

This article belongs to the Special Issue Public sector Innovation - Conceptual and Methodological Implications

Guest Editors: Ann Karin Tennås Holmen (UiS), Maria Røhnebæk (INN)

Introduction to Special Issue Public sector Innovation - Conceptual and Methodological Implications

Maria Røhnebæk

Inland School of Business and Social Sciences
Inland Norway University of Applied Sciences
Email: maria.rohnebak@inn.no

Ann-Karin Tennås Holmen*

Faculty of Social Sciences
University of Stavanger, Norway
Email: annkarin.holmen@uis.no

*corresponding author

Introduction

In Western welfare state contexts, innovation is increasingly promoted as vital for addressing a range of societal problems. This has been expressed in research and public policies and has implications for the ways in which social science research is designed and carried out (De Vries et al., 2016; Osborne, 2013; Karakas, 2020; Forskningsrådet, 2018). Calls for innovation to address societal challenges imply that social science research is expected to play a more instrumental and active role in bringing about societal change, an idea often coined as expectations that bring a greater *impact*. Thus, research projects are increasingly expected to result in innovations or contribute to the realisation of innovations introduced and/or implemented by collaborating partners.

The aim of this special issue is to provide space for discussions and reflections on the conceptual and methodological implications of increased attention to innovation in public policies and services. This special issue includes articles that, in different ways, shed light on the complex relationship between research and innovation, focusing particularly on innovation in the public sector. Public sector innovation has emerged as a vital research field over the past two decades (Chen et al., 2019; De Vries et al., 2016; Fuglsang & Rønning, 2014; Hartley, 2005; Osborne & Brown, 2013), but fundamental conceptual and methodological aspects of research on public sector innovation deserve more attention.

Reflections and discussions on the conceptual and methodological issues related to innovation are needed for various reasons. Regarding the conceptual issues, one area of concern relates to the transfer of the innovation concept from a market context to the public sector. Moreover, the policy and research discourse on innovation has been criticised for carrying a positive normativity based on the assumption that innovation is largely desirable and inherently 'good' (Osborne, 2013). This may have limited the space for critical studies examining the contested and conflict aspects of innovation.

Furthermore, because research related to innovation tends to come with the expectations of researchers as contributors to innovations, various dilemmas may arise regarding researchers' roles and potential role conflicts. Being a researcher and contributor to innovation can pose challenges regarding objectivity, proximity and analytical distance. Research into and involvement in innovation may entail demanding balancing acts that deserve critical methodological reflection. However, those research processes that engage with innovation may also enable experimentation with new methodological approaches that can make valuable contributions to the rethinking of methodological principles in social science research.

Hence, the aim of this special issue is to further develop research dialogues concerning public sector innovation and shed light on themes that have not yet been sufficiently addressed, such as critical examinations of the concept of public sector innovation and its performativity, critical discussions of how the phenomena can be studied, and critical explorations of the linkages between research and innovation. The articles in this special issue contribute to illuminating how the policy and research discourse concerning public sector

innovation contains blind spots and challenges, but they also highlight the potential for developing future research avenues in this field.

This special issue presents a collection of articles grouped under two theme headings: 1) conceptualisation of public sector innovation and 2) the role of research and researchers in public sector innovation. We set the stage for these articles by briefly outlining the backdrop of the current public sector innovation discourse.

Public sector innovation

The early writings on public sector innovation served largely to set the agenda, focusing on expressing the arguments for *why* innovation is crucial for improvements in the public sector (Albury, 2005; Borins, 2001). Albury argued, for instance, that innovation 'is not an optional luxury but needs to be institutionalised as a deep value' (2005, p. 15). Starting from this premise, he outlined a framework that was meant to support the implementation of 'successful innovation in the public sector'. This, it was argued, relied on an understanding of the barriers to innovation and how they could be tackled. A range of studies and writings on public sector innovation have followed from these premises, leading a substantial part of public sector innovation research as centred on identifying the 'drivers and barriers' for innovation (De Vries et al., 2016; Ringholm & Holmen, 2019). Identifying the drivers and barriers was, for instance, central in the PUBLIN project, which was the first research project concerning public sector innovation supported by the EU through the fifth work programme (Koch et al., 2006).

