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Design in the Time of Policy Problems

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Abstract: This paper discusses an emerging context in which design expertise is being applied – the making of government policy. It reviews existing research and identifies the claim that design changes the nature of policy making. The paper then adapts a conceptual framework from social studies of science to make sense of the encounter between design and policy making. The paper applies this lens to an empirical account of design being applied to policy making in a team in the UK government. The findings are that in addition to supporting officials in applying design approaches, the team's work shapes the emergence of hybrid policy making practices, and at times problematizes the nature of policy making. It does this within logics of accountability, innovation, and reordering. The contribution is to provide empirical detail and a nuanced account of what happens in these encounter between design expertise and policy making practice.

Keywords: design thinking; experimentation; policy labs; interdisciplinarity

1. Introduction

This paper discusses the emergence of a context for the application of design expertise - the making of government policy, with accompanying practitioners, conferences, publications, researchers, and teaching and learning. Over the past decade, there has been growing interest in design thinking in policy and government. Taking various institutional forms, examples include specialist units inside government departments, notably Denmark's MindLab; inside local, city or regional governments, such as France's 27e Region; and within intermediary bodies such as Nesta's Public Policy Lab in the UK (Puttick et al 2014).

This area is fast growing. An event held in London in 2015 brought together over 350 participants involved in public innovation labs with a shared commitment to experimenting with new approaches from behavioural science to data science to design thinking (Nesta 2015). The UK national innovation agency Nesta, a co-organiser, estimated that there were then 100 labs internationally (ibid). In addition to the teams of civil servants using design approaches, there are now consultancies that specialize in supporting such efforts, some of them using the term "social design" as well as universities supporting these developments (Armstrong et al 2014). This emergence accompanies growing recognition that existing ways

of doing things in the making of government policy are not addressing the many challenges facing nations and communities from climate change, to inequalities, to the global migration crisis. In a time of multiple, interconnected policy problems, some government functionaries are reaching for design expertise to help address them.

Remembering an interview with Charles and Ray Eames in 1972, one might have anticipated the trajectory for design thinking over the last decade from products into an expanded field including innovation, organisational strategy, and now policy (Kimbell 2011). Asked, "What are the boundaries of Design?" the Eames answered, "What are the boundaries of problems?" (Eames Office 2015).

An example of the kind of problem to which design thinking is now being applied is how policy makers can better support what the UK Government calls "troubled families". Their troubles cost the multiple government agencies that intervene into their worlds £9 billion a year (UK Government 2015). With professional expertise that does not usually include topics such as education, healthcare, housing, employment, child protection, drugs and alcohol use, crime and so on, what claims does the field of design make about being able to reduce those troubles? How does design expertise render itself useful and accountable to people who are the object of government policy, and engage with civil servants, service providers, civil society organisations, politicians and the taxpayers who provide the funds and, arguably, the legitimacy to intervene into their lives?

To discuss this, the paper reviews existing research exploring what design approaches bring to the making of policy. It then provides new perspectives based on a study of one such exemplar in central government, Policy Lab in the UK Government's Cabinet Office. Drawing on my participant observation in this team for a year, the paper examines how design was deployed in the making of government policy and what can happen in the encounters between designerly expertise and policy making practices through the lens of the social studies of science and technology.

The findings are that, in addition to supporting policy officials in the use of design methods in a service mode, design expertise shapes the emergence of new hybrid policy making practices, and at times problematises the nature of policy making itself. It does this within three logics or rationales, which may appear at different times in a project – a logic of accountability, a logic of innovation, and a logic of reordering.

The paper makes two contributions. It offers empirical detail about how design practices intersect with policy making practice from one of the first exemplars of design for policy in central government. Second, it broadens existing literature by adding nuance to the claim that design can change policy making.

