Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Research Policy

Situated novelty: Introducing a process perspective on the study of innovation

M. Janssen *, A.M.V. Stoopendaal, K. Putters

Erasmus University Rotterdam, Institute of Health Policy & Management, Healthcare Governance Department P.O. Box 1738, 3000 DR Rotterdam, The Netherlands

ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

This paper introduces a process perspective to innovation studies to answer the research question: *What is innovation and how are different meanings ascribed to it in a healthcare setting?* Drawing on four ethnographic case studies of projects in a public-funded innovation program in rehabilitation care in the Netherlands, we challenge some well-known assumptions about innovation that have long inspired traditional understandings of innovation. The findings are based on data derived from observations and interviews with managers, project leaders, and (para) medical professionals involved in the four innovation projects. The results indicate that (1) people often assign other meanings to innovation than mere 'novelty'; (2) that innovation usually entails extensive work that also constructs the value of an innovation; and (3) this has major implications for the management of innovation in organizational practice. This paper builds an argument for introducing an alternative ontological perspective on innovation based upon the notion of 'situated novelty'. In proposing the contextual perspective, we aim to extend current understanding of innovation processes.

1. Introduction: on innovation

In the course of our research into innovation in rehabilitation care[1], we came across a picture of a device in an old book on the historical development of rehabilitation care in the Netherlands. Shortly after, to our surprise we came across a very similar device at an innovation fair:

"*As researchers interested in innovative developments in rehabilitation care, we attended an exhibition on that theme eager to discover new technology and working methods. To our surprise, we stumbled upon a device that on first sight looked very familiar. Called an 'Armeoboom', the device [an overhead sling suspension system] was presented as the newest thing for training patients with impaired functionality of the upper body. A decade ago, one of us had worked as an occupational therapist in a rehabilitation center before starting a career in research. This new device reminded her of one she used when she was a therapist: the 'OB device'*

designed by Olle Blomqvist. She asked the exhibitors if the Armeoboom was perhaps the latest update of the OB device. They looked puzzled and clearly didn't know what she was on about. Their reaction made us wonder: How could something so old be treated as if it were a brand new innovation? Passing by other stalls showing new technology made us wonder again: What does this say about innovation in the sector? What does innovation actually mean?"

Field notes from 'Symposium on Innovation in Rehabilitation', June 8, 2012.

This fragment from our observation notes shows *how* framing something as new or novel can play a role in presenting an innovation project. However, this experience made us think not only about the novelty of the particular device, but what the word innovation actually means. Could nothing have actually changed in rehabilitation care in the past decade, despite all the attempts to fuel innovation at the organizational and professional level? Our experience at the innovation fair may suggest that the result of all this effort may be incremental continuity, in the sense of minor improvements and adaptions to an established concept, rather than radical innovation. It may also point to the difficulty of discussing a sector's actual innovativeness, even if the main body of literature on innovation delivers insights into how innovation can or should be managed – implying that innovation is actually there. Based mostly on research into successful innovation projects, the

---

* Corresponding author at: Institute of Health Policy & Management, Erasmus University, P.O. Box, 3000 Rotterdam, DR 1738, The Netherlands.
E-mail address: m.janssen@bmg.eur.nl (M. Janssen).

[1] The rehabilitation care sector provides treatment and support to people with (temporary) physical disabilities and/or chronic conditions. Please see the Methods section for more information on the sector.

traditional literature usually describes how innovations should be fostered, cared for, and organized to repeat a particular success. Despite all the scholars' recommendations that tend to emphasize the preconditions, stimulants and barriers to success, innovation is still a modest endeavor (Berwick, 2003). The studies often lead to seemingly contradictory ideas on the management of innovation in organizations. Paradoxically, they argue for allowing room to experiment and establishing guiding principles, for collaboration and control, for flexibility and efficiency and for closely involved management and management at a distance (Quinn, 1985; Dougherty, 1992; Oke, 2004; van Dijk et al., 2011). Traditional attempts in current literature include explanations of innovation in terms of best practices (Sevón, 1996; Szulanski, 1996), studies that distinguish innovation from implementation in a more linear process (e.g., Rogers, 2003) and those with a strong focus on managing or working around the paradoxes (Chia and Holt, 2009; Farjoun, 2010; Smith and Lewis, 2011; Schultz and Hernes, 2013). We believe these current characterizations help to communicate ideas, but we consider them insufficient to facilitate a thorough understanding of innovation processes in organizations. They tend to focus on similar questions that rely on similar assumptions about what innovation is; namely, something new by definition. We see two problems in that view: (1) it fails to problematize the underlying descriptions of this 'newness' and (2) it overlooks the processes that constitute what is seen as new.

