Moving Toward Paradigms and Patterns of Transformative Innovation in Public Sector Labs

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This paper shares work in progress from action research focused on the transformative potential of public sector innovation labs (PSI labs). Much of the research about PSI labs remains within current paradigms of Western and European governance. If public sector innovators hold an ambitious and systemic innovation intent, then there is a need to stretch beyond these dominant paradigms. Westley et al. (2011) capture the need for this ambition: "to support 9 billion people without transgressing critical planetary boundaries, efforts to diffuse and scale the most promising innovations must be accelerated. This requires the transformation of the institutions that shape our cultural, political, and economic transactions" (p. 775).

Given this urgency, I argue that PSI labs that hold an ambitious, systemic intent must take an approach to their work that does not (inadvertently) reinforce the problematic dimensions of dominant paradigms. Action research data is used to construct a conceptual framework that proposes aspects of transformative/emergent/resurgent paradigms of governance for innovation. The tensions inherent in moving away from what is, and toward what must/may be are explored. Potential roles and responsibilities of design/ers in skillfully navigating the spaces that these tensions create conclude the paper.

Keywords: public sector innovation, social innovation lab, systems thinking

Introduction

Much of the literature about public sector innovation (PSI), and public sector innovation labs (PSI labs), takes the current paradigm of governance as relatively fixed. In the context of public sector organizations in North America and Europe, these dominant paradigms of governance are fundamentally shaped by settler colonialism and New Public Management (NPM) and by the systems, structures, and behaviours that arise from these paradigms. There is some PSI and PSI labs literature that explores ideas of ambidextrous, collaborative, networked, citizen-engaged, adaptive, design-oriented, and open governance that may be pointing toward emerging ideas about an evolving governance paradigm (Bason, 2017; Blomkamp et al., 2018; Blomkamp, 2021; Boukamel & Emery, 2017; de Vries et al., 2016; Hartley et al., 2013; Lewis et al., 2017; Lewis, 2020; McGann et al., 2018; Sørensen & Torfing, 2011). Literature that explores the tensions between enabling conditions and barriers to PSI tends to be framed within these dominant paradigms as well (for example: Bekkers & Tummers, 2018; Demircioglu & Audretsch, 2017; Gryszkiewicz et al., 2016; Munro, 2015; Tõnurist et al., 2017; Torugsa & Arundel, 2016). Enabling conditions and barriers related to context, conceptions of leadership, institutional and organizational culture, collaboration, identity/purpose, and impact measurement also remain largely within the frames of settler colonial and NPM frames (for example: Brown & Osborne, 2013; Carstensen & Bason, 2012; Considine & Lewis, 2007; Gieske et al., 2016; Hartley et al., 2013; Kronsell & Mukhtar-Landgren, 2018; Lewis et al., 2017; Mulgan, 2009; Ricard et al., 2017; Timeus & Gascó, 2018; Tõnurist et al., 2015).

Innovations that aim to work at the root causes of complex civic challenges must necessarily look beyond the dominant paradigms, systems, and structures that created them, particularly when the intent is to move beyond interventions that make the existing system more efficient or user-friendly. Arguably, efficiency and user-oriented innovations may actually work to uphold the problematic systems and structures of the dominant system, and distract from or prevent more radical shifts from occurring (Wheatley & Frieze, no date; Sharpe et al., 2016). An example can be drawn from many 'innovations' in public engagement that do not shift power, agency, or

decision-making and tend to keep those who already have positional power and authority in place. There are decades of evidence that working on complex challenges like systemic oppression and climate change from within these dominant paradigms is not leading to change at the scale or speed required. How then might structures like PSI labs think differently about systemically intervening in complex challenges in order to create the conditions necessary for innovation that is not bound by the current governance paradigm?

I argue that this is the space of transformative, emergent, and resurgent innovation, and not the space for incremental, efficiency-oriented, or user-centered change. By attending to paradigms, Meadows (2008) tells us that the impacts of systems change efforts are likely to be much more significant than other types of interventions, and that we need to "keep speaking and acting, loudly and with assurance, from the new [paradigm]" (p. 164). What is this new/resurgent paradigm that we might begin to imagine and enact in order to work in/with/on complex, systemic civic challenges? And how might this create a generative tension with what we may need to move away from, or hospice? This short paper describes potential elements of paradigms of transformative, emergent, and resurgent innovation in the public sector. Patterns of tensions created by what we may need to move away from and move toward are explored. The conceptual framework is a result of participatory action research and constructivist grounded theory building with 85 public sector innovation lab practitioners from 25 organizations in 7 countries (Canada, Europe, Australia) conducted from 2017 – 2020, and continues to be a work in progress. The paper closes with some questions about the potential roles and responsibilities of systemic design/ers in working with these tensions.

Change, Transformation, Emergence, Resurgence

Before discussing the conceptual framework, working definitions for the ways in which the terms change, transformation, emergence, and resurgence are used here are provided. Most of these terms are used quite regularly in innovation discourse, although they often mean different things. This section draws from a collection of thinkers that are exploring these processes (Corntassel, DATE; Juarrero, 2015; Kimmerer, 2013; Lichtenstein, 2014; Meadows, 2008; Scharmer, 2016; Sharpe et al., 2016; Simpson, 2017; Snowden & Boone, 2007; Wheatley & Frieze, no date).

