**"Design-Based Research to Inform Implementation and Innovation in Human Services"**
Jodi Sandfort

Governance and management of public institutions in the United States is at a crossroads. Years of under investment in public institutions, low salaries and high turnover in private nonprofit organizations, as well as high levels of citizen distrust in formal institutions create formidable challenges. The proliferation of government forms of investment (Salamon 2002), and concerns that the technical complexity of these mechanisms overshadows public managers abilities to manage (Kettl 2000; Hill and Lynn 2005), has created a crisis of capability.

These challenges are quite apparent in policy fields providing public services to our most disadvantage citizens. With income and asset inequality at an all-time high in the United States, the social safety-net is effectively dismantled (Lipsky 2013). In resource-starved fields, public and nonprofit service providers via for authority and resources, creating complex institutional environments (Sandfort 2010) that bear little resemblance to the carefully designed service networks often imagined by public administration scholars. Top down regulations mix with performance measurement and legacy organizational routines to create significant administrative burdens experienced by service recipients (Herd et al. 2013; Heinrich, 2018).

In response, I struggle to determine what is the most prudent way to pursue my scholarly agenda. While public management research has become more empirically rigorous, many note this research does not have much take-up among public managers (Meier 2015; O'Toole 2004; Isett, et al 2015). Rather than thinking about public service motivation, publicness, or representative bureaucracy, public managers are trying to implement policy mandates or find opportunities for innovation. They need scholars to bring our systematic approach and rigorous analytics to help with those pressing problems.

In 2013, Stephanie Moulton and I embarked upon a project to provide more conceptual clarity to the literature on policy implementation and consider its relevance to practice. We succeed in creating multi-media case studies, analytical tools, and a book (Sandfort and Moulton 2015) to support improved implementation practice grounded in multi-level governance and social theory. Our strategic action field theoretical framework (Moulton and Sandfort 2017) helped us to be more clear that, in addition to supporting more effective policy implementation, we also were poised to support more programmatic and administrative innovation.

In late 2015, I started to build an Institute to assist me in realizing these ambitions. The Future Services Institute works with leaders in Minnesota state and local governments to improve the performance of public service programs and systems that serve low-income families (see www.futureservicesinstitute.org). To do so, we engage in leadership development, program evaluation and applied research, and facilitate complex systems change through design labs, conferences, and extended projects that support innovation.

Our work is grounded in both the strategic action field theoretical framework and a methodology of design-based research  (Bason, 2017; Fishman, et al. 2013;  Penuel et al. 2011).

Our design-based approach accounts for an interplay of research knowledge, practical implementation tools, and contextual knowledge of the setting.  As Herbert Simon (1996) described, design science in management focuses upon trying to intervene in current conditions to change them into more preferred ones.  Rather than focusing on linear causation in general cases, design-based research is focused on understanding causality in a specific setting (Romme, 2003; Lewin, 1946).  Design takes seriously the existing administrative and social conditions in a particular context (Bason, 2010, 2017).  Yet it also uses new information to create what should be,  through engaging others and sharing what happens as a result (Ansell & Torfing, 2014; Patton et al, 2016; Romme, 2003).  In this way, it involves intervening in public institutions to assist managers in improving public value outcomes (Bryson et al, 2014).

In addition to conventional social science methods– surveys, focus groups, interviews – design methodology  involves facilitating collaborative forums where dialogue, learning and decision making can occur.  Such settings may enable co-creation, where service users, staff, and managers can work together to identify problems, explore elements of them, or interpret data (Bovaird, 2007; Bryson, Quick, Slotterback, & Crosby, 2013; Sandfort & Quick, 2017). It also involves sharing research results with people responsible for making changes in the system (Nabatchi and Amsler 2014).  Rather than seeing this intervention as contaminating research conditions, design-based scholars recognize the invaluable role that such information can play in supporting rapid-cycle learning in complex, adaptive systems in order to inform more appropriate actions (Hargreaves, 2014; Patton, et al 2016).

This approach to public administration scholarship is still in early stages of intellectual development (Barzelay and Thompson 2007; Barzelay 2012; Sandfort 2018; Bardach 1998; Moynihan 2018).   Yet, Ansell and Torfing (2014) note three components of design thinking that suggest its possible role in supporting public sector innovation:  design is problem- and future-oriented, it uses heuristic devices to make choices concrete, and it requires the creation of collaborative forums.  Bason (2017) provides the most complete account of the application of design-based interventions and methods in public organizations to date.

This approach is consistent with the growing international scholarly chorus about the "new public governance" (Ansell & Torfing, 2014; Ansell, 2011; Bryson, 2014; Emerson & Nabatchi, 2015; Gray & Purdy, 2018).  I look forward discussion with those attending Minnowbrook about the viability of this approach for our field.


Bio:
Jodi Sandfort is a Professor at the University of Minnesota's Humphrey School of Public Affairs and Chair of the Management and Leadership Area.  She currently is a Family Self-Sufficiency Scholar funded by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services focused

on building research and analytical capacity in state and local human service bureaus.  She is the founder and Academic Director of the Future Services Institute, an applied research and training center focused on public service redesign in partnership with state agencies, county governments, nonprofit service providers, and private foundations.  Dr. Sandfort received a Ph.D. in political science and social work from the University of Michigan. She also holds a master's degree in social work from the University of Michigan and a B.A. from Vassar College.  For more about her work see www.jodisandfort.org.

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