In this paper, we present four case studies analyzing innovative projects included in a subsidized innovation program in the Netherlands (see Table 1). A qualitative evaluation of this program, aimed at improving the sector's innovativeness, formed the context for this study on innovation practices. Starting from the question of how to manage innovation, we argue that we need a critical analysis of these assumptions, and the ontological standpoint that they reflect, before we can analyze how to manage innovation. This approach may deliver additional insights if we first determine what innovation means; *what* exactly is being managed? Although current definitions of innovation differ across scholars and research disciplines, in one way or another many refer it to mean something new or 'novel'[2]. It remains, however, difficult to get a grip on this 'novelty' element. Instead of striving for a stricter definition of novelty, we take an alternative approach that goes beyond traditional views. Drawing on an emergent trend of process thinking in organization studies, e.g., Weick's (1979) work on organizing and sense making and Van de Ven's (1999) work on innovation, we turn attention from novelty as an end state toward gaining an understanding of *how processes produce what we see as new or novel* (Thomas and Morgan, 2013). The theoretical framework in this paper adopts the ontological standpoint that innovations are representations of complex social processes in which many interactions take place over time. These processes constitute what innovations *are* and what they *mean* in practice. Tangible innovations (e.g., new treatment methods or technologies) are then seen as representations of processes of continuous enactment. This turns both the innovation and the processes that lead to its existence into complex, continuously fluctuating units (Farjoun, 2010). So, instead of assuming that it is known beforehand what innovation is, and thus, also what needs to be organized or managed, we take the question of how to manage innovation back a step by rethinking the underlying concepts from a process perspective. We aim to illustrate innovation processes from a processual viewpoint by describing how innovations are enacted in practice (e.g., Thomas, 2003; Hernes, 2008; Langley and Tsoukas, 2012). Here we use 'enactment' as it reflects our theoretical and ontological perspective in which we consider

innovation as a practice that is constituted through ongoing, coordinated actions and relationships (Mol, 2002; Woolgar and Neyland, 2013). We thus explore the multiple meanings of innovation by focusing on the work that is conducted in innovation projects to gain a better understanding of innovation processes, and to draw lessons for the management of innovation. The central question this paper addresses from a process perspective is: *What is innovation and how are different meanings ascribed to it in a healthcare setting?*

This paper continues by describing the theoretical framework to show how a process perspective contributes to the understanding of healthcare innovation. It assesses various streams of literature from our interest in ontology to help develop a way of further specifying concepts, such as innovation and novelty. Section 3 further describes the case studies, and how we studied them. Section 4 discusses three main findings of our analysis: (1) people often assign other meanings to innovation than just the novelty element; (2) innovations usually entail extensive work and through that work construct the value of the innovation; and (3) the different meanings of innovation, and the work inherent in it, influence the management of innovation in organizational practice. Finally, Section 5 answers the main research question, discusses the implications of our findings for practice and research, and elaborates on the contribution this paper makes to innovation studies.

2. Theoretical framework

Given the fact that innovation is conceptually defined in many different ways in a wide variety of research traditions, it seems undoable and even unwise to try to fully grasp this diversity here. What matters for the purpose of this paper is that all the definitions have one common element; they all refer to 'novelty' or 'newness'. Schumpeter (1934), often called the founding father of innovation studies or the prophet of innovation (Louçã, 2014), speaks of *new* elements or *new* combinations of existing elements. West (1990) emphasizes the adoption of innovation in his psychological perspective by defining innovation as ideas, processes, products, or procedures that are *new* to the unit of adoption. Bledow et al. (2009), in turn, refer to innovation as the development and intentional introduction of *new* and useful ideas. Greenhalgh and Stones (2010) and Brandsen et al. (2005); Dijk van et al. (2011); Edquist and Lundvall (1993); Feldman and Pentland (2003); Greenhalgh et al. (2004); Jansen et al. (2012); Laet de and Mol (2000); Loon et al. (2014); Lundvall (2007); Rosenkopf (2011); Sørensen and Torfing (2011, p849) also emphasize the novelty element in actor-network theory and public administration literature on innovation by "*novel* set(s) of behaviors, routines, and ways of working" and "intentional and proactive processes that involves the generation and practical adoption and spread of *new* and creative ideas," respectively. In the literature on innovation systems, Hekkert (2008) uses "the successful development and application of knowledge and technology in the form of *new* technologies, products, processes, practices and services" to define innovation. This vast range of literature and definitions raises the question what 'novelty' means exactly. What appears novel to some could be more common to others; something can be novel for an individual, a firm, a sector or for the entire world. The pursuit of innovation is theorized as crucial for the long-term survival of both public and private organizations, and novelty is a recurring element in its definition. Novelty is, however, in this respect often narrowly defined. Others have already pointed at the problematic nature of narrow definitions of novelty. Rosenkopf and McGrath (2011) specified and defined 'novelty' by treating it as a multidimensional construct. They provide a well-structured overview of conceptualizations of novelty and conclude, for example, that novelty can be found in either the innovation itself or in its context. Although these insights are valuable for questions on inno-

---

[2] See Crossan and Apaydin (2010) for a review of definitions used in organizational literature on innovation.