it will be used.

This not only raises questions about the policy development process and the role of research in it, but it also raises questions about what the role of the researcher is after the

---

<sup>7</sup> See Summary of the Research Results at <http://www.incore.ulst.ac.uk/home/research/ongoing/dippsummary.html>. Last visited 9 June 2003.

<sup>8</sup> See Summary of the Research Results at <http://www.incore.ulst.ac.uk/home/research/ongoing/dippsummary.html>. Last visited 9 June 2003.

research has been completed. Does the researcher's role cease after publication and dissemination? Should research findings simply be handed over to relevant bodies for their use, no matter how they see fit? Or, does the researcher need to be involved in the actual interpretation, use and ultimate implementation of their ideas? The latter requires a significant paradigm shift in the academic research community and, of course, is not free from its problems—but I think it is worth considering.

Being involved in the policy development process following the production of research may also have different meanings in different contexts, and is dependent on how researchers see themselves within the society. For example, in South Africa—particularly in the 1980s and early 1990s—many researchers felt that the boundaries between activist and academic were not significant. In fact, from certain political perspectives, the academic was encouraged to be an activist and not to sit on the fence in the highly charged political environment. As a result, academics had fewer concerns about the final use of their research, and at the same time were more willing to lobby, engage policymakers and get involved in the implementation of their ideas even if this meant engaging in the political arena and compromising their objectivity (which they did not to claim to have anyway).

In Northern Ireland, my experience is that academics—guided by a more rigid sense of perceived objectivity and distance in doing research due to their more traditional understanding of academia and faith in positivist science—have more concerns about how their research will be used in forming policy. This often results in them pulling back from public debate about their work, burying their ideas, and not involving themselves in policy and political debates subsequent to publication. Many ideas remain trapped inside books and reports, some of which are only now emerging in the post-ceasefire years when they have space to recast their social identities in a changing society.

### **Purpose of research**

Above I argued that the context has a major impact on how or if research will be used, or

lessons transferred. This assumes that researchers do in fact want their research to be transferred and ultimately aspire to social change through their work. To this end, it is important to ask some seemingly basic questions, such as: Do we do research to change policy? Do we want it to help develop new theories? Is developing theory by its nature comparative? Do we want it to impact practically? If so, at what levels of society do we envisage this happening at? These questions, in turn, highlight the importance of assessing the impact of policy research. This is a complex issue, but requires some exploration.

How research impacts on policy development, then policy transfer, then societal change, begs the question of how we actually assess policy and research impacts upon the social and political fabric of a society. Little thought is given to this, especially in an academic environment where the outputs are steadily being considered more important than the quality or the broader outcomes of research. This is partly because outputs have become one of the main criteria for many funders and universities in evaluating the effectiveness of projects. This creates a “tick box mentality” as researchers fill out evaluation forms, ticking off how many research outputs they have spewed out during the grant period, rather than being forced to consider the wider social and political ramifications of their work at a more descriptive and qualitative level.

In sum, I am of the opinion, that it is the way that we measure our impact that often influences where we put our energies as researchers, that is largely into publication with little consideration as to broader social and political outcomes which are more difficult to assess. This fuels a context where lessons—loosely based on research—are primarily what is transferred between societies, rather than serious policy transfer happening with researchers themselves helping to guide this process.

### **Rationalizing and compartmentalizing**

The output-focused mentality mentioned above also leads to what can be termed compartmentalizing and rationalizing of research. Compartmentalizing, for example, is

taking place around the debate concerning the role of truth commissions in transitional justice. Currently, the so-called psychological dimensions of truth commissions is steadily becoming a field of study in its own right (e.g. how does testimony impact on individuals, is truth psychologically beneficial). So too are the “fields” of research focused on public attitudes following truth commissions; the international legalities of such processes; and reparations, to name a few.

Of course, there is a role for expertise in specific areas and the need for research in them, but we need to guard against these areas being compartmentalized because of inter- and intra-disciplinary competition. The result of compartmentalizing, other than creating a raft of competing professionals all vying for research funds and constantly trying to out-do one another, is that the need for a holistic approach (something policymakers struggle with in most societies typified by the desire but largely failed attempts to create “joined-up” policymaking) is never realized. We as researchers do little to assist with finding answers to how to make policy in transitional contexts in an integrated fashion because we cannot do it ourselves.

