How can we…? Connecting inventive social research with social and government innovation

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In their introduction the editors argue that inventive approaches to social research combine "the doing, representing and intervening into social life" (Marres et al, ppxx). They emphasise how social life – and research – exists in the making and foreground why inventive approaches should be experimental. The carrying out and assessment of such experimentation in doing, representing and intervening into social life is always in question. They argue for the value of (researchers) pursuing long-term associations and changes to social life. But they point to the limitations of prioritising easily traceable, short-term associations between social research and social action which might result, for example, in Das Kapital not being seen as able to demonstrate research impact or policy relevance.

This afterword explores these ideas in relation to two contemporary domains of social life in which such creative experimentation is evident. It suggests how inventive social research as discussed in this volume might intersect with developments in the fields of social innovation and government innovation.

Social innovation is one of the new socials identified by Marres and Gerlitz in their chapter, a term given to an area of practice and scholarship that aims to address social needs through creating strategies, infrastructures, ventures, products or services that involve new configurations of resources (Mulgan et al 2006; Nicholls and Murdock 2011). A closely related area of government innovation is an emerging institutional practice within national, regional and local government administrations, often in the form of 'policy labs' (eg OECD 2016; Puttick et al 2014; Williams 2015). In such settings, diverse actors including governments, community organisations, funders and businesses conduct experiments into contemporary social life, sometimes in collaboration with academic researchers. In both, the devices and practices of 'social design' are increasingly visible as a resource to drive creativity and connect public servants and others with citizens and other publics, often with unclear results (Chen et al 2016; Julier and Kimbell 2016).

My aim here is to mix insights from this book with the creative practices tied up with how public policies, solutions and services are being constituted, researched, designed, developed and evaluated as they co-emerge in relation to social issues and policy agendas. In what follows I review some of the concerns of participants in this world of social and government innovation. I then identify opportunities for inventive social research to reconfigure these events, narratives and practices. Finally I suggest some issues that result from using an inventive approach in relation to social innovation and to government experimentation. As someone with stakes in these matters as a citizen, user, researcher, educator and consultant, my discussion is unapologetically

interventionist and activist[i]. I take what I understand to be the possibilities of inventive social research and explore how it can reconfigure devices, practices and narratives associated with 'innovation' to change how things are done in public policy contexts. My hope is that the academic discussion in this book, which recognizes the potential for engagement between social research and creative practice and experimentation in social life can intersect productively with the practices of social and government innovation through which public issues are formed and addressed. However this might present some challenges because of the emphasis in these worlds on demonstrating short-term achievements and easily traceable passages between insight and evidence and action and outcome.

The word 'innovation' has gained wide currency in a context in which neo-liberalism increasingly pushes public servants, politicians and citizens to come up with novel solutions to society's issues. Social and government *innovation* are perhaps better characterized as *invention* (Barry 2001), which foregrounds the processual and performative nature of how novel solutions are constituted and re-made. Invention might be seen as a phase or stage within an innovation process, emphasising the reconfiguring of constituent elements into novel arrangements, which cannot be pre-determined (Garud et al 2013). But more than a temporal phase, the concept of invention also points to the logics through which new combinations of resources are assembled and through which new publics and issues are brought into being.

Recent developments suggest growing visibility of activities seen as, or hoped to result in, innovation in relation to public administrations, with close alignment to related experimentation happening in business. Arguments for 'mission-oriented' innovation in today's governments (eg Mazzucato 2013) intersect with 'agile' software development (eg Government Digital Service 2016), 'lean' start up (eg Ries 2011), 'smart' government (eg Noveck 2015) and new partnerships between government, business and social enterprise (Eggers and Macmillan 2013). Such developments have co-emerged alongside related activities within think tanks and community and voluntary groups as well as being informed by academic research[ii]. They are also shaped by neo-liberal drivers within some governments to promote austerity, drive commercialisation of public service provision and co-produce solutions with social actors, sometimes shifting the responsibility for addressing society's issues away from governments to others (Julier 2017). As a result, to differing extents, it is possible to find big data analysis, digital platforms, social media engagement and analysis, randomised control trials, participatory design and social and behavioural research used alongside one another to generate and explore such solutions to policy issues (in the case of government innovation) or to address problems that may result from policy decisions and actions, or their lack (in the case of social innovation). Common to both social and government innovation are preoccupations with, and narratives about, experimentation, politics, participation and systems change.