Researching the 'drivers and barriers' of public sector innovation can be important in many ways. For example, it contributes to the generation of knowledge about the specific characteristics of the public sector context for innovation compared with a private sector context (Halvorsen et al., 2005). A need for more context-sensitive innovation models in the public sector has been identified (Hartley, 2005, 2013). Understanding the specific drivers and barriers that frame innovation in the public sector can be helpful here. Moreover, research into the drivers and barriers may result in valuable insights for policymakers and practitioners on how to strengthen the public sector's capacity for innovation. Nevertheless, when searching for these 'drivers and barriers', the innovation concept itself remains unproblematised, and it is somewhat uncritically accepted as something that is desirable to strive for.

(Ringholm & Holmen, 2019; Osborne & Brown, 2011). The contested and conflicted aspects of innovation become linked to the surrounding ‘barriers’ rather than to potential controversies embedded in the content and outcomes of innovation itself. The need to highlight and analyse the underpinning discursive aspects of using the term ‘innovation’ in the public sector is a central concern that is addressed in this special issue (see particularly the article by Langergaard and Fuglsang).

Approaching public sector innovation as a discourse evokes discussions of how power is embedded in the language we use. The term discourse can be largely linked to the work of Michel Foucault, who understood discourse as ‘practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak’ (Foucault, 1972, p. 49). This means that the language we use does not reflect the world to which it refers, but it plays an active part in creating and recreating the social world. Although this may be self-evident, we are often not fully aware of the complex ways in which language is performative. Thus, we do not always see how certain ways of defining and conceptualising the world set the premise for the way in which we perceive things and act.

In the early 1990s, the term ‘development’ and the language distinguishing between ‘developing and developed’ nations were critically examined through discourse analyses, in what became known as ‘postdevelopment theories’ (Escobar, 1991; Ferguson, 1990). These postdevelopment theories challenged the way in which the vocabulary of ‘development’ produced and reproduced practices that continued to worsen the situation for developing countries, contributing to an enlargement—rather than narrowing—of the gaps between poorer and wealthy nations. By deconstructing the development discourse, these theorists asked for ‘alternatives to development’ rather than merely searching for ‘development alternatives’ (Escobar, 1991). We can draw parallels to the innovation concept and its increasingly widespread use in public policies, public sector organisations and society at large. There is a need for discursive approaches to the concept that can create awareness and raise discussions on what kind of priorities and practices this language enables and which voices, concerns and practices the innovation discourse may displace. Although there are reasons to explore and search for ‘innovation alternatives’, there might also be reasons to discuss ‘alternatives to innovation’.

As described, the normative underlying premises have shaped the academic literature on public sector innovation, which has limited the room for critical discussions. First, the discourse has been shaped by the focus on identifying 'drivers and barriers', which has implicitly assumed innovation as being desirable. Moreover, the innovation concept has gained ground through academic literature aiming to create awareness that innovation in the public sector may be more widespread than we tend to think (see, for instance, Ringholm et al., 2013). As the argument goes, the public sector may be just as innovative as its private counterparts, but other terms such as 'renewal', 'reforms' and 'improvement' have been more commonly used in the past. The shift of vocabulary has led to increased awareness concerning the need for measuring public sector innovation (Arundel et al., 2019) and to the more specific developments of public sector 'innovation barometers', which we find in Denmark¹ and in Norway². Altogether, this adds to a growing innovation discourse that increasingly shapes our understanding of what constitutes suitable practices for ensuring quality, effectiveness and viability in the public sector.

