Book Review

Mark Considine, Jenny Lewis and Damon Alexander
Networks, Innovation and Public Policy: Politicians, Bureaucrats and the Pathways to Change inside Government
Houndsmills, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009

Reviewed by Robyn Keast

Having wrung the most from workforce and workplace productivity initiaitves, innovation has come to the fore as a key goal and directive for public sector organisations to become more efficient. This clarion call for innovation can be heard all around the world, with public services everywhere taking up the message to develop better, smarter, novel, more innovative processes, programs and policies. In the current push for innovation, networks are considered to be a superior vehicle through which collective knowledge can be shared and leveraged; replacing or at least supplementing the role function previously provided by inventive leaders.

While a number of studies (for example, Ferlie et al, 1984, Osborne, 1998; Damanpour, Walker and Avellanda, 2009; Walker, Jeans and Rowlands, 2001; Osborne and Brown 2005) have been undertaken to better understand and enhance innovation within the public arena, they have largely overlooked the detailed functioning of networks as innovation drivers or creators. This study by Considine et al. (2009) which examined the norms, practices and structures of innovation networks within the Australian public sector, represents a comparatively rare effort to interrogate this phenomenon and, in so doing, expand understandings of what constitutes and facilitates innovations through government-based networks.

The book provides a timely departure from standard, single dimensional approaches through two means. First it syntheses governmental innovation with social network literature and concepts to account for the impact of institutionalised roles and rules on the interpersonal network at play in the innovation process. Second, the authors expertly draw upon and thread social network analysis maps and metrics throughout the text to transform abstract metaphors of innovation networks into more concrete examples, thus highlighting the varying patterns of relationship, exchange and structures in place and functioning within and across the public sectors. Social network analysis (SNA) is an empirical approach that uncovers the hidden topology of exchange patterns that occur between people and entities.

Drawing on a substantial data set (qualitative and SNA) collected across eleven diverse municipalities in Victoria, Australia, the authors provide detailed and nuanced insights into the ways in which people and process interact to create innovation and innovation spaces. Therefore, while the introductory chapters, which provide the conceptual, theoretical and

methodological foundations to the book, are instructive, the primary intellectual contribution is contained within the latter chapters. A deeper discussion and critique of the underpinning assumptions of how networks create innovation would provide a stronger argumentation in this preliminary section.

In Chapter Four the authors set out the background or context within which innovation takes place – the preconditions. It also tracks the flows of information and advice-seeking that occurs between government actors, demonstrating the different network structures that abound as well as the different positions and roles that key innovators/actors occupy. The results distil a more complex picture of innovation creation than the linear models often presented, limiting the capacity for wholesale prescription of network forms and functions. Also, using ego networks (networks formed around an individual actor and their direct connections) as a unit of analysis, the chapter highlights the central position that senior executives occupy in the innovation space and the critical linking work they undertake; directly connecting members and importantly acting as conduits to other, well-connected members.

In the four selected municipal case studies (chapters 5-9) the authors systematically trawl through their data to provide a 'more finely grained' (105) understanding of how innovation is conceptualised on the ground in local governments and how individuals within networks and the structure of their network facilitate and create innovations. This exposé of the people involved in innovation - their place within the organisational system, and their structural position within the pattern of connection – provides a comprehensive account of the innovation process as it transpires within the government domain: thus beginning to bridge the demarcation between individual agency and relational structure that often besets network studies. Context is found to be an important attribute for government innovation, with different locations, personnel and organisational attributes combining to generate different levels and types of innovation. Finally, through its systematic analysis, the study provides evidence of a link between networks and innovation outcomes: confirming the prevailing, although often unproven, assumption that government networks can indeed act as vehicles for innovation creation.

Networks, Innovation and Public Policy is a timely examination of the actuality of government-based innovation creation, given the current demands for new, more efficient and effective ways to deliver services. It translates the often abstract conceptualisations of innovation via networks into the actuality of practice: who does what, under what conditions and within which patterns of connection. Most importantly, the book reminds us that innovation is a complex and nuanced process which is highly differentiated, making it difficult to prescribe and replicate. Although not offering prescriptions and tools to be applied, the authors provide a comprehensive insiders' view of innovation in practice.

About the Author:

Robyn Keast is an Associate Professor at the Queensland University of Technology's Business School in Queensland, Australia. She is widely published in the area of public sector networks and collaboration and draws upon social network analysis as a key methodological approach in her applied research on social innovations in this arena. Currently Research Director for the Airport Metropolis Project, Robyn can be contacted at rl.keast@qut.edu.au.

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