A further consequence of compartmentalization is what I call rationalization. To state this simply: the clearer one describes the social impact of differing transitional justice mechanisms *the less likely* they may be seized upon and used. For example, and turning to the issue of truth commissions again, the more one studies the psychological impact of truth commissions on victims, the more complex, ambivalent and contested the outcomes will become. This is accurate as it reflects the psychosocial reality of individuals trying to deal with personal loss in the social world. Sound social research will inevitably expose the range of different individual impacts and the myriad of contingent factors at play—summed up by the mantra that individuals all have different needs.

The result of this can be opposite to what we imagine. Generally—from my experience—when policymakers are faced with contradictory and complex research results they tend to curtail their policy responses to it, rather than expand it. The response to the complexity of the issues at hand can result in a rationalizing of the policy agenda.

To continue the example of truth commissions: what we know is that the understanding of truth commissions has changed in the last few years (Hayner, 2001). In the past, as Hayner (2001) argues, truth commissions were largely understood as investigative mechanisms with the primary aim of publishing an authoritative and factual report on human rights violations committed in a country. Now their remit often includes issues such as reconciliation and healing with the societal impact of the process being considered vitally important (Hayner, 2001). Of course, whether truth commissions should be concerned with concepts such as healing and reconciliation is a point for debate.

However, the point I wish to make is that if we continue to study the social impact of truth commissions (as we should) we will inevitably find a range of impacts and some may even be contradictory, and all results will be context specific. This is the nature of social research. The difficulty with this will be that we will be unable to easily generalize this research (in the same way positivist science claims to generalize its findings), and we will have to give contextual and nuanced answers to what the real impact of processes such as truth commissions are. This “uncertainty” (but accurate uncertainty) is difficult for policymakers. As a result, you may find them sticking to what they can “measure” or talk about with clarity, for example, narrowing (rationalizing) truth-recovery processes back to their investigative roots, or legal parameters, and throwing out the potential for the processes to be more wide-ranging and include issues such as attitudinal change, reconciliation and healing in their mandate because it is difficult to measure these impacts.

### **Lessons for researchers**

Above I have outlined a range of issues that as researchers we need to consider when we explore the question: “are lessons transferable?”. As a starting point, we need to interrogate our own assumptions about what it is we are hoping our research will influence and how. We may need to be flexible in this and consider how we intend to shape this process ourselves (or not). A broad frame for understanding the transfer of

lessons and measuring the impact of this “transfer” is required. This needs to be thought about at the outset of a research project. Such an understanding may well need to move beyond our desire for our work to be used carefully, honestly and accurately in a rational and linear form of direct policy transfer. We may need to engage in the contested political debate that will follow the dissemination of research results. The process of policy transfer is never strictly empirical, and always socially contested and contextual.

We also need to think about how our research is disseminated and marketed, with or without our consent. Of course, the media is now a major player in this regard. Over stretched policymakers looking for a summarized and “sound-bite” versions of research studies are a critical and inevitable factors in this regard. To this end, we need to seriously consider whether we want to engage in the game of “sound-bites” and “quick facts”. This is challenging because these “games” can be what deliver the “results” in terms of lesson drawing and policy transfer, but they may also compromise the integrity of the research.

Having said this—and on the other end of the continuum—we need to find ways in which we can convey complex social reality and challenge the mentality of digestible research that simply have a populist or instantaneous appeal. We also need to realize that pressure to change or develop policy always has public dimension. Influencing public opinion can influence public policy indirectly (International Health Policy Program cited in Pillay, 1999).

Simultaneously, we may need to engage in the so-called micro debates. In debates around transitional justice mechanisms, for example, we generally engage in the broad analytical and political debates at the expense of describing the micro events and processes. The full story is seldom told, undermining the quality of the information to be “transferred” and “learnt” from.