We do not suggest that the increased focus on public sector innovation is wrong, but we invite more nuanced, problematising and critical academic discussions on innovation, including scrutiny of the concept itself. This special issue is meant as a contribution in this regard, which resonates with calls and arguments from other scholars such as Osborne and Brown (2011). They frame the innovation discourse as an 'innovation imperative' and problematised how this imperative is guided by an overly positive normativity (Osborne & Brown, 2013). Moreover, Langergaard (2012) has critically discussed how the 'publicness' of public sector innovation has been sidelined when compared with the focus on innovation. These issues have also been raised and discussed by Kattel (2015) and by Ringholm and Holmen (2019) who problematised how the underlying dichotomy of drivers and barriers may conceal the power aspects of the innovation concept, limiting the ability to see how the impact of innovations may be perceived differently depending on the context and positioning of the actors. Similar concerns have been raised by Fuglsang and Rønning (2014), who also addressed the often conflicted nature

¹ <https://www.innovationbarometer.org/>

² <https://www.ks.no/fagomrader/innovasjon/innovasjonsledelse/innovasjonsbarometeret-for-kommunal-sektor/>

of public sector innovations and consequent need for more contextual research strategies.

We find that the need for critical and reflexive academic debates on public sector innovation becomes increasingly important as the concept also becomes ever more embedded and entangled with social science research practices. The emergence of the innovation discourse brings forward 'innovation' as a central (catch-) phrase in policy documents, in tenders for commissioned research and in various research funding schemes nationally and internationally. We see a new landscape for social science research, one where researchers are increasingly expected to take on roles as innovators or contributors to innovation in collaborative arrangements. This connects to the developments in the public sector innovation literature. Initially, the literature focused on bringing attention to the public sector as being (potentially) innovative itself rather than merely a facilitator and funder of innovation in private industries. To some extent, this assumes a somewhat introverted approach towards innovation as something that takes place within public sector organisations.

However, the focus on open, networked and collaborative approaches to innovation has become substantial and largely influential, captured in various phrases such as collaborative innovation (Bommert, 2010; Hartley et al., 2013; Sørensen & Torfing, 2011), open innovation (Chesbrough, 2006), service ecosystems/innovation ecosystems (Chen et al., 2019), cocreation and coproduction (Voorberg et al., 2015), codesign (Bason, 2017, 2018) and innovation networks (Gallouj et al., 2013). The arguments for more collaborative and networked forms of innovation are often linked to the need to meet complex and cross-cutting societal problems that cannot be handled by singular actors or within specific services or sectors. Efforts to bring together a diversity of actors also imply expectations that social science researchers play a more active role as participants rather than mere observers. The implications of this, when it comes to changing roles for research and researchers, are also issues we want to raise with this special issue, and we present contributions that shed light on the experiences and reflections from the intersection of research and innovation (see particularly the article by Gulbrandsen & Høiland).

The collection of articles

The articles collected in this volume approach public sector innovation from different points of departure. Three articles critically examine and discuss the concept of innovation and its implications for research and discourses on public sector innovation, examining how innovation links to research and to shifts in researcher roles. The two articles on the innovation concept are mainly theoretical, but one draws on empirical case vignettes as illustrations (see Fuglsang). The article addressing the roles of research in public sector innovation is based on the findings from a case study.

In the opening article, which addresses the concept of innovation, Langergaard calls for more critical reflections and discussions of the implications involved in labelling renewal and change in the public sector as 'innovation'; she highlights the need for research dialogues that are more aware of what conceptualising involves— that is, how the use of language and labels directs our attention and shapes the way we perceive the world and, consequently, how we act in it. The author points to a lack of coherence in the way 'innovation' is understood in the literature, and she problematises the lack of explicit reflections on the diverse epistemological bases underpinning diverse forms of research in this field.

The article suggests that a way forward is to encourage reflections and discussions along three dimensions of conceptualisation: epistemological, pragmatic and normative. The epistemological dimension relates to the question of how knowledge is understood, which opens up reflections on how the concept of innovation links to phenomena in the world. Questions of epistemology also link to reflections on the nature of different forms of research concerning public sector innovation: Does it aim to describe, explain, predict or direct? The pragmatic dimension deals with the more practical or instrumental aspects of public sector innovation. It links to discussions on how to make innovation in the public sector happen, which incentives are appropriate, how to identify and enhance drivers and how to tackle barriers and so forth. Finally, the normative dimension links to the value-laden aspects of the innovation concept and how to deal with this from a research perspective. This article connects this normative dimension to theories on value creation and debates on public value. Although Langergaard's article sets the stage for discussions on conceptualising public sector innovation

along three dimensions, she also underlines that the three dimensions are closely interconnected.