Challenges in social and government innovation

Much social and government innovation as currently organised is tied up with 'challenges'. Sometimes a challenge is simply expressed in the form of a summary of an issue and a question starting 'how can we…?'[iii] Such challenges are articulations of issues which managers of public services, policy makers, funders, businesses and entrepreneurs as well as universities and third sector groups organise themselves in relation to, possibly with the involvement of academics and with academic research. Familiar topics include addressing environmental change, tackling obesity or improving prospects for people facing unemployment. The construction and articulation of such challenges takes a variety of forms depending on one's location in relation to an issue, with varying degrees of agency, accountability and legitimacy. For example funders, consultancies, universities, think tanks, community groups and service provsiders may construct or be invited to respond to a challenge via mechanisms such as invitations to tender, calls for proposals, competitions, sandpits, jams, and design briefs, with associated platforms, resources, networks, funding and means of assessing to what extent a challenge can or has been addressed. Funders, policy teams, researchers and managers seek to mobilise diverse resources in addressing an issue including researchers, professionals, citizens, activists or 'users' – often with uncertain motivations, accountabilities or rewards and different levels of urgency – alongside different institutional research capacities, organisational routines, datasets and modes of participation. Indeed, such is the extent of the challenge that there is now a centre studying and giving guidance on organising one[iv]. Accordingly, in what follows I identify some of the current challenges within social innovation and government innovation, informed by my research and practice in the UK. As presented below,

these challenges are also approaches or techniques used to address public issues. But they are themselves organisational issues with which public leaders and managers are preoccupied, in a context in which they are required to produce their 'innovations'.

The challenge of understanding and setting issues. Often described as 'wicked' (Rittel and Webber 1972) or 'complex' (eg Snowden and Boone 2007), today's problems articulated in the context of social innovation or policy innovation are dynamic, multi-actor and multi-sited. Informed by perspectives in systems theory, futures and strategic management, there has been recognition for several decades that 'transdisciplinary approaches' (Bernstein 2015) are needed to address such issues. Issues such as low educational attainment for white working class boys in the UK cross the boundaries of disciplines, organisational capabilities, sites of practice and scales of government, requiring actors to work together to understand the social world they want to change. Such issues are seen as dynamic and in flux and as having interdependencies, contingencies and feedback loops that make them hard to identify, describe or analyse. Issues co-emerge with publics; non-government stakeholders can play active roles in enrolling others into an issue (Marres 2005; Hillgren et al 2016). But despite these moves, in many cases policy or social problems have endured, despite the application over years of different kinds of expertise, analysis, investments in organizational change, changes in leadership, technology, and other resources as well as fluctuations in collective visions about which problems matter. Different assumptions play out here about what counts as evidence that there is an issue, what kind of issue it is and for whom. Big data and behavioural research are

increasingly evident as resources and drivers of organisational attention in the policy ecosystem (Dunleavy 2016). Such evidence is often tied to the capacities of corporations to assemble, organise and analyse large data sets providing particular kinds of social data. But alongside big data too are micro-social perspectives from ethnography as well as participatory approaches to exploring issues through workshops, events and online platforms. The growing availability of and interconnections between different forms of data are reconfiguring social and government innovation landscapes.

The challenge of generating and exploring solutions. In a context in which issues are seen as dynamic, multi-sited and multi-actor, then advocates for social and government innovation often argue for an experimental approach (eg Breckon 2015). Different kinds of experimentality emerge in response to different social or policy issues involving different kinds of organisational apparatus. Some approaches, for example, healthcare improvement (eg Robert and Macdonald 2016), recognise the value of local actors with a stake in an issue being involved in generating and co-producing solutions – which handily coincides with a smaller role for government in a neo-liberal world (Julier 2017). Digital platforms are often implicated in the work of governing. Some responses to social or public policy issues, such as the OpenIDEO digital platform[v] publish open challenges set by a policy team, foundation or corporate sponsor and structure and enable processes that aim to engage people not previously connected to an issue to explore it and generate and iterate possible solutions. Alongside this kind of experimentation, other traditions have become more visible inside government and public policy. In particular randomised control

trials adapted from clinical sciences are promoted by some funders, researchers and civil servants as ways to test ideas and provide evidence for policy decisions about 'what works', often tied to behavioural theory (see Puttick 2012; Halpern 2015)[vi]. As in science and technology studies (STS), for civil servants and social entrepreneurs a persistent preoccupation is scale, not as an analytical construct but as an operational achievement: how can solutions developed and tested *here*, be rolled out and effective *there*?