Change happens through incremental adaptations. The foundations of the current system remain unquestioned and unchanged, and the focus is on making things work better through small improvements.

Transformation is a more significant shift in people, structures, processes and systems. It is often triggered by a growing problem, challenge, or crisis, and this pressure is what is required in order to shift or dislodge a stable or stuck approach into a different state.

Both change and transformation modify, respond to, and/or adapt existing elements, processes, structures, behaviours and routines.

Emergence is a dissimilarity (rather than a difference), where the parameters themselves change, rather than the variation of existing parameters that happens with change or transformation. Emergence is creation sparked by aspiration, the 'becoming' of a vision for a new opportunity that was not there before. Emergence tends to vastly expand the potential, capacity, and capability of people, organizations, and systems to work on the challenges that they face.

Resurgence is focused on work to recover, revitalize, and renew possibilities of being and relationship that have been suppressed and marginalized by the dominant system. Resurgence is most often associated with Indigenous cultures, and reflects integrated spiritual, cultural, economic, social, and political dimensions of these processes.

Noting that there are fundamental and critically important distinctions and differences between transformation, emergence, and resurgence, these three ideas are taken together when playing with paradigms in the conceptual framework that follows. The framework aims to begin to name how transformation, emergence, and resurgence (together) are different than the change orientation most often used by PSI and PSI labs.

Working with Paradigms to Create and Explore Tensions

Figure 1 describes aspects of what holding paradigms of transformative, emergent, or resurgent innovation might involve. In the centre column are aspects of paradigm, along with the patterns to move away from (on the left), and patterns to move toward (on the right). This conceptual framework was generalized from literature and rich action research data generated by/with 85 action co-researchers when prompted to consider and practice ideas about leadership, enabling conditions, barriers, and agency/accountability for transformative public sector innovation. Further nuance to the moving away and moving toward patterns is provided as an appendix (Table 1), where descriptive fragments of data from action co-researchers is shared. These moving away/toward patterns are intentionally shown as spectra rather than binaries so as to invite consideration of many different ways to stay in motion with the patterns, engage with the tensions that they create, and to avoid an overly simplistic 'this is better than that' interpretation.

Moving away from....	Transformative/emergent/ resurgent innovation is...	Moving toward....
White Dominant	reimagining possibilities and paradigms through lenses of equity and decolonization	Inclusive + Just
Theatre	embedded into personal, organizational culture, and systems level DNA	Authentic
Reactive	taking a whole-systems and All My Relations view of complex challenges	Systemic
Fear	rooted in creativity and risk taking to develop and try new possibilities, ideas, and solutions	Courage
Control	sharing power and leadership, and cultivating agency	Release + Unleash
Scarcity + Efficiency	knowing that we have everything that we need in order to create conditions for mutual flourishing	Abundance
Closed + Competitive	building movements and enabling the work of others	Open + Collaborative
Conflict Avoidance	engaging with tensions, conflict and contestation as a generative force	Conflict Engagement
Marginal + Pragmatic	aspirational, and has significant and meaningful impacts on complex challenges	Ambitious + At Scale

Figure 1. Paradigm and patterns of transformative, emergent, resurgent innovation.

Questions for Discussion

Are there systemic design interventions that might support hospicing/letting go of the systems, structures, and paradigms that no longer serve? Are there systemic design interventions to support the imagining/letting come of systems, structures, and paradigms that enable transformative, emergent, and/or resurgent innovation?

What are the potential and unique roles or responsibilities of an innovation lab to articulate the paradigms within which they are operating? To move toward paradigms that might enable systemic transformation on complex civic challenges? To identify and experiment with systemic intervention points that might help to shift these stuck paradigms and patterns into something more generative?

Working on transformation, emergence, and resurgence is often slippery and hard to describe, and has poor measures to tell us when we are 'there.' Might this framework give us some clues or signals about how to understand impact?

When we work on systemic interventions that challenge the dominant systems, structures, and narratives there will be push back. How might practitioners ready them/ourselves to navigate this? How might researchers support and enable this?

While it is important to hold this conceptual framework lightly and consider it as offering some provocative food for thought, it also surfaces how 'innovation' can become a way to mask or hide hard-to-face truths about how current systems are failing us in many ways. How might our personal and collective work be inadvertently contributing to keeping problematic systems, structures, and behaviours in place?