2. Context

2.1 Design practice in policy contexts

Over the past decade there has been increasing interest in design-based approaches in public policy contexts with a particular focus on the design of public services and design for social innovation (eg Manzini and Jegou 2009; Brown and Wyatt 2010; Meroni and Sangiorgi 2011; Bjögvinsson et al 2012; Manzini 2015; DESIS Network 2015). Inspired by the success of consumer firms rethinking their work as designing customer experiences, service design and design thinking have been taken up in central, local and regional government.

A brief snapshot of recent activity in just one country, the UK, gives a sense of this emerging field in which discussion about design of public services blurs into design for policy. Recent reports have argued for design expertise to be applied to public services (Design Commission 2013). The Design Council (2015) offers training and support to help public sector organisations apply design approaches to public services building on over a decade of experimentation (e.g. Cottam and Leadbeater 2004). The DIY Toolkit (2015) website produced by Nesta funded by the Rockefeller Foundation had 350,000 hits with 40,000 downloads in its first year. Annual conferences bring together international practitioners to share experiences (e.g. Service Design in Government 2016).

2.2 Researching design for policy

Within design studies there is as yet little research into this emerging field. A book edited by Bason (2014), previously head of MindLab, brought together practitioners and researchers exploring this area. A recurring theme is the idea that policy work is changing and needs to change, and that design brings new approaches to the making of policy. Bringing design into policy might be expected include the following, according to Junginger (2014):

- An orientation to understanding the experiences of people into whose lives policy making intervenes – a shift from being problem-centred to being "human-centred"; and
- An openness to inquiry and invention – helping envision and develop new possibilities for useful, usable and desirable policies.

In his concluding essay Bason (2014) identifies a shift between two kinds of policy making. The first mode, *intelligence-design-choice*, is currently dominant, in which public servants apply forethought to guide organizational action to solve problems. In contrast the emerging approach brings into view what Bason calls the "sensemaking policy maker" who practices *design-intelligence-choice* by paying closer attention to how problems are represented. As Bason puts it, "Design becomes the shaping of things while engaging with others in the flow of action and the production of outcomes" (Bason 2014: 229).

A chapter by Christiansen and Bunt (2014) describes how policy making is reconfigured through design:

- By providing a focus on outcomes, rather than solutions;
- By creating systems that enable post-production, rather than stand alone services;
- By experimenting to produce the grounds for conviction; and
- By recognizing and exercising a new type of authority that is distributed, rather than hierarchical.

Together these accounts of design *for* policy making argue that policy making practices, models and expertise are changed as a result of this encounter.

While policy may be a new context for applying design thinking, policy researchers have shown interest in policy design for some decades. As summarized by Howlett (2014), policy design is about developing efficient and effective policies by applying knowledge about policy means gained from experience and reason to the development and adoption of courses of action that are likely to succeed in achieving intended goals within specific policy contexts. Tracking a history of academic research in policy design, he sees this area as underexplored and identifies the emergence of new interest. One example of this, Considine (2012), identifies a line of research that recognizes design expertise in processing data, reading situations, and seeing imaginative solutions and proposes this as the basis of a model of public policy design expertise.

Looking more broadly at the context in which design meets policy, Williamson (2015a) discusses the emergence of government innovation labs with a focus on educational policy. He argues that such labs represent a distinctive approach to the use of emerging techniques, instruments and methods of governance. He argues that such labs redefine the nature of the problems that policy should address, alongside simultaneously specifying the kinds of solutions appropriate to remedying them. However public servants involved such innovation labs are not attentive to the theories or histories on which advocacy of policy experimentation draws (Williamson 2015b).

In short there is not yet a significant body of research examining design in the context of policy making. On the one hand there are claims about the efficacy of design approaches in public service and policy contexts, arguing that they offer an important shift in practice and focus. Meanwhile in the policy literature, there is interest in policy design but as yet little awareness of recent developments in practice. Critical and historical approaches note the conversations such developments are part of, including algorithmic decision-making, different kinds of evidence and experimentation, and new actors involved in making policy. A gap that can be identified is to understand what happens in the encounters between design expertise and policy making practice, recognizing the narratives about innovation with which they are both currently tied.

