
Introduction: innovation in public services

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INTRODUCTION

The general topic of innovation has inspired vast amounts of research, theorizing, speculation, and wishful thinking . . . Innovation is advocated . . . by sundry philosophers, journalists, politicians, industrialists and social reformers. (Kimberly 1981, p. 84)

Kimberly's judgement on the pre-eminence of innovation as a concept reflected no doubt the results of two decades of tectonic societal change throughout the 1960s and 1970s. Yet it resonates also with the place that innovation currently occupies in public policy and public services management in the early twenty-first century (Aldbury 2005). Since the early 1980s, it has become one of the key 'buzzwords' beloved by policy makers and practitioners around the world (Borins 2001; Eshima et al. 2001) – leading one commentator to dismiss it as 'policy chic' (Behn 1997). Indeed, it has an appeal that seems hard to argue with. It combines a determination to reform and improve the delivery of public services with a whiff of 'state of the art' business practice. Surely no one can disagree with such a heady cocktail?

In the UK, for example, the growing dominion of innovation as an influential concept in public policy can be traced back to the early 1980s and it has continued ever since. In 2008 the Cabinet Office exhorted that 'government must embrace a new culture that celebrates local innovation' (Cabinet Office 2008, p. 7). Likewise the highly influential White Paper *Innovation Nation* asserted that innovation in public services 'will be essential to meet the economic and social challenges of the 21st century' (Department of Innovation, Universities and Skills (DIUS) 2008a, p. 8; see also Audit Commission 2007).

What is curious is that this pre-eminence has developed over the past three decades despite the absence of an evidence base. Until recently, comparatively little was known of the contingencies, processes and impact of innovation in public services (Osborne and Brown 2011). As a consequence both public policy and academic research have been predicated upon a diffuse view of the nature and process of innovation in relation to public services, despite repeated calls for evidence-based (or at least, evidence-influenced) public policy (e.g. Nutley et al. 2007). The effect of this has been to leave policy makers and public service managers with little guidance upon how to manage the challenging process of innovating in service delivery; the UK *Innovation Hub* report published in 2008 going so far as to state that it is 'too early to be prescriptive about managing innovation' (DIUS 2008b, p. 19). Whilst there may indeed still be gaps in our knowledge, this book aims to provide a framework for understanding and supporting innovation in public services. For the first time, it brings together research on innovation in public services from around the globe.

This introductory chapter is intended to provide a guide to the remainder of the book. It will begin by exploring the challenges that we face in understanding innovation and

argue that there are several key issues that need to be addressed in developing further this understanding. The second part will then provide an overview to the rest of the volume and the key issues that it addresses.

INNOVATION IN PUBLIC SERVICES: THREE FLAWS

Our initial premise is that there are three flaws that have undermined our understanding of innovation in public services. These are:

- a flawed understanding of the nature of innovation;
- the positioning of innovation as a normative ‘good’ in public policy and resultant prescriptive policy making; and
- the adoption of an inappropriate model of innovation from the manufacturing, rather than the services, sector.

The first two of these flaws are addressed here whilst the third is the subject of a separate chapter.²

A Flawed Understanding of the Nature of Innovation

The study and practice of innovation in public services were beset over the latter half of the twentieth century by persistent misunderstandings of its nature. In the UK, for example, it has been subjected to mistaken characterisations from two perspectives. First, the Conservative government of the 1980s drew upon Porter’s theory of ‘competitive advantage’ (Porter 1985) as the central mechanism through which to drive improvement in public services delivery. This mechanism placed innovation at the heart of the effective workings of the market in order to achieve precisely such ‘competitive advantage’ (Nelson 1993). However, like much of the New Public Management movement, this approach drew upon management experience and theory derived from the manufacturing sector, with a concentration upon the development of finite products in a stable market environment and ‘based upon assumptions drawn from manufacturing industry’ – services as such were considered by Porter to be ‘fragmented industries’ and received scant attention in the model (Nankervis 2005, p.111). This led to an approach to the development and support of innovation in public services by central government that subsequently concentrated upon the design of ‘innovation products’ rather than ‘service processes’. This is explored further below.³

The policies of the subsequent UK Labour government of 1997–2010 were affected by a different problem, however. The place of innovation in the public policy debate has never disappeared – indeed, ‘innovation’ was at the core of that Labour government’s agenda since the publication of the *Modernising Government* White Paper (Cabinet Office 1999). This describes innovation as a process of the ‘*continuous improvement* in central government policy making and [public] service delivery’ (para. 4.9, our emphasis) – a characterisation contained in a series of subsequent policy documents – for example, House of Commons Select Committee of Public Accounts (2003), Audit Commission (2007), Cabinet Office (2008) and DIUS (2008a).