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Appendix

Table 1. Data fragments from participatory action research identifying leverage points for systemic interventions for transformative, emergent, resurgent innovation

Paradigms: transformative/ emergent/ resurgent innovation is…	Leverage points to move away from…	Leverage points to move toward…
Reimagining organizational possibilities and paradigms through lenses of equity and decolonization	**White Dominant** • Current paradigm of colonization and white dominance resulting in ongoing systemic and structural inequities, oppression, and injustice • Limited opportunities for innovation to happen within oppressive organizational systems, structures and paradigms • Those who benefit most from the system tend to be in power, and to keep the current system in place, "cling to the dominant system"	**Inclusive + Just** • Based in Indigenous, anti-oppressive, feminist, and queer ways of knowing and being • Letting go of/unlearning white dominance • Come together, and practice being human • Examine values attached to quality of work, formulate problems differently, and include a diversity of perspectives • Unlock new (old) ways of knowing, doing and being that then inform a renewed construct of 'public sector'
Embedded into personal, organizational culture, and systems level DNA	**Theatre** • Innovation as performance; a façade of social innovation • Lot of talk, not a lot of commitment or follow-through • Word innovation regularly used, but not defined, and not integrated into organizational strategy, processes, budgets, performance objectives, or measures • Innovation is strongly attached to brand, identity and narrative without much substance	**Authentic** • Innovation-related values, purpose, goals, strategic approach and activities are clear and strongly theorized • Processes, structures, systems and communication infrastructures in strategic alignment, while leaving room for the non-linear and emergent nature of innovation work • Adequate resources, time, social and political capital invested and commensurate with the scope of the challenge • Strategic learning and adaptive leadership systems and processes in place
Taking a whole-systems and All My Relations view of complex challenges	**Reactive** • 90% of what we do is reactive because we're desperate; always operate like it's an emergency • Reductionist approaches; "working at the end of the pipe, cleaning up the garbage" • Quick fixes are rewarded, incentivized, encouraged and/or required • Case-by-case, one-off and short-term reactions are the norm	**Systemic** • Strong, systemic analysis to surface interconnections, relationships, and dependencies and work from this place to identify potential response • Slow down and ask deeper questions of self, organization, and system to reveal assumptions, biases, blind spots, privilege, and paradigms • Strategic clarity about what is the real problem that we are trying to solve? • Catalyse change from deeper leverage points; change the unchangeable
Rooted in creativity and risk taking to develop and try new possibilities, ideas, and solutions	**Fear** • Blame, shame, and punish when there are failures • Fear of screwing up • Stay the course; status quo as the easy way because it is known, even if it underperforms • Fail to avoid negative consequences of current trajectory	**Courage** • Let's try it, let's do it; how amazing would it be if… • No one is going to yell at you for having an interesting idea; create comfort and take away fear when someone goes first • Step into ambitious goals and idea, even if you know you might not get where you are trying to go
Sharing power and leadership, and cultivating agency	**Control** • Top-down leadership structure and approach to managing innovation • Ego-driven; innovation is for people with special skills, access, or power • Internalized hierarchy; wait for someone else to lead • Innovation is not my job; innovation is stifled	**Release + Unleash** • Innovation leadership lives in many people, and they need opportunities and agency to realize this • People showing up to lead innovation often are not the senior leaders; who is stepping into what is the hardest? • Co-create culture of supporting people; we should be getting people excited, not holding them down
Knowing that we have everything that we need in order to create conditions for mutual flourishing	**Scarcity + Efficiency** • Public sector system is being starved, leading to narrative that it is inefficient and underperforming • Missing basic tools to enable great work • Keep squeezing more and more out of people	**Abundance** • We have the people, skills, talent, knowledge and commitment if we develop, enable and support this • We have the necessary resources if we work

	• Tolerate operating with deficiencies, 'I can't believe what we do with so little' internalized as source of pride	collectively and direct them where they need to go • We have the time that we need to think, act, reflect, and learn in deep relationship with others; these things take time
Building movements and enabling the work of others	**Closed + Competitive** • Organizational systems and structures discourage and inhibit collaboration • Consistently de-prioritize building and strengthening relationships • Work with those we already know, stay in echo-chambers • Activities, plans, strategies, resources, information are withheld or siloed within- and between people and organizations • Low trust; competition for attention, resources and access	**Open + Collaborative** • Create pathways and incentives for cross-pollination, connection, openness and sharing • Look outwards for ideas, collaborators, expertise, and experiences • Enable innovation ecosystems that support interconnections, reciprocity, collective impact, shared leadership, and trust
Engaging with tensions, conflict and contestation as a generative force	**Conflict Avoidance** • Disruptors and disruption considered problems that need to repressed and managed • Avoid working with conflict around big issues because they scare people • Important issues are stuck, without building shared understanding of different points of view even when there is disagreement • Difficult issues are avoided, delayed, worked around, and get progressively worse	**Conflict Engagement** • Disruptors invited as catalysts, disruption provokes curiousity, loving contestation welcomed • Skillfully hold space for brave, honest conversations, create opportunities to engage with difference (internally and publicly) • Learn to work with discomfort as a place for learning and movement, to reveal promising possibilities
Aspirational, and has significant and meaningful impacts on complex challenges	**Marginal + Pragmatic** • Low organizational readiness and willingness to make investments required to get to different outcomes • Look for prescriptive, formulaic ways to do innovation • Innovation often one-off's, at a micro level, without scaling or significant impact • You have to be realistic in what you deliver	**Ambitious + At Scale** • Challenges are high stakes and urgent, and there isn't time to waste • Cultivate readiness to take the big leaps and to make systemic, durable change • Efforts have a profound impact on a lot of people, and in the world