

Policy Innovation Diffusion: Research Progress, Frontier Issues and Future Trends

Chuqiao Li^{1,*}

¹ School of Government, Beijing Normal University, Beijing, 100875, China

*Corresponding author. Email: lcq1214@163.com

ABSTRACT

After decades of development, the research on policy innovation diffusion has become one of the hottest research topics in the field of public management. With the deepening of governance and policy innovation practices in countries around the world, the content and methods of policy innovation diffusion research have become increasingly diverse. These researches cover many aspects such as the diffusion and diffusion path of local policy innovation, the internal relationship between policy innovation diffusion and individuals or organizations, and the multiple mechanisms of China's policy innovation and diffusion. At the same time, research on the influence of public managers on the diffusion of policy innovation has also emerged and has become a frontier issue in this field. The future discussion on the role of change agents at the micro level will continue to be the focus of researchers.

Keywords: Policy innovation diffusion, Diffusion path, Local government, Public manager.

1. RESEARCH CONTEXT AND LATEST PROGRESS OF POLICY INNOVATION DIFFUSION

1.1. The Basic Context of Policy Innovation Diffusion Research

The research on policy innovation diffusion started from American policy scholar Jack L. Walker's classic article "The Diffusion of Innovations among the American States" published in American Political Science Review in 1969. In this essay, Walker focused on the phenomenon of policy innovation and diffusion in government decision-making, and posed a pioneering research question: Why did some states adopt a new policy? How did this new policy diffuse from state to state?[1] Since then, more and more public policy scholars have begun to pay attention to the phenomenon of inter-governmental diffusion of policy ideas and projects. In 1990, the Berrys integrated the internal determinant model and external diffusion factor model in their article "State Lottery Adoptions as Policy Innovations: An Event History Analysis". In addition, this article was the first to use the event history analysis method in policy innovation diffusion research, which not only achieved an important breakthrough in theory and method, but also promoted policy innovation diffusion research into a period of comprehensive

development, the researchers began to explore the multiple factors influencing the diffusion of policy innovation from different perspectives such as geographical location, organizational relationship and institutional arrangement [2][3].

In the 21st century, the research on policy innovation diffusion has also stepped into a stage of deepening development. On the basis of finding the correlation between variables, more and more researches have been beginning to explore the interaction mechanism between influencing factors and policy innovation diffusion results. Up to now, the main mechanisms of policy innovation diffusion generally accepted by academia include learning, imitation, socialization, competition and coercion. At the same time, the policy areas involved in policy innovation diffusion are increasingly diversified and rich.

1.2. The Latest Progress of Policy Innovation Diffusion Research

In recent years, the world's politics and economy have been undergoing unprecedented and profound changes. In order to adapt to the new challenges brought by the change of policy environment to the governments and people of various countries, more and more countries have sought new ways of policy combination in order to realize the optimal allocation of social resources and the

effective solution of public problems, as well as reduce the opportunity cost of policy implementation. While policy innovation activities have become an important form of policy practice in various countries, the research on policy innovation diffusion has also expanded and become one of the most mainstream and hot research topics in the international public administration field, with a large number of theoretical and empirical literature constantly emerging. By searching the literature published in international authoritative journals of Public Administration such as *Public Administration Review*, *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory*, *Public Administration* in recent years, we summarized the latest trends and progress of policy innovation diffusion research mainly focusing on the following aspects:

First, local policy innovation diffusion and diffusion path. The diffusion of policy innovation among different regions has always been the most basic issue discussed in policy innovation diffusion research. Among them, one of the researches exploring the policy innovation in the United States shows that, compared with the federal government, the state government has more autonomy and is the main policy innovator. And the federal government plays a more guiding role in the innovation of democratic election policy, immigration policy, anti-terrorism policy and other policies related to national security and social stability [4]. As for whether a policy innovation can diffuse and be adopted across states is closely related to economic development, the level of governance, and any other factors. For example, Jenkins and Krause respectively investigated the different roles played by factors such as regional wealth, education level, demographic structure, family structure and policy characteristics of neighbouring regions in influencing the innovation and diffusion of education policy, housing policy and urban climate policy [5][6].

Second, the internal relationship between policy innovation diffusion and individuals or organizations. The diffusion of a certain policy innovation among local governments not only depends on the decision of local governments, but also lies in the promotion of stakeholders or the active advocacy of individuals with clear demands. Different interest groups have different influences on innovation diffusion according to their own capabilities. However, based on the analysis of representative democracy and cooperative governance model, Sorensen pointed out that the collaboration and cooperation between policymakers and stakeholders is the key driver of policy innovation and innovation implementation [7]. At the organizational level, most of the research focuses on the relationship between policy innovation and organizational performance [8].

Third, research on the mechanism of policy innovation diffusion in China. Under the global trend of state decentralization, the discussion of policy innovation

diffusion in the non-Western world has increasingly highlighted the important practical significance and research value. While China, with the largest population and the second largest economy in the world, as well as features such as developing economy, authoritarian politics, and Confucian cultural, has attracted wide attention from academic circles and is used as a typical case to test the generation mechanism of policy innovation and the phenomenon of policy innovation diffusion.