In addition, we need to accept the fact that researchers are part of the process, especially in politically charged environments. There is an onus on researchers to convey their

results in a way that is usable. To do this requires knowledge and engagement with the political environment. As obvious as it sounds, and not wanting to bring up age old debates about objectivity in social science, we are not simply bystanders or scientists that reflect social reality. For example, we often forget that as researchers we are an audience—or at least a conduit to a wider audience—in the politically charged transitional process. We need to treat those who are part of the research—like ourselves—as subjects with a sense of agency in the political drama. Research subjects (*sic*) are not merely vessels that provide information, just as we are not merely passive and objective recipients interpreting and documenting this.

For example, a researcher can be at pains to make several guarantees about confidentiality to an interviewee, but while doing this forget that perhaps the respondent has a very different desire for the use of the research than the researcher. To expand: research respondents are acutely aware that what they are saying to researchers will be communicated publicly (even if not attributed to them). They may want information conveyed publicly. They may be engaging in a private discussion that they know will ultimately be public in one form or another. The public arena—perhaps stating the obvious—cannot be divorced from the private interview space, especially during highly political charged times. As such we do not merely record information, but exist within it and our results are interpreted, conveyed and contested within this space and beyond. This can give rise to creative opportunities for learning and exploration, but sticking to a naïve belief that we are merely objective recorders of the information we get, or that respondents are passive imparters of information, can be problematic.

During times of transition, for example, especially when a new government has come to power, it is evitable that researcher, participant and policymaker will have a political opinion, or at least a preferred political outcome. My experience of the truth commission process in South Africa was that the vast majority of researchers who studied it over its life had a strong desire to demonstrate that it was working and was a viable option for other contexts (of course, there were those who thought the opposite, but I believe they were in the minority). Certainly when it came to those undertaking research

to assess its impact there was a strong bias towards interviewing those in the commission, those working around it in non-governmental organizations like myself, and those who testified before it.

Many researchers—from my own experience of being interviewed dozens of times—used forms of “response validation” (i.e. cross checking interim research findings with respondents). This is a good idea in principle, but I was often left wondering how many of the researchers interrogated this methodology in their reports and papers. There is always a danger of "romanticising" respondents' accounts (Atkinson cited in Barbour, 2001). I think this is more likely in the transitional context when the political stakes of success are high.

Those working in or about transitional justice mechanisms (who generally become the respondents of research on these issues)—whether they are politicians, members of civil society, victims and/or perpetrators of gross violations of human rights to mention a few—have an enormous personal and political investment in the results of any research findings. They know that research findings could bolster or undermine their political position, especially in a “sound bite” driven world. Although “response validation” can be an important and useful technique<sup>9</sup>—at times, researchers undertaking follow-up discussions with respondents, can choose to disregard their own interpretations and to accept those of respondents at face value, “this can be cosy but may lead to collusion” (Barbour, 2001). Having said that, if one accepts researchers and respondents are active participants in an unfolding process then one needs to ask if this is actually problematic anyway. That said, if this all takes place without reflection there is little doubt it is.

## **Conclusion**

Lessons are transferable, but one can never think about context enough. In addition, we need to appreciate context not as a time-bound concept, but as something that is always

---

<sup>9</sup> Barbour (2001) notes that “respondent validation” can be particularly valuable in action research projects, where researchers work with participants on an ongoing basis to facilitate change. I would share this view.



changing, and in transitional contexts, changing fast.

For example, when looking at the case study of South Africa and Northern Ireland, it is clear that there are issues surrounding the temporal location of any data collected. When was the data captured? And, between what temporal periods are lessons being drawn to each other? We will easily engage in a lesson drawing discussion between Northern Ireland and South Africa without really asking: where are these societies on some sort of a continuum in terms of their peace processes or transition? What is happening globally? And, how ready are people to engage in the issue at hand in the different contexts? And, of course, what are the cultural differences between the societies? I think these issues are vital, particularly if we are considering policy transfer. However, if we are discussing lessons, perhaps in the broad way I outlined earlier, there may well be more scope for an open engagement in a comparative discussion.