3. Approach and methods

3.1 Approach

To explore the encounter between design expertise and policy making practice, this paper adopts a conceptual framework and uses it to discuss an empirical case. The data comes from a study I undertook while embedded in a small team of civil servants in the UK government, Policy Lab based in the Cabinet Office (Kimbell 2015). Through my participant observation I was involved both in co-constituting the team's practice by helping deliver some of its activities and by contributing to its collective sense-making informed by organisational ethnography (Neyland 2007). My activities included helping design, facilitate and document workshops, and discussing what was happening in person and via email and social media, thus directly shaping some of the projects the team undertook.

3.2 Conceptual framework

To make sense of the encounter between the two field discussed here, it is useful to turn to research on interdisciplinarity in the social studies of science and technology. In a study which analysed the encounters between several different fields of knowledge and practice, Barry et al (2008) identified three ways that disciplines engage. The authors studied social science in relation to climate change science; social science in relation to technology innovation; and experimental art practice in relation to science. Each of these can be seen as an area in which people and institutions with different expertise come together to create new kinds of knowledge and practice that can expand the boundaries and ways of working of the originating fields. Adapting Barry et al's findings suggests three modes of engagement between design and policy:

- In *service* mode, one discipline or field being is in service to another to fulfill a need or address a lack with a hierarchical division of labour. For example design expertise supports policy making by creating visualisations of people's experiences of government services or policies for civil servants to use.
- In *partner* mode, two or more fields integrate to combine resources resulting in new ways of doing things, whose value is assessed according to the criteria of antecedent fields. For example design and policy making expertise are combined into a new hybrid that is recognizable to specialists from each and can be made sense of in existing terms.
- In *challenge* mode, one discipline's way of approaching problems and solutions calls into question the assumptions, claims and methods of another. Such interdisciplinary encounters spring from a self-conscious dialogue with, or criticism of, the limits and status of existing fields. Challenges can be antagonistic (in which the tensions are not productive) or agonistic (in which the tensions are productive).

Barry et al (ibid) also identified three logics or rationales within which these modes play out, adapted here for this discussion.

- The first logic is *accountability* – the idea that one field's knowledge base or expertise (for example designers using inventive methods to engage with service users and stakeholders) can help another field to better engage with the publics to whom it is accountable.
- The second is the logic of *innovation* – the idea that new kinds of expertise and novel solutions will only come about by going beyond existing ways of doing things. For example, combining aspects of existing fields will generate results that open up the space for future possibilities to emerge (Barry et al 2008: 26).
- The third is *re-ordering* – the idea that what a field is made up of and concerned with is not a given and may be changed in the interactions with other specialisms. This results in "new objects and practices of knowledge, practices that are irreducible to previous disciplinary knowledge formations and to accountability and innovation" (Barry et al 2008: 42).

Using this framework has the following advantages. Firstly, there are similarities between Barry et al's study of interdisciplinarity and current changes in policy making practice. Just as interdisciplinary research is promoted as being able to make science more accountable to society and to make links between research and innovation, so too open policy making (UK Government 2016) is expected to make the civil service more accountable to its stakeholders and to drive government innovation. Second, there are similarities between the kinds of research and practice Barry et al discuss and the activities that Policy Lab enables inside government including methods to generate ideas, engage with participants, and use ethnographically-informed research to shape strategy. Third, much of the narrative and practice associated with policy making is tied up doing and interpreting "evidence". Policy making sits on the cusp of knowing the world and acting in and on it. Contemporary discussions about evidence-based policy, as well accounts of experimental policy making using randomsied control trials, push policy making practice into encounters with other fields of expertise. Finally, the framework is informed by a long tradition of empirical study which is attentive to the embodied material practices through which knowledge is produced.

