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Social Innovation in public services: Innovating 'co-creative' relationships between services, citizens and communities?

Editorial

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Public services face growing pressure to innovate but there is little agreement how this can be achieved (Hartley, 2014). Social innovation is explicitly about addressing human needs and its place in public policy is well-established (Marques et al., 2017; Sabato et al., 2017). This themed issue puts a spotlight on the intersection of social innovation and co-creation. Co-creation is a more recent entrant to policy agenda than social innovation but also appears to have achieved the status of an orthodoxy (Osborne et al, 2016; Torfing et al, 2019). In the context of public services, co-creation is characterised as “active involvement of end-users in various stages of the production process” (Voorberg et al., 2015, p. 1335). There are variations in detail and emphases vis a vis the longer established term co-production (Brandsen & Honingh, 2018; Bovaird et al, 2019). A common thread in co-creation is that people typically called “service users” or “beneficiaries” become seen as asset holders with legitimate knowledge about what their services should comprise (Fox et al, 2020).

In addition to meeting human needs, social innovations are said to transform relationships and increase people's resources and capabilities (Moulaert et al., 2013). Social innovation as an idea has roots in various traditions including, but not limited to, innovation in industry and technology (Bassi et al, 2019). A distributed knowledge base including the active contribution of consumers has come to the fore in commercial innovation (Chesbrough, 2011; Curley, 2016). Empirical studies of real-life social innovations worldwide have highlighted co-creation tropes such as revision of professional roles, collective empowerment, and who gets to define what matters (Evers and Brandsen, 2016; Bassi et al, 2019; Oosterlynck et al. 2019). Co-creation, in short, appears to align closely with claims in the (social) innovation literature that the roles of innovator, producer and consumer overlap or merge (Grimm et al, 2013).

We present five research-based articles with empirical settings across sectors including social care, economic development, and criminal justice. The authors report and analyse innovative co-creative initiatives involving marginalised and stigmatised groups (prisoners, urban racialized minorities, rural poor populations including Roma). There are also three new development articles highlighting specific

areas of innovation, and four short debate pieces that offer thoughtful provocations. We group all these contributions under three sub-themes as follows although there is some overlap between them

Unequal power dynamics and the “hard to reach”

Temidayo Eseonu draws on the politics of difference to explore how power asymmetries impact on the ability of racially minoritised citizens to voice their needs. She evidences some success in an experimental intervention to enable design inputs from so-called “hard to reach” young people in employment support services. More radical, innovative change, however, would be needed to influence the patterns of power that fail to include large parts of societies. With the research article by Judit Csoba and Flórián Sipos, we turn to a co-creation initiative for improving household livelihoods in Hungarian villages beset by multiple disadvantage. The modernization of public services in that country is distinctive and contradictory, with local leaders expected to be entrepreneurial innovators while central government constrains their room for manoeuvre and strengthens welfare dependency. Against this unpromising background, experimental strategies empowering local communities proved difficult, but not impossible.

Jane Gibbon and Natalie Rutter report how social enterprises enabled social innovation and co-creative practices in UK prisons. Criminal justice would seem a particularly hostile environment both for co-creation (given that service users are under compulsion) and for innovation in the context of risk management and regulation. Gibbon and Rutter nevertheless demonstrate the power of transformational learning through innovation and co-creation, made possible especially by relationships within social enterprise activities. Two debate pieces enrich the theme of combatting unequal power by demonstrating successful, imaginative ways of involving people who lack resources. Hayley Trowbridge and Michael Willoughby draw attention to how digital storytelling can connect public services with citizens, especially those who are rarely heard. Paul Hine makes a case for participatory arts as an innovative means to improve co-creation processes through shared human experience.

Multiple agencies and sectors

Wendy Hardyman, Steve Garner, James Lewis, Robert Callaghan, Emyr Williams, Angharad Dalton and Alice Turner introduce the term ‘innovative imagination’ to denote public service practitioners’ increased capacity to deploy new tools and skillsets. Drawing on evaluation of a public service innovation programme in the UK, they propose a service ecosystems perspective to incorporate the knowledge and experiences of citizens, service users and wider stakeholders. The new development piece by Clare FitzGerald, Franziska Rosenbach, Tanyah Hameed, Ruth Dixon and Jo Blundell unpicks the misapplied rhetoric of co-creation in English local government. In that context, fragmentation brought about by privatization and austerity has led to widespread enthusiasm for new forms of collaboration. Collaborative structures take many forms but although often framed in the language of co-creation, only rarely change the power to define problems and direct action. Andrea Bassi’s debate piece also reflects on multiple actors, agencies and sectors, noting that that given its stress on the direct participation of citizens, co-creation can overlook professionals and put civil society roles under strain.

Innovations to enable co-creation as an ongoing process

Kadri Kangro and Katri-Liis Lepik touch on the roots of co-creation and innovation in technology and commerce in their research article. Hackathons are a well-established means to facilitate innovation through intensive, fast-paced collaboration, originally by prototyping in the IT sector. The authors show how ‘social hackathons’ for public service innovation in a rural area of Estonia succeeded in adapting the format to mobilise people from different backgrounds around co-defined problems. There was some co-design of practical solutions and also evidence of movement towards new local contexts where experiments and their spaces are favoured. Emyr Williams’ debate article contends

that service providers typically adopt consultative rather than collaborative approaches to co-creation and proposes participatory budgeting experiments as a means to bring about change. Two New Development articles shed light on adaptations from digital innovation for co-creation. David Jamieson and Mike Martin recount how an open-source, web-based tool using Living Lab methodology was refined through experiences with real-life pilot projects across Europe to support the modelling of co-creation with input questions and prompts. In common with the majority of commentary on co-creation and social innovation, the articles in this themed issue are generally positive and optimistic. Harri Jalonen reminds us that bad consequences can follow from good intentions and proposes a novel 'wicked game' approach to cope with the complexities.

Taken together, the articles in this themed issue take stock of the emerging evidence base, conceptual developments, and policy lessons. Contributions from Estonia, Finland, Hungary and the UK show, in various ways, how co-creation and social innovation may be related in terms of intentions, principles, practices and outcomes, and how sustainable changes might be (Wilson et al 2012). The challenge as ever is to move from an approach where we enthusiastically build co-creation 'sandcastles' on sunny days which are all too soon washed away when the tide comes in.

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