The challenge of understanding change. Current practice in social and government innovation to some extent recognises that multiple actors are involved in constituting an issue and then shaping potential responses to doing something about it in order to achieve intended 'outcomes', recognising that unintended consequences will also result. To understand a problem or to generate a solution, a manager in a voluntary sector organization or a civil servant may be asked to articulate a 'theory of change'. Theories of change in play often foreground micro-social worlds and 'choices' made by individuals rather than social practices (e.g. Shove et al 2012) or are informed by, draw on and deploy forms of technological determinism (e.g. Wilkie and Michael 2008). Some domains such as healthcare improvement allow an understanding of change that recognizes multiple kinds of social world and researchers' and managers' participation within it alongside the beneficiaries of interventions or users of services. But in other cases, innovation toolkits[vii] and calls for proposals published by commissioners of services spread the idea that such theories of change can be adequately described in a page or two. Some funders, for example, require applicants to describe their theory of change underpinning a project (eg

Nesta 2016). Elsewhere, methods drawing on participatory design in social or policy innovation workshops ask participants to materialise models of potential solutions and act out through role play how solutions might change a situation (Kimbell 2015). In describing how a desired change in a social world might unfold as a result of a proposed intervention, participants are asked to foreground 'barriers' to change and how these need to be addressed in implementing a solution. The temporal and spatial ordering of how change is constituted, experienced, understood, assessed and evaluated is downplayed. Discussions of who has agency to make change and the conditions and possibilities around this are often left unexamined.

The challenge of participation. From different perspectives, social innovation and government innovation are both premised on current and future relations between actors involved in an issue. Such practices foreground human actors such as 'users', 'citizens' or possibly 'beneficiaries', often already identified as involved in an issue and having particular 'needs' or 'capacities'. In social innovation and government innovation practice, emerging activities include generating insights about what is happening in a social world from the perspective of such actors; identifying and mobilising emerging practices; identifying non-obvious actors in an issue; and engaging actors in generating and possibly co-producing solutions. In the case of caring for older people, for example, human actors might include people directly experiencing the social or policy challenge (e.g. older people and their families, friends or neighbours), professionals (e.g. social workers, health visitors, nurses), service providers (e.g. carers working for municipalities or commercial firms), businesses (eg

entrepreneurs or local shops or utilities), researchers (social or healthcare researchers, but also data analysts), and voluntary or community groups (e.g. those working with older people or carers). A perspective from STS would also emphasise the non-human actors that co-constitute adult social care, such as assistive technologies, particular kinds of housing arrangement and lay out, concepts such as 'ageing' and 'caring' and financial models for care services. For people self-identifying as social or government innovators, acknowledging and engaging a wide array of actors may be driven in part by openness to emergence as well as democratic ideals. Nonetheless existing and future levels of agency and power relations may be under-examined. For innovators inside government, participation has a complicated relationship to formal democratic structures and processes, party politics and the media. For example inviting responses via an online consultation or through participation in a policy workshop can privilege some contributions over others (eg Fortier 2010).

Opportunities for inventive approaches

These brief summaries of some of the challenges facing those involved in social and government innovation have highlighted some concerns that resonate with inventive social research. While some readers may object to my emphasis on relatively short-term, easily-traceable intervention, I want to explore what inventive social research has to 'offer' service managers, delivery partners, policy makers, funders or communities entangled with these challenges. How might inventive social research express and connect social phenomena in the settings I describe, resulting in changes in how things are done, as well as in new insights?

How does it challenge dominant notions of innovation in government and society? The things that inventive social research might offer or provoke, however, are not necessarily what these actors want, value, or have capacity to engage with, a topic to which I will return later.

Challenging the challenge. As indicated in this book, a core characteristic of inventive social research is how it problematises an issue. Instead of taking up a challenge as initially articulated or framed, inventive social research starts with a query into a domain. It does not take as given the constituents of an issue. Through such research, a social or policy innovation challenge is likely to be reconfigured. This may allow identification of specific aspects that need addressing, or acknowledgement of different actors from those originally thought to be part of the issue, or a shift in location, scale or timeframe. For example in his chapter on making interventions to the Barcelona Pavilion, Jacque reveals the material practices, objects and materials associated with its maintenance and management, by temporarily recomposing the constituents of the pavilion. For social or policy innovators, inventive social science draws attention to the possibility that the challenge motivating their work is composed differently than they originally understood, which can be revealed through creative intervention. The actors or publics involved in constituting the challenge might not be the ones initially assumed to be part of it, and their capacities might also be other than originally understood (Stilgoe and Guston 2017).

