



CoDesign

International Journal of CoCreation in Design and the Arts

ISSN: 1571-0882 (Print) 1745-3755 (Online) Journal homepage: <http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/ncdn20>

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To cite this article: Lucy Kimbell & Guy Julier (2019): Confronting bureaucracies and assessing value in the co-production of social design research, CoDesign

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/15710882.2018.1563190>



Published online: 08 Jan 2019.



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Confronting bureaucracies and assessing value in the co-production of social design research

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the issue of assessing the value of social design research. It locates the emergence of social design practice and research against a background in which public and social organisations are increasingly bureaucratised as a result of New Public Management and shifts to New Public Governance. Within universities, too, organisational processes and structures require research to demonstrate impact within an audit culture. Through the study presented in this paper, we claim that the bureaucracies found in contemporary academia are ill-equipped to adequately assess generative, impactful, and multi-sited research in which value is co-produced with diverse participants. This presents challenges when attempting to understand the value of social design research. Building on social research and studies of innovation policy, sustainable human-computer interaction and evaluation, we define social design research as inventive, contingent, and political. To address the issue of its evaluation, we propose two-stage social design research. In the first stage, research issues, questions, methods, data, and 'proto-publics' are assembled, which reveal the conflicting framings and ways that value is assessed. These are re-assembled in a second stage during which the research is stabilised. The findings have implications for research managers, academics and their partners, and university administrators.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 28 November 2017
Accepted 18 December 2018

KEYWORDS

Social design research; social design; interdisciplinarity; multi-disciplinarity; knowledge exchange

1. Introduction

Social design research is an emerging field that draws in a broad range of design specialisms and combines these with deep understanding, analysis, and expertise developed in other domains of research and practice such as ageing, healthcare, social policy, government and politics, and planning. It combines the change orientation of design practice that aims to intervene in social issues through the application of design expertise, practice, and thinking¹ with the knowledge-building, evidence-based culture of researchers. Its multiple relations with other kinds of expertise and their varied institutional locations and framings, combined with its orientation to both intervention *and* research, make it hard to assess its value. Indeed, diverse notions of value may surface or be generated in spaces of social design research where different forms of valorisation encounter one another. By examining the bureaucratic contexts of social design research,

specifically public and third sector organisations and universities, we aim to better understand the implications for assessing the value of social design research.

Social design research includes producing knowledge to inform the straightforward fashioning of objects that, for example, improve efficiency, enhance well-being or promote inclusivity for societal benefit (Armstrong et al. 2014). Examples include designers working with specialists such as public service managers and stakeholders such as residents in (re)designing artefacts and services offered by the local government as part of public service innovation in a context of neo-liberal austerity (e.g. Thorpe 2019). As a form of research, it generates problem-solving, practical outputs as well as producing new understandings of the socio-material world into which it seeks to intervene (Ehn, Nilsson, and Topgaard 2014).

However, social design research can also include the exploration and generation of new socialities, practices, and ontologies that may be ongoing as processes (Braslett 2015). For example, working with and across a municipality and its stakeholders, social design researchers can open up new relationships, new capacities for change and render publics and issues visible (e.g. Ehn, Nilsson, and Topgaard 2014). In this latter case, its never-ending state of becoming points toward something that eludes pre-established systems of valorisation, indeed producing its own sets of values and ways of feeling and knowing (Facer and Enright 2016). This unfolding is where contexts and interventions are reconfigured iteratively and progressively through *inventive* research (Marres, Guggenheim, and Wilkie 2018). New possibilities and purposes for social design research may be discovered in this agonistic, cross-disciplinary space. These may disrupt how we account for value and impact, and they call into question the basis on which we think about them.