The second article seeks to advance public sector innovation research by drawing on theoretical resources that have been scarcely integrated in the literature so far. More specifically, Fuglsang introduces practice theory and argues that a practice-based approach to public innovation may enable more contextual studies of innovation that are suitable for capturing the often unpredictable and conflicting nature of innovation processes. A practice-based approach explores innovation as embedded in practices, which, in simplified terms, are understood as routine ways of doing things. The article explores what a practice-based approach to innovation means and seeks to grapple with the question of how innovation tends to be ingrained in practices while also disrupting these. The article focuses on innovation at the level of public service organisations, outlining two intertwined approaches: the Apollonian and the Dionysian.

The Apollonian practice is the purposeful speaking of actors' plans and interests, as well as the rules of the game. In this type of innovation, actors align around a common idea structure. The process is formalised, structured and sequential. The Dionysian practice is a more spontaneous, bricolage-like approach that brings people together in an open space of innovation. Using two case vignettes, Fuglsang shows how these modes of innovation are interdependent in a complex and paradoxical way that poses challenges for management. Although we often expect innovation processes in the public sector to be universal, high-scale and highly aligned with policymakers' decisions and ideas, this contribution shows that actors at different levels in public sector organizations may incorporate other ideas and considerations into the processes, thus making them more unpredictable. The practical lesson is that innovation leaders need to take into account the specific elements of each innovation process. There is no 'one size fits all' when it comes to innovation strategies.

Hence, the first two articles address and discuss how to conceptualise, theorise and study public sector innovation and deal with public sector innovation as a research field. The remaining article addresses the role of research in public sector innovation.

Gulbrandsen and Høiland take a critical point of departure, challenging the assumptions that public sector innovation is enabled through the coupling of research/researchers and public sector actors. The authors examine these assumptions in the context of the Norwegian Labour and Welfare Services (NAV) by analysing the role of research in five innovation cases. The analysis explores the driving forces of the innovation projects and categorises the role of research into three phases of the processes. The analysis shows that research contributes either by providing new knowledge for immature ideas or innovations in the process or by delivering numbers and narratives to secure funding and legitimacy. Three idealised relationships between research and innovation frame the case analysis; the cases are assessed in terms of whether they represent examples of 1) research to innovation, 2) research on innovation and 3) research in innovation. The findings are used to denote how research can contribute to these three forms of transformation in innovation processes. The current article contributes by conceptualising the potentially different roles of research in public sector innovation processes.

Overall, this special issue sheds light on the complex relationship between research and innovation in the public sector. The contributions address public sector innovation as a research field and provide insights, theories and perspectives on how to study, conceptualise and theorise phenomena in this field. Second, the contributions address public sector innovation as diverse practices, providing insights and concepts that facilitate a discussion concerning the roles of research and researchers in these innovation practices. As editors, we hope that this special issue will encourage a continuous discussion about the conceptual and methodological issues of public sector innovation.