3.3 Research site and background

Policy Lab was set up in early 2014 to bring new approaches, tools and techniques to the work of policy officials in the UK Civil Service. Describing itself as a "proving ground", Policy Lab has worked with policy teams in government departments on practical projects, using a range of methods from ethnographic research to collaborative idea generation to prototyping, combining design, digital and data (Siodmok 2014). Policy Lab emerged in the context of emerging narratives such as the Civil Service Reform Plan (UK Government 2012) which, among other things, made commitments to "open policy making" becoming the default drawing on a range of experts from academics to those who will deliver the policy;

and ensuring civil servants have the necessary expertise, tools and techniques, and a clear understanding of what works in practice. A year later, a Civil Service report (UK Government 2013) promised to

- Fund a Policy Lab to promote innovative techniques such as design-based thinking and ethnography to approach policy problems in a new way;
- Develop a culture where openness to new evidence, involving a broader range of inputs and experts and experimentation was the starting point to solving problems and developing options by trialing, testing and iterating, with implementation in mind.

For the first two years, Policy Lab was funded by government departments to be a cross-government resource to support policy officials to try out new ways of working. Based in the Cabinet Office, Policy Lab was closely tied to discussion about innovation produced by the government but also intermediaries such as Nesta as discussed by Williamson (2015a).

In its first year Policy Lab had a core team equivalent to 2.4 full-time staff. Led by Dr Andrea Siodmok, an experienced strategic designer, Policy Lab works with collaborators inside government and with specialist UK consultancies. In its first year its demonstrator projects included working with the Home Office on digital policing, with the Ministry of Justice on supporting couples with children going through divorce or separation and with the Department of Work and Pensions and Department of Health on health and work. It also delivers one-off workshops for civil servants, having given around 3000 people in the first 18 months opportunities to try out creativity and collaboration techniques.

3.4 Data gathering and analysis

Data gathering took place as a result of my being embedded in Policy Lab three days a week for a year. Data included fieldnotes and photographs; documents produced by the Policy Lab team such as presentations, project briefs, reports and summaries of meetings; emails and social media activity including Twitter and SlideShare files; and blog posts such as the Cabinet Office's Open Policy blog. In addition to my participant observation, I conducted semi-structured interviews with civil servants and others working with them. Much of this material is confidential and in the vignettes that follow, some details have been changed. I informed participants of my status in the team as a researcher, anonymised many details and, when doing interviews, gained written informed consent.

Analysis and interpretation happened through iterative cycles of identifying themes in the data; creating accounts and sharing them with participants including civil servants; triangulating these accounts with other people; and referring back to other sources such as practitioner blogs and reports and academic literature.

4. Encounters between design expertise and policy making practice

The discussion that follows reviews the intersections of design expertise and policy making practice via projects from Policy Lab's pilot year through the conceptual lens offered by Barry et al (2008). The discussion highlights the multiple and at times contradictory ways that design expertise played out in its encounters with policy making practice.

4.1 System re-design workshop

The first example comes from a project that Policy Lab conducted with the Ministry of Justice (MOJ) about family mediation services. This was an area in which current policy was not working. A change in the law had resulted in removing the option of state-funded legal advice for couples getting divorced. Instead, there were now mediation services to encourage people not to go to court when separating, which then became mandatory before applying to court and for which some parties could receive for free (see Kimbell 2014 for more detail).

MOJ set up a project which saw Policy Lab *service* the policy team by supporting them to try out new approaches to inform the thinking about family mediation. Policy Lab worked with a partner, Innovation Unit, to undertake ethnographically-informed interviews with people going through divorce, including people using mediation services, and with providers of services.

Towards the end of the 10 week project Policy Lab and Innovation Unit convened a one-day workshop in which I was a participant, which brought together 33 stakeholders involved in the issue. This included policy officials and people representing different aspects of family law including mediators, lawyers, judges and other specialists such as people providing voluntary services. Within the logic of *accountability*, Policy Lab helped the department engage in new ways with publics involved in the issue.

Activities in the workshop included small teams of people with different expertise working together to explore the issue of couples with children going through separation and divorce. First they reviewed printed versions of personas generated from the research. Through discussing these accounts, participants brought into view the lived experience of these individuals. Then the teams created visions for how people could reach agreement about family disputes without going to court (see Figure 1). Having prioritized three of these visions, teams then created roadmaps for how actors in the issue – including their own organisations – could work together differently to achieve their vision.