Sensitising participants to the 'socials' being enacted. Inventive social research does not take the 'social' as a given but performs an emerging understanding of

particular socials through experimental co-articulation – offering an 'experiential togetherness' as Savransky observes in his chapter. By intentionally modifying settings or prompting actors to express themselves or perform differently, social phemomena become visible in new ways. Inventive research reveals the agencies and different kinds of social which may co-exist and interact with one another. Being able to identify, bring into view, or analyse these within a project can enable those working in social innovation or government innovation to develop and continually revise their understandings of the policy domain and how potential solutions are reconfigured. This can help them think through the ways in which the problem might change as experimentation proceeds – and draw attention to how a project's activities are implicated in articulating particular socials.

Generating infrastructures/practices that constitute an issue or public. The versions of inventive social research that combine design and STS resemble some contemporary activities within social and government innovation. Expertise which bridges research and practice is now being developed as capabilities inside government teams and social innovation networks. For example, civil servants in the UK government are using creative approaches that combine the doing, representing and intervening in policy development (eg Kimbell 2015). By combining different kinds of research, materialising models of potential policies and organising participatory workshops, multiple understandings of the policy issue and potential interventions are brought into view, changing the issue and the institution of government, not just representing the issue. For social or policy innovators, adopting an inventive approach would

allow them to better understand how policy agendas, devices, work programmes and publics are configured relationally. It would allow such practitioners to recognise and reflect on their roles in doing infrastructuring work by providing resources, designing work programmes and producing devices such as models, frameworks, guidelines and criteria (eg LeDantec and Disalvo 2014; Hilgren et al 2016).

Enabling attentiveness to scaling. Scaling and the distribution of agency are long-standing concerns within STS and are evident in inventive approaches to social research. For example Nold's macro and micro prototypes connect the issue of noise annoyance at Heathrow and publics within new configurations. Wilkie and Michael's chapter shows how the situated performances of the networked Energy Babble disrupted assumptions of the research funders about 'community' and policy framings about the usage of information from smart meters. Inventive social research in social innovation or government innovation contexts can highlight how scale is performed, rather than pre-existing, assumed or given. It has the potential to generate new possibilities enabling intended outcomes to be identified, assessed and revised while being open to recognizing how novel configurations and consequences unfold in practice.

Opening up the work of researching. Inventive social research draws on traditions which highlight the distribution of agency across human and non-human actors and the translations involved producing knowledge and achieving technological change. Marres and Gerlitz's account of a collaborative analysis of a dataset from Twitter showed how categories such as 'frequency' or 'volume' got in the way of

detecting the sociality of Twitter, which led to the research team refocusing their attention on developing other means to access dynamic interactions between Twitter accounts. In their chapter Guggenheim et al combine objects, situations and pressure to demonstrate the (creative) work that goes on in researching an issue. Bringing these orientations into social and government innovation draws attention to the material practices, events and actors involved in doing and representing research and intervening into an issue. Instead of analyzing and reproducing 'what works' – a contemporary preoccupation within social or government innovation, this approach can highlight what is required for a solution to 'work' and the practical accomplishments of doing research in social and government settings.

In short there is potential for inventive approaches to engage directly with social innovation and government settings. By 'directly' I mean academic researchers working experimentally in collaboration with people (who may have research training) in local or central government, community and voluntary groups, think tanks, service providers, entrepreneurs, activists or others in the policy ecosystem who are engaged in understanding a problem domain and intervening into it. Some of the challenges such individuals or teams face in doing the work of social or government innovation present opportunities to enact novel kinds of doing, representing and intervening in social worlds. While this may be driven by, and result in, the prioritisation of short-term, easily traceable associations, on the other hand there is also potential for inventive research to intervene too in institutional practices, devices and narratives that drive this short-termism.

Implications

Inventive social research can problematise accounts of policy issues and potential solutions developed in relation to them. It can propose modes of doing research by opening up theories of change, identifying how scale operates, acknowledging human and non-human constituents and agency, and examining the governance and styles of participation enacted in a project. In so doing, new possibilities will emerge. By engaging experimentally in reconfiguring projects that aim to address social or public policy issues, researchers may help articulate and detect new socials; develop new devices, infrastructures and methods; and produce understanding of their genealogies, possibilities and limits. They may also be able to situate themselves more closely in relation to some of the challenges that service providers, policy makers and activists are involved in by co-producing 'change' as well as 'knowledge' (Facer and Enright 2016).