References

- Albury, D. (2005). Fostering innovation in public services. *Public Money and Management*, 25(1), 51-56.
- Arundel, A., Bloch, C., & Ferguson, B. (2019). Advancing innovation in the public sector: Aligning innovation measurement with policy goals. *Research Policy*, 48(3), 789-798.
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.respol.2018.12.001>
- Bason, C. (2017). *Leading public design: Discovering human-centred governance*. Policy Press. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt1t88xq5>
- Bason, C. (2018). *Leading public sector innovation: Co-creating for a better society*. Policy Press. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv1fxh1w>
- Bommert, B. (2010). Collaborative innovation in the public sector. *International Public Management Review*, 11(1), 15-33.
- Borins, S. (2001). Encouraging innovation in the public sector. *Journal of Intellectual Capital*, 2(3), 310-319.
<https://doi.org/10.1108/14691930110400128>
- Chen, J., Walker, R. M., & Sawhney, M. (2019). Public service innovation: A typology. *Public Management Review*, 1-22.
<https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3410084>
- Chesbrough, H. (2006). Open innovation: A new paradigm for understanding industrial innovation. *Open Innovation: Researching a New Paradigm*, 400, 0-19.
- De Vries, H., Bekkers, V., & Tummers, L. (2016). Innovation in the public sector: A systematic review and future research agenda. *Public Administration*, 94(1), 146-166. <https://doi.org/10.1111/padm.12209>
- Escobar, A. (1991). Anthropology and the development encounter: The making and marketing of development anthropology. *American Ethnologist*, 18(4), 658-682.
<https://doi.org/10.1525/ae.1991.18.4.02a00020>
- Ferguson, J. (1990). The anti-politics machine. *The Anthropology of the State: A Reader*, 270-286.
- Forskningsrådet (2018) *Innovasjon i offentlig sektor. Forskningsrådets strategi 2018-2023*. Oslo.
- Foucault, M. (1989). *The archaeology of knowledge*. Routledge.
- Fuglsang, L., & Rønning, R. (2014). Introduction: Framing innovation in public service sectors: A contextual approach. In *Framing innovation in public service sectors* (pp. 15-31). Routledge.
<https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315885612-8>

- Gallouj, F., Rubalcaba, L., & Windrum, P. (2013). Public-private innovation networks in services. Edward Elgar Publishing.
<https://doi.org/10.4337/9781781002667>
- Halvorsen, T., Hauknes, J., Miles, I., & Røste, R. (2005). On the differences between public and private sector innovation. Publin Report D9. NIFU STEP. Available online at: <https://nifu.brage.unit.no/nifu-xmlui/handle/11250/226535>
- Hartley, J. (2005). Innovation in governance and public services: Past and present. *Public Money and Management*, 25(1), 27-34.
- Hartley, J. (2013). Public and private features of innovation. *Handbook of Innovation in Public Services*, 44-59.
<https://doi.org/10.4337/9781849809757.00011>
- Hartley, J., Sørensen, E., & Torfing, J. (2013). Collaborative innovation: A viable alternative to market competition and organizational entrepreneurship. *Public Administration Review*, 73(6), 821-830.
<https://doi.org/10.1111/puar.12136>
- Karakas, C. (2020) Public sector Innovation. Policy brief European Parliamentary Research Service.
- Kattel, R. (2015). What would Max Weber say about public-sector innovation? *NISPAcee Journal of Public Administration and Policy*, 8(1), 9-19.
<https://doi.org/10.1515/nispa-2015-0001>
- Koch, P., Cunningham, P., Schwabsky, N., & Hauknes, J. (2006). Innovation in the public sector: Summary and policy recommendations.
- Langergaard, L. L. (2012). Innovating the publicness of the public sector: A critical, philosophical discussion of public sector innovation [PhD dissertation, Roskilde University].
- Osborne, S. P., & Brown, L. (2011). Innovation, public policy and public services delivery in the UK. The word that would be king? *Public Administration*, 89(4), 1335-1350. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9299.2011.01932.x>
- Osborne, S. P., & Brown, L. (2013). Introduction: Innovation in public services In S. P. Osborne, L. Brown, & D. Alexander (Eds.), *Handbook of innovation in public services*. Edward Elgar.
<https://doi.org/10.4337/9781849809757.00007>
- Ringholm, T., & Holmen, A. K. T. (2019). Innovasjon i møtet mellom idé og institusjon. In A. K. T. Holmen & T. Ringholm (Eds.), *Innovasjon møter kommune*. Oslo Cappelen Damm akademisk.

- Ringholm, T., Teigen, H., & Aarsæther, N. (2013). Innovative kommuner. Cappelen Damm akademisk. 13-30
- Sørensen, E., & Torfing, J. (2011). Enhancing collaborative innovation in the public sector. *Administration & Society*, 43(8), 842-868.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0095399711418768>
- Voorberg, W. H., Bekkers, V. J. J. M., & Tummers, L. G. (2015). A systematic review of co-creation and co-production: Embarking on the social innovation journey. *Public Management Review*, 17(9), 1333-1357.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/14719037.2014.930505>