That said, there is a whole set of meaning attached to the process of lesson drawing that is beyond the simple content of the research being transferred between contexts, no matter how empirical. We need to reflect on this and consider how we measure the impact of research. How we measure impact of research (especially our limits in this regard) shapes what type of research work is valued and funded. We should also not forget the basics. What is the meaning of engaging in lesson drawing? What is being transferred? Why? When is the process taking place? How are the lessons being conveyed and by whom? Where are we as researchers in this process? And, what do we want out of this process—policy transfer or a broad application of our work to the lesson drawing environment?

It is important to move from the premise that policymakers within the process of transition—for want of a better way of putting it—are generally not in a position to maximize information we impart in our research. This is a serious challenge for researchers as policymakers often work with whatever seems to fit within the context, not with what is necessarily seen as objectively valuable and useful within that context. Then again, we should also aim our research at the public because public opinion, as

argued above, also affects policymaking indirectly.

On some levels, however, the idea of doing complex social research is fairly incompatible with policymaking at a governmental level. Policymaking is dependent on making decisions and immediate implementation. Authentic social research is about describing complex realities in dynamic contexts through the long lens of history, theory and consequence. Yet it is this seeming incompatibility that should encourage us to find new ways of ensuring that research is used creatively and to achieve maximum impacts, not only relative to context, but within a contested political context in which we ourselves are actors. This is the challenge that lies at the core of considering how and whether lessons from empirical research are transferable.

## References

Barbour, R.S. (2001). Checklists for improving rigor in qualitative research: a case of the tail wagging the dog? BMJ, 322 ( 5 May ), pp. 1115-1117.

Bennett, C.J. (1998). Understanding Ripple effects: the Cross-National Adoption of Policy Instruments for Bureaucratic accountability. Governance: An International Journal of Policy and Administration, 10(3), p. 228.

Brocklehurst, H., Hamber, B., Robinson, G. & Stott, N. (2001). Lesson drawing from the Negotiated Transitions in South Africa and Northern Ireland. Paper presented at the 2000 Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association, Marriot Wardman Park, USA, August 31 – September 3, 2000.

Brocklehurst, H., Stott, N., Hamber, B. & Robinson, G. & (2001). Lesson drawing: Northern Ireland and South Africa. Indicator SA, Vol 18(1), March, pp. 89-94.

Evans, M. & Davies, J. (1999). Understanding Policy Transfer: A multi-level, multi-disciplinary Perspective. Public Administration, 77(2) (Spring), pp. 361-385.

Dolowitz, D. & Marsh, D. (1996). Who Learns What from Whom: a Review of the Policy Transfer Literature. Political Studies, 44(2), p. 347.

Dolowitz, D. & Marsh, D. (2000). Learning from Abroad: The role of Policy Transfer in Contemporary Policy Making. Governance and International Journal of Policy and Administration, 13(1).

Ginsburg, D. (1996). The Democratisation of South Africa: Transition Theory Tested, Transformation, Issue 29, pp. 74 – 101.

Habib, A. (1995). The transition to democracy in South Africa: Developing a dynamic

model. Transformation, Issue 27, pp. 50-73.

Hamber, B. (1998) (ed.). Past Imperfect: Dealing with the Past in Northern Ireland and Societies in Transition. Derry / Londonderry: University of Ulster / INCORE.

Hayner, P.B. (2001). Unspeakable Truths: confronting state terror and atrocity. New York: Routledge.

O'Donnell, J., Scmitter, P.C. & Whitehead, L. (1986). Transition from Authoritarian Rule: Prospects for Democracy, Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press.

Pillay, Y. (1999). Researching public policy. In Martin Terre Blanche & Kevin Durrheim (eds), Research in practice: Applied methods for social sciences. Cape Town: University of Cape Town Press.

Tucker, B. & Scott, B. (1992) (eds.). South Africa: Prospects for Successful Transition. Cape Town: Juta.

Walden, B. (1991). Asia's Diverse Democratic Transitions. In K. Gaerlan (ed) Transitions to Democracy in East and Southeast Asia. Quezon City: Institute for Popular Democracy.