The outcomes of the workshop were the establishment of a collective but temporary inquiry into parents going through separation or divorce; a clearer sense of the publics to whom this was an issue and the relationships between them; recognition of the need to collaborate and reconfigure resources and enable change at a systems level to achieve the intended

policy outcome; and new capacities amongst participants to situate themselves differently in relation to the issue.

The MOJ policy team were familiar with the issue and many of the actors in it. For them, the value of the workshop was to convene a new way of working which resulted in a *re-ordering* of the policy arena. Instead of the sometimes antagonistic engagements between civil servants and some actors in this sector, this workshop engaged participants in a collaborative, open way of working which, convened by Policy Lab and an independent consultancy, to produce what some of the civil servants referred to as a "neutral space" in which they could explore the issue together.

Figure 1   Photo from Policy Lab/Innovation Unit system redesign workshop showing a mixed group of participants from different backgrounds collectively generating a vision for the future of family mediation.

Reflecting later on the workshop, a civil servant from MOJ commented,

> "I was really impressed with [the service providers] who don't have the opportunity to think about the bigger picture … [In the workshop they] were enthusiastic and engaged and able to take on our policy problem and help us out with it, even though some of the things that were being suggested might have an adverse effect on their service. But they were able to see it from a much bigger picture and not just about them."

The workshop brought into view the experiences of people going through separation or divorce, and engaged participants in collaborating with others to construct future visions of services and roadmaps. In so doing, this enabled participants to open up their assumptions about how the policy area was constituted and what it was made up of. Many of the participants were familiar with the issue but the workshop activities resulted in a *re-ordering* of the issue, including – at least for a few hours – their current relations to it and to one another.

4.2 The policy sprint

The second example comes from a joint project between Policy Lab with the Department of Work and Pensions (DWP) and Department of Health (DH) in a complex and politically contentious area about providing welfare support to people out of work. This took place in the context of significant changes such as a general election and plans for further major cuts to budgets and to welfare benefits. The first phase of this project (which later further developed) took place over five months.

The particular focus was finding new ways to support people in work with health conditions. Below a policy adviser from DWP describes the drivers shaping the project, in which Policy Lab *serviced* the policy teams by bringing in external expertise in ethnographic research. Here his account uses a logic of *re-ordering*, in which external perspectives (users' experiences) could drive central government policy rather than the other way round.

> "Thinking about things from the user end is alluring because policy tends to come down from central government, and ends up with the people on the front line doing their best to try and combine all of that with what's in front of them. So we need to reverse some of that thinking, to strengthen that input from the user end, to counterbalance some of the centrally driven stuff. That's why it's appealing. What we've been trying to do is look at all the tiers together. And make sure there isn't such a big gap between head office and the front end."
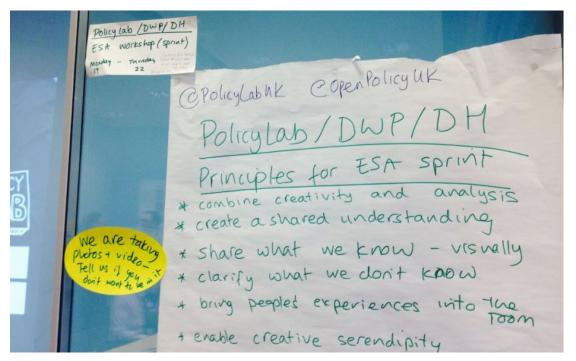
As well as servicing the departments, Policy Lab *partnered* with them shaped by the logic of *innovation*. It took the lead on organising and facilitating the project, working closely with the departmental policy leads to design and resource the activities, resulting in new hybrid ways of doing policy work. For example Policy Lab and its partners convened a "policy sprint" workshop to kickstart the project (see Figure 2) (Drew 2015).