This formulation is at odds with the extant innovation research literature which situates not continuous improvement but rather ‘newness’ or *discontinuous change* at the heart of the innovation process (e.g. Tushman and Anderson 1985; Herbig 1991; de Brentani 2001; Johannessen et al. 2001) – and that this is what differentiates its managerial challenges from those of incremental organisational change or service development. This view of innovation is clearly at odds with that employed within the current UK policy framework and elsewhere, notwithstanding the guidance of the academic advisors to the UK government who have continued to emphasise both the complexity of innovation and the centrality of discontinuous change to it as a process (e.g. Mulgan and Albury 2003; Hartley 2006).

Such a re-conceptualisation, we argue, is an injustice to the intricacy of managing both innovative and incremental service development. Both are essential for reforming and improving public services – but both require different approaches to their facilitation and sustenance. Public policy does an injustice to both by conflating them together. Even the work of Mulgan and Albury (2003) continues to conflate incremental innovation (discussed further below) with incremental service development and organisational change. This is a fatal flaw. It misunderstands the differing challenges that service development and service innovation pose. It is a quite different task, for example, to support staff in developing their existing skills than to tell them that these skills have been made redundant and that they need to re-train to retain their post (if it has not been made redundant too, of course). The distinctive nature, and challenges, of innovation, as opposed to service development or change (such as the management of risk, uncertainty and failure), become lost in such sophistry.

This has two implications for public policy. First, we need to know whether the public service reform process is based upon incremental development or upon innovation because it helps us understand the trajectory of this reform and to evaluate its strengths and limitations. Secondly, it matters at a very fundamental level to the public service managers and staff embroiled within the reform process. The management of innovation is an entirely different task from the management of developmental change, as suggested above. If public service managers and staff (whether they are situated in the public, private or third sector) are to be provided with the requisite managerial tools to carry out their roles effectively, then it is essential that public policy is based upon an accurate understanding of the innovation process, rather than conflating it with the rather different, if as important, process of developmental change.

Innovation as a Normative Good

Recent UK papers for Society for Local Authority Chief Executives (SOLACE) (Thomas 2008) and for the Innovation Unit (Horne 2008) have urged the normative need for innovation – yet with no clear statement of what this means, beyond ‘the need to improve existing services’ (Horne 2008, p. 6). In a similar vein Westall, focusing on the role of social enterprise in innovation, describes innovation as ‘changes in products, services and processes . . . to meet new needs in new ways’ (Westall 2007, p. 4).

Contained within this discourse has been the enduring assumption that any particular innovation must, *a priori*, be ‘a good thing’ – because the overall process of innovation is

'a good thing'. Yet these are statements of an entirely different order. One can agree that 'innovation' as a process is essential for the improvement of public services – but that is not the same as asserting that any specific innovation must therefore be positive, simply because it is 'an innovation'.

This conceptualisation of innovation as a normative good can also be found embedded in the dialogue about 'social innovation'. Harris and Albury (2009) situate this as innovation 'for the social and public good' (p. 16, our emphasis), compounding the assumption that innovation must always be a positive boon. Social innovation, it seems, can only ever be such a boon and so any opposition to it must therefore be reactionary and somehow 'not' in the public good (for a more detailed exploration of the nature of 'social innovation' see Phills et al. 2008 and Murray et al. 2010).

However, as Hartley (2005) has noted, whilst innovation and improvement have often been assumed to be synonymous this is by no means always the case. Consider briefly the innovative technology that has allowed the development of biometric identity cards. This is clearly both a technical and social innovation. Yet where does that leave the large numbers of citizens complaining that this innovation is not so much a normative good as an infringement of their civil liberties and another step in the creation of a 'big brother' society – or even those scientists who argue that the technology itself is flawed and easy to circumnavigate (Lips et al. 2009)? Similarly the 'pin-down' and 'regression therapy' approaches to residential social care for young people in the 1990s were undoubtedly innovative in their nature – yet few would not argue that they breached fundamental human rights and as such had no place in the repertoire of social work, no matter how 'innovative' they might have been (Levy and Kahan 1991; Kirkwood 1993; Kendrick 1998).