Against this background, this paper examines the concept of value in social design research, identify the problematics it is entangled within, and sketch out a potential solution to the challenge of understanding such value. As a result, it flips from a consideration of the value of social design research to proposing how such research can reveal, rupture or reconfigure the institutional framings, practices, and devices through which valuation is practically achieved. To achieve this, we draw on literatures in several traditions including studies of design and social research. It is also informed by projects we have undertaken to map social design research.²

First, we review different approaches to social design and to social design research and note the limited discussions of value to date. We argue that a relative lack of reflexivity in universities as to the contemporary conditions in which design researchers operate hinders systematic exploration of the problematics of valorisation. Second, we argue that systems of governance in the social sector and questions of impact and audit in universities conspire to shape social design research and challenge its systems of valorisation. Third, we sketch out insights from social research, innovation policy, sustainable human-computer interaction (HCI) and studies of evaluation. We then synthesise the discussion to propose characteristics of social design research as *inventive*, *contingent*, and *political*. We suggest seeing such research as activating spaces for engaging or assembling ‘proto-publics’. This is where the – albeit temporary – spaces of social design research enable exploring and aligning differing and competing conceptions of value among collaborating actors shaping how the research is valorised. Fourth, we propose a way of operationalising such spaces to explore questions of value therein through what we call two-stage social design research. We conclude by discussing

implications for research managers, researchers and their partners, and university administrators.

Our insights developed from dialogues with UK and international researchers in the design and the social sciences, mostly employed at Western higher education institutions. While we aim to be reflexive about the contexts in which we are implicated against a backdrop of economic and political turbulence, the specificities of our careers and locations³ will have resulted in our being less attentive to other modes of organising within universities, the social and public sectors, and their consequences.

2. The rise of social design and social design research

We make a distinction between social design practice and social design research. As Chen et al. (2016) note, social design is at an early stage of development. In their introduction to a journal special issue on the topic, the authors point to key challenges in its having impacts: '[S]ocial design in its current stage may do well at the scale of a village or an informal organization, but its prospects of success are far smaller when it has to deal with the abstract structures of governance typical to late modernism' (3).

Social design practice is carried out in public, private, and third sector organisations and in academic contexts involving researchers and/or students in addressing and solving problems in relation to societal issues, which may be highly local. In universities, it may be delivered through processes associated with knowledge exchange, consultancy or student projects. It is action-oriented, aiming to produce change, although new knowledge may come out of this.

In contrast, social design *research* prioritises testing or contributing to existing knowledge, or creating new insights, through systematic inquiry oriented towards intervention, future action, change or transformation. There is often a thin line between these two, and this partially accounts for the multiple, hybrid nature of the outcomes of social design research. A programme of research or a project may result in conventional academic outputs such as journal articles. But it might also produce workshops, objects, prototypes, devices, guidelines, reports, and toolkits. It can result in new networks of knowledge held between various hitherto unlinked actors; embodied learning of new methods; new insights; new concepts to be developed; enhanced capacities for exploration, collaboration and engagement; and many other possibilities including desirable and undesirable unintended consequences.

Social design research is often co-produced with actors in a social issue such as residents, public servants, and service users, revealing and responding to situated contexts. Such design research can take place through spaces and moments such as workshops, community engagement, online fora and physical meetups. Researchers have taken up the notion of 'infrastructuring' to emphasise how constructing, enabling, and maintaining these activities and the social relations that they are realised through are essential to the work of researching and designing (e.g. Hillgren, Seravalli, and Emilson 2011; Ehn, Nilsson, and Topgaard 2014). However, infrastructuring may also be analysed within a wider frame of the bureaucratic logics and regimes that exist around the immediate space of the co-production of a research project. Individuals and groups are agents of and reproduce their institutional or organisational cultures and framings – be they, for example, the university, municipality or social enterprise they

work for. The spaces of co-production in social design research will therefore necessarily surface contradictions and tensions in what is valued and how it is valorised.

Discussions of value in design research often draw on the concept of ‘social’ value associated with Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) and commercial Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR). These often focus on the performance of individual organisations, rather than the multiple versions of value that may exist or compete with each other in the co-production settings of social design (Sanders