This was a 2.5 day workshop that I was actively involved in helping design and facilitate in the form of a collective inquiry into work and health. It involved about 20 people including policy makers, analysts, designers, researchers and stakeholders in exploring existing evidence, identifying gaps, articulating research themes and questions that the project could answer through ethnography and data science, shaped by the lens focusing on people's experiences of ill-health and work. The group produced a research design for the project and a high level plan for how the joint project would unfold through the combination of different resources and expertise. On the final morning several representatives from stakeholder organisations including clinicians and employers reviewed the scope of the emerging

project, gave feedback and were interviewed to produce further insights into the perspectives of people affected by the issue. As the Policy Lab lead Cat Drew put it in her blog post after the event, "It's not often that stakeholders are invited in at the 'understanding the problem' stage, before we have any ideas to test and they seemed to like it: *'Thought yesterday was great: it really felt collaborative and productive'"* (Drew 2015).

The outcomes of the sprint were the establishment of a collective inquiry into ill-health and work in the context of policy across a diverse group of people; a clearer sense of the publics to whom this was an issue; and different ways of thinking about and constituting the issue.

While these activities were associated with the logic of *innovation*, the policy sprint itself produced moments of *reordering*. For example while participants were coming up with research questions for their joint project to explore, one, who works for an organisation supporting people looking for work, posed the question: "What is good work?" This question introduced an important but uncomfortable space within the shared project. It prompted participants to step back and consider from whose perspective the project was being run and its ultimate purpose.

Figure 2   Photo from Policy Lab's first "policy sprint" workshop showing its design principles during a joint project with the Department of Work and Pensions and Department of Health

For policy makers, the locus of activity is usually the minister in their department, shaped by the rationale of accountability to the rest of government and to voters. But by posing this question, the participants shifted – at least potentially – the major focus of accountability away from ministers towards the people who are the objects of government policy. Asking "what is good work?" resulted in a temporary re-ordering of what matters. Here the mode of design was to *challenge*, not just partner. The lead official had agreed to collaborate in the

project within a logic of accountability. But one of the results was to pose as a question the nature of "good work" and its outcomes within people's lives, rather than "government policy" or "reducing costs". This question surfaced the irreducible politics in policy development, namely who gets to define, structure and shape future visions.

5. Conclusion

In its pilot phase, Policy Lab successfully demonstrated that approaches and methods associated with design expertise can be used within central government in relation to live policy issues. Policy Lab helped civil servants from government departments apply design within their day-to-day policy development work. To do this it engaged specialist consultancies, people with first hand experience of a policy issue, front line staff and delivery partners in research, sense making, idea generation and prototyping, resulting in positive outcomes for participants which included:

- Situating projects as collective inquiries involving a broad range of participants into issues, structures and processes through which problems and solutions would emerge;
- Setting up ways for civil servants to try out different ways of doing and knowing in relation to one another and to other publics and the issues they work on;
- Reordering what matters, by bringing into view the experiences and worlds of people affected by or involved in a policy issue and making project teams accountable to this evidence.

Using Barry et al's (2008) analysis of interdisciplinarity offers a way to go beyond common descriptions of the "value" of design to governments interested in assessing its impact. The use of design expertise was located within narratives of accountability, innovation and re-ordering. At times design was in service to policy makers, providing them with expertise in methods (such as collaborative idea generation with stakeholders) or the production of outputs (such as visualisations of people's experiences of a policy issue). At other times this expertise was recombined into new forms of policy making. But at times the encounter between design and policy making presented a challenge to the regular way of doing things by surfacing uncomfortable truths. Thus as well exploring and generating what new policy making capabilities might be, design problematised policy making – and this could be a significant part of its contribution. But with this possibility comes a new challenge for design in the time of policy problems – posing the question of what kinds of visions, worlds and communities such practices might help bring into being and the ethical and political implications for design professionals involved in such work.

government departments, as well as collaborators such as specialist design and research consultancies. More details can be found in Kimbell (2015).

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