Such over-reaching assertions about innovation do little to facilitate appropriate innovation in public services, nor do they acknowledge the potential for negative effects of innovation, or the challenges that this poses for its support and management. Van de Ven (1988) has made this important point more broadly: the way in which innovation and success have become seen as interchangeable. Noting that innovation 'is often viewed as a good thing because the new idea must be useful' he argues that innovations that do not produce such a normative improvement are subsequently redefined – '[they] are not normally called innovations, they are usually called mistakes' (1988, p. 105). The difficulty with such normative assumptions is that they do nothing for our understanding of the innovation process in public services – and potentially hinder the guidance that can be offered to policy makers and practitioners about the promotion, support and management of appropriate and effective innovation in public services. Innovation is vital to the provision of effective and responsive public services. However, its support and management require a nuanced approach that acknowledges that not all positive change is always innovative and that not all innovative change is always beneficial. We will now present a framework that we argue offers precisely such a nuanced and engaged approach to understanding innovation in public services.

UNDERSTANDING INNOVATION IN PUBLIC SERVICES

The Nature of Innovation

The appraisal of UK public policy around innovation and public services above noted that there was a lack of precision about what is actually meant by innovation and that there was a normative tendency that assumed innovative activity must be a positive – and that this approach was also part of a somewhat circular definition of an innovation. Both these limitations can also be found in the research literature. Membretti (2007) and Meeuwisse (2008), for example, both evaluate innovation in public services without any clear definition of what is meant by ‘innovation’. The European Union PUBLIN programme on innovation in public services (Koch and Hauknes 2005) includes impressive reviews of the private and public sector innovation literature (e.g. Halvorsen et al. 2005; Roste 2005), yet the programme is also disappointing in its conceptualisation of innovation. Halvorsen et al. (2005), for example, initially define it simply as ‘changes in behaviour’ (p. 2), later refining this to the ‘implementation of a conscious programme of change to gain certain effects or results’ (p. 63) – a definition subsequently adopted by the programme as a whole. The problem with such a broad definition of innovation is two-fold. First, it assumes that innovation must be a conscious process, yet this is often not the case. The commercial development of ‘Post-It Notes’, for example, was certainly an innovation, but it was entirely an accidental by-product of a search for another product (Peters and Waterman 1982). Just as with change more generally, innovation can be an emergent as well as a planned process – and for many public services, change and/or innovation can be thrust upon them by political decisions or by ‘accidental invention’ as much as a conscious determination to address a ‘performance gap’ (Golden 1990). Secondly, it falls prey to the conflation of innovation and incremental development identified earlier, with similar results.

There is, however, a substantial literature that explores the nature of innovation – and that could provide an important input into the policy process. Contemporary innovation theory thus differentiates between four modes of change to products and services – three innovative modes and one developmental (Garcia and Calantone 2002). The first is *radical innovation* – a comparatively rare event that transforms the entire societal paradigm of production (classic examples being the replacement of canals by the railways in the industrial revolution and the creation of the World Wide Web). The second type is *architectural innovation*. This results in changes to both organisational skills and competencies and to the market/needs that an innovation is addressing – but within the existing production paradigm (Henderson and Clark 1990). The third type of innovation is often called *incremental innovation*. The term ‘incremental’ here is slightly misleading. Such innovation still involves discontinuous change to products or services. However, it takes place within the existing production paradigm and affects either organisational skills and competencies or the market/needs that the innovation is addressing, not both (Garcia and Calantone 2002). The fourth type of change is *product or service development*, that builds upon existing skills or markets/needs and may well involve significant organisational learning – but that does not involve any element of ‘newness’ or discontinuity (Sundbo 1997).

In differentiating these four types of change it is important not to fall victim to the

above flaw of assuming any normative element to the discussion. Over time a series of non-innovative developments can be as significant for a service as one incident of innovation, whilst incremental innovations may be more significant or enduring than architectural ones. The central issue here is to understand the different policy contexts and approaches to their management that different types of change and innovation require. One size does not 'fit all'.