With the possibility of closer engagement between inventive social research and social and government innovation come a number of matters that need further consideration. The first is the different temporalities that come into play in the worlds of academic research, which may not be aligned with those within social innovation and policy experimentation. Academia has its own temporal intensities that emerge, for example, when applying for funding, doing research, presenting at workshops or conferences, and writing papers or books, as well as moving between jobs or institutions. Some of these take place over days or weeks; some may take place over several years. Within social innovation and government innovation, timescales are equally varied and intense. Invitations to

tender may have deadlines of weeks or months, research undertaken to shape policy making may take months, while efforts to research, develop and redesign a service might take months or years. In contrast a minister might want a policy recommendation to be produced in a matter of days; a campaign to change regulations or the law might take years. Aligning the perspectives and resources of researchers in relation to organisational routines and resources inside public administrations and the organisational ecosystems around them is not a trivial matter but as Guggenheim et al argue, the application of pressure may be productive.

A second and related issue is the accountabilities held by different actors involved in an inventive collaboration. Academics might hold themselves accountable to colleagues, current or future students, their institutions, funders, professional bodies or partners from civil society, business or the public sector. Managers, volunteers, activists or civil servants have other accountabilities which might include to colleagues, professional bodies, service users or residents, funders and donors, organisational partners, codes of practice, or to public bodies such as parliament. Bringing into view and articulating distinct accountabilities at different levels of institutionalisation and formality, recognizing that these accountabilities may continue to change, requires attention and reflexivity.

A third issue is the jostling for power and negotiations between different kinds of expertise required to do inventive social research, which also emerges in other kinds of applied academic research. In their chapter Guggenheim et al propose

that experts 'accompany' a lay person along an experimental path. Doing

inventive social research in the context of social or government innovation

requires awareness of different kinds and sites of expertise and the

infrastructures, practices and devices that enable this. In different ways, the

contributors to this book reveal some of the skills and knowledge required to

undertake inventive socio-material and aesthetic experiments. As the

connections between social and government innovators and creative practices

continue intensify, new patterns of expertise will emerge within inventive

research. More intersections between the kinds of academic research discussed

in this volume and the practices I have described will lead to the development of

new tools, bureaucratic relationships and systems of valorisation and

governance.

Each of these issues shapes the material practices, devices, infrastructures and

processes of doing inventive research in the contexts of social and government

innovation. By being attentive to temporalities, accountabilities and expertise as

constitutive of inventive research, such experimental collaborations will play out

differently.

To conclude, this sketch has suggested how inventive social research might

engage with current preoccupations and practices in social innovation and

government innovation. Shared concerns include experimentation, systems,

participation and the reordering and reconfiguring of a social world and the

politics of so doing. By drawing attention to the processual reconfiguring of

resources and relations through a change process, inventive researchers and

their collaborators in social innovation and government settings may add nuance, critical appreciation of and insight to the claims made for and about innovation. My hope is that my description of the challenges I see in social and government innovation and brief outline of how this could unfold will spark new engagements. At the very least, this account may prompt interest among researchers in some of these settings in more inventive doing, representing and intervening.

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[i] I have been involved in different ways within these developments for over a decade: as an educator teaching design thinking to MBA students and social entrepreneurs; as former head of social design at The Young Foundation; as a researcher studying social design for the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC); as a researcher embedded for a year in Policy Lab, a team in the Cabinet Office of the UK government via an AHRC fellowship; as a consultant helping government bodies develop design capabilities; as a user of public services; and as an activist where I live.

[ii] There is a long tradition of think tanks in the UK and other policy ecosystems which carry out research and undertake experiments in relation to social issues that are sometimes translated into public policy. An early example was the Institute of Community Studies set up by Michael Young in 1952. Through his

writing, work on the Labour Party manifesto in 1945, involvement in the creation of institutions such as the Open University, Young has long been recognized an early social innovator whose expertise bridged social research, public policy and organistional action (Young Foundation 2017).

iii An exercise in which participants note down and then share challenges in the form 'how can we…?" is common in the work of Policy Lab, a team in the UK government's Cabinet Office. See https://www.slideshare.net/Openpolicymaking/policy-lab-slide-share-introduction-final [accessed 11 June 2016].

iv The UK's innovation agency Nesta set up a Challenge Prize Centre in 2012 to study and promote 'challenge-based' innovation <http://www.nesta.org.uk/challenge-prize-centre>, [accessed 11 June 2016].

v International design consultancy IDEO's platform partners with foundations, corporate sponsors and government bodies to set challenges for its users to respond to, <https://openideo.com>, [accessed 11 June 2016].

vi A leading example here is the UK-based international Behavioural Insights Team originally set up in the UK government's Cabinet Office, which it now co-owns with the UK innovation charity Nesta and the senior management team. See the account of its chief executive David Halpern (2015). Such approaches are not without criticism.

vii See for example the Development Impact and You Toolkit aimed at people working in development contexts, produced by UK innovation agency Nesta and funded by the Rockefeller Foundation, <http://diytoolkit.org>, [accessed 11 June 2016].