1.3. Review of Policy Innovation Diffusion Research

At present, most research on policy innovation diffusion focus on the organizational level of local governments and the spatial and temporal diffusion of policy itself. In addition to discussing the influence of policy entrepreneurs on policy diffusion, few research have analysed the role that public managers within organizations may play in policy innovation diffusion. Significantly different from the organizational and personnel systems of western federal democracy, China's centralized cadre system profoundly shapes the innovation incentives of local officials and public managers. Therefore, it also created a huge space for refining the research perspective from organizations to individuals and deeply exploring the roles of public managers at different levels in policy innovation diffusion. In recent years, there have been research results that analyse and test the influence of government officials on the diffusion of innovation, some research on policy entrepreneurship have also begun to explore issues related to the performance of policy entrepreneurship functions by government officials. On the basis of summarizing these frontier achievements, the author will further clarify the research questions need to be answered in this field, in order to provide useful reference for promoting and enriching the research on policy innovation diffusion at the individual level.

2. RESEARCH PROGRESS ON THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN PUBLIC MANAGERS AND POLICY INNOVATION DIFFUSION

At present, researches on the relationship between public managers and policy innovation diffusion mainly focus on the influence of external transfer of public managers and the potential decisive role of their own professional characteristics. Due to the fact that the bureaucracies are firmly entrench themselves in their own constituencies in the political system of western countries, there are few researches on the transfer of public managers. Compared with western countries, under the personnel system of China's authoritarian system, the unified arrangement of officials by central or superior authorities becomes an exogenous determinant of

officials' geographical mobility, which provides an ideal environment for researchers to explore the policy innovation diffusion based on official geographical mobility. By established an agent network diffusion model, Yi et al. investigated the influence of official mobility on policy innovation diffusion in the district where they work. They pointed out that public managers within the government can act as change agents, as their career changes and migration between different districts can encourage them to bring policy innovations from the previous place to the new place of work, and named this phenomenon of policy innovation diffusion "portable innovation" [9]. Zhu & Meng based on a spatial panel analysis of China's 31 provinces' education and medical expenditure data, as well as provincial governors' mobility experience over the past 15 years, further confirmed that cross-district mobility can encourage local chief executives to integrate their work experience in their original workplace into their current position, thereby promoting the convergence of policy practices between the previous and current areas [10].

In addition, there are also some researches that break through the fixed model of leadership's influence on decision-making, and consider the role of grass-roots public managers in participating in the policy agenda and innovation diffusion. Such researches currently focus more on the comparison of grass-roots public managers and policy entrepreneurs. According to Gofen, as the front-line workers who interact directly with the public, provide public services and implement policies and regulations, grass-roots public managers are the key participants in the construction and reconstruction of policies [11]. These grass-roots bureaucrats are more likely to act as policy entrepreneurs because they are familiar with the field and the network of relationships in it, and are able to identify social needs and window of opportunity for action. Sometimes they are even willing to take the risk of providing help for public appeals they consider valuable [12]. Lavee & Cohen clearly proposed through case analysis that in addition to exercising administrative discretion in policy implementation, grass-roots managers may also cross the boundary between politics and administration, and directly influence policy design and innovation as policy entrepreneurs [13].

3. FUTURE TRENDS OF RESEARCH ON THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN PUBLIC MANAGERS AND POLICY INNOVATION DIFFUSION

It is an inevitable trend for policy innovation diffusion research to pay more attention to the role of change agents at the micro level. In the frontier field of policy innovation diffusion, research focusing on exploring the influence of public managers on the diffusion of policy innovation from the individual level has also appeared and received more and more attention.

However, in view of the limitations of current research, there are still plenty of research questions to be answered and confirmed in the future, whether to explore the logical relationship between external mobility or managers' personal qualities and policy innovation diffusion.

First, in terms of research on the influence of personal and professional characteristics of public managers, a clearer and more coherent model needs to be developed, which includes goals or rules that fundamentally drive the innovative behaviour of managers, the ability to obtain and process information, actions or decision-making motives and the political and social resources they have mastered, so as to provide a complete framework for systematic analysis of managers' participation and promotion of policy reform and innovation.

Secondly, in the research on leadership, on the one hand, we can combine investigation and qualitative analysis to further explore the mechanism behind the group effect of occupational cohort on the cross-district policy innovation diffusion, and investigate the underlying reasons that determine the motivation of innovation diffusion in the same group of decision-makers. On the other hand, investigate leadership style, leadership role as intermediate variables, compare the different performances of the same group of leaders with similar age and political rank in the diffusion of policy innovation under the influence of these factors.

Thirdly, in the research on grass-roots public managers, a future research direction is to explore how to help grass-roots managers overcome the limitations of perspective, power and resources brought by organizational hierarchy through system design, give full play to their role advantages, and make them more actively and effectively participate in and promote policy innovation.

Finally, as for the research on the cross-district mobility of administrative officials, while verifying the network framework established by existing researches, it is necessary to conduct research on the potential drawbacks of mobility, that is, local development strategies and policy choices may be alienated into the means for public managers to pursue their own promotion and career development, thus making the policy objectives deviate from the original purpose of serving the public. In the future, researchers can try to construct an analysis framework between the mobility and the alienation of innovation diffusion by examining the effectiveness of policy innovation diffusion and evaluating the governance performance brought about by the transfer of officials.

4. CONCLUSIONS

The research on policy innovation diffusion focus on why a government adopts a new policy and how the adoption of innovation diffuse across different levels and regions. This research has received extensive attention and discussion internationally since its rise in the 1970s, and has demonstrated a good explanatory power for the administrative reforms of Western countries through the increasingly rich theoretical and empirical research results. China's reform and opening-up over the past 40 years has also been a process of constant policy exploration, innovation and diffusion. On the basis of summarizing the research context and the latest progress of policy innovation diffusion, this paper focuses on the frontier issues and future trends of the research on the relationship between public managers and policy innovation diffusion, in order to provide reference for the future research in this field.

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