This approach to understanding innovation has been explored within the public services literature also. Osborne (1998)⁴ has developed this approach to understanding innovation in public services. Whilst not including the 'radical' innovation category above, it differentiates between total (architectural) innovation and two types of incremental innovation (expansive and evolutionary) – as well as differentiating innovation '*per se*' from gradual service development. Such an approach, we believe, offers a more effective framework for conceptualising innovation in public services and for driving forward both meaningful research and evidence-influenced public policy making and public services management.

The Source of Innovation

The traditional model of innovation has long argued in favour of individual agency as the source of innovation – the 'hero innovator' model popularised by Peters and Waterman (1982) or the assertions of management guru Drucker (1985) that '[e]ntrepreneurs innovate'. Roberts and King (1996) developed this approach in the context of public sector organisations (PSOs). Based upon extensive psychological testing they developed a model of the 'public entrepreneur' as tenacious and goal driven, working long hours, willing to take risks, confident and skilled in using political connections. More sophisticated versions of this approach have moved beyond 'simple' individual agency to explore the interaction between the individual and his or her organisation (Jelinek and Schoonhoven 1990) – and there are also a number of such studies in relation to public services (e.g. Barlett and Dibben 2002; Windrum 2008).

Useful though these individual approaches are, they often lack an organisational or institutional context for public services (Praill and Baldwin 1988). In this context, two areas of research on public services innovation are important. On the one hand, both Ferlie et al. (1989) and Baldock and Evers (1991) have emphasised the importance of the organisational locus of innovation: top-down innovation is primarily concerned with organisational and service efficiency whilst bottom-up innovation is primarily concerned with organisational and service effectiveness. On the other hand, the work of Borins (2001) and Crosby and Bryson (2005) has emphasised the importance not only of individual agency but also of the 'innovation sponsor' who (at the political and/or organisational level) provides the mandate and space for innovative activity, including the risks that it involves. In such a context the sponsorship of senior managers and/or politicians is an essential pre-condition of innovation. They may not need to sanction each individual project but a mandate and culture of innovation must exist to permit staff to engage in the risks (and likelihood of failure) that innovation invariably involves.

Latterly, research and theory upon the sources of innovation has also shifted from the organisational locus to that of the environment. Increasingly research has emphasised the

importance of an open systems and institutional understanding of the sources of innovation. In relation to services, this explicitly acknowledges the importance of organisational and institutional environmental sensitivity (Tether 2003); the need to work across horizontal networks in services provision rather than maintain a closed organisational boundary (Ahuja 2000; Brown and Duguid 2000; Chesbrough 2003); and the centrality of service users as a prime source of innovation (Alam 2006; Von Hippel 2007). This has led to models of innovation facilitation that are embedded precisely in this open systems orientation and that look outward from the organisation or service rather than internally (e.g. Santonen et al. 2007).

Such approaches can also be identified in research upon public services innovation. A major contribution of the PUBLIN programme on public services innovation has been to draw attention to this open systems and institutional context of innovation (e.g. Roste 2005). Osborne et al. (2008) have also emphasised the importance of the institutional context for the innovative capacity of third sector organisations, whilst Windrum and Garcia-Goni (2008), Considine et al. (2009) and Van Buuren and Loorbach (2009) have all explored the importance of organisational, environmental and policy networks for innovation. Brown (2007) has also examined the significance of the regional clustering of public service innovations for their sustainability. Finally, Walker (2007) has brought the environmental and organisational perspectives together for PSOs through use of the concept of 'organisational–environmental configuration'.

This research provides us with a more sophisticated understanding of the sources of innovation and their contingencies than has been found in public policy and public services delivery to date. These ideas are explored further in this volume. Overall, it offers us a more sophisticated view of the role and management of innovation in public services delivery than has hitherto been the case. Such a view is, we argue, vital to researchers and students of public policy making and public services delivery, as well as to policy makers, civil servants and the managers of public services themselves.

A GUIDE TO READING THIS BOOK

This book is intended both for the inquisitive student and practitioner and for the researcher. A systematic reading will provide an overview of the key issues in innovation in public services and a multi-disciplinary approach to their examination. Alternatively the book can be treated as a resource. Each chapter is self-contained in its contribution and can be read in its own right to provide a novel perspective on innovation in public services. The choice of approach is, as they say, yours.

The book is structured in six parts, followed by a concluding chapter. Part I examines the context for innovation in public services and situates it within trajectories of public service reform. The opening chapter of Joe Wallis and Shaun Goldfinch presents a global perspective upon this, and Laurence E. Lynn, Jr then teases out some of the linkages, and contradictions, in the relationship between public services reform and innovation in public services. Jean Hartley then moves on in this contextual section to explore the state of our knowledge about innovation in public services. In particular she unravels the complexities of the relationship between innovation in the public and private sectors. Stephen Osborne and Ian Miles conclude this section with two chapters

exploring the contribution of services theory to understanding innovation in public services.

Part II then goes on to explore the change management challenges that innovation presents for public services. Ian Colville and Mike Carter provide an over-arching framework for understanding organisational change and its management, whilst Kerry Brown and Jennifer Waterhouse provide a 'state-of-the-art' review of current approaches to change management. John Bryson and Barbara Crosby conclude this part of the book by exploring what to do 'when stakeholders matter' and the complexities of stakeholder engagement in the innovation process.

Part III moves on to examine the core managerial challenges that innovation presents for public services. Brian Head starts by tackling the issue of evidence-based policy making and its implications for innovation in public services, whilst Osborne and Brown raise some key issues about the governance of risk in innovation in public services – they argue for a holistic and transparent approach rather than a technocratic one. There are then four chapters that look at the strategic, entrepreneurial, leadership and strategic roles. Both Zoe Radnor and her colleagues and Roberts and Longley explore the role that entrepreneurship and individual agency can play in public service innovation, whilst James Svara explores the role of leadership in successful innovations in local government in the US. Paul Joyce takes a more rational view of the issue, exploring strategic planning approaches to innovation and their impact upon public services. Part III concludes with two chapters reviewing distinct but important issues. Edler and Uyerra examine the public procurement process and the extent to which it can inhibit or enable innovation in public services. Finally, Macaulay and Norris engage with the difficult issue of the ethics of innovation in public services.

Part IV then moves to review the specific issue of information and communications technology (ICT) and e-government – both as innovations in public services in their own right and as enablers of other innovative developments in public services. Victor Bekkers reviews the potential of ICT as a source of innovation, Valentina Mele analyses the public policy context of innovation and its import for public services, and Rob Wilson and his colleagues examine a specific case where ICT-enabled services were an innovation in their own right, in the context of services for older people.

Part V next engages with the important issues of collaboration, networks and the co-production of innovation in public services, both with service users and third sector organisations. Jacob Torfing provides an important conceptual framework to understand 'collaborative innovation' and Tony Kinder looks at the inter-organisational dynamics of innovation in a collaborative context. Mary-Lee Rhodes then offers a complex systems view of innovation before Myrna Mandell and Robyn Keast and Jenny Lewis and her colleagues present network-based approaches to innovation – in the context of public service delivery and public policy making respectively. This part concludes with a group of chapters looking at third sector and user involvement in public services innovation. Kirsty Strokosch presents an important framework to understand the roles of both of these groups in innovation. The dynamics of third sector involvement are then considered in three chapters by Osborne and his colleagues, Paul Windrum, and Celine Chew and Fergus Lyon. Finally, the role of users and citizens in innovation in public services is approached by two important chapters by Birgit Jæger and by Michelle Farr.

Part VI contains six case studies of innovation in practice, all examining different issues. First, Gill Harvey returns to the issue of evidence-based policy making and considers what it might mean in practice; Paul Cunningham engages with the process of innovation in the context of the health service and Richard Walker explores the impact of organisational factors upon the innovative capacity of local governments. This part ends with three final case studies – of the challenges of structural innovations in the context of local government by Rhys Andrews and George Boyne, and two perspectives upon the crucial issue of the diffusion of innovations in public services and their sustainability in the context of the UK health service, by James Barlow and by Trisha Greenhalgh and her colleagues.

The book closes with a concluding chapter by the editors, reviewing what we know, and what we still need to know, about innovation in public services.

NOTES

1. The first part of this chapter has been abridged and developed from Osborne and Brown (2011).
2. See chapter 4.
3. See note 2, above.
4. See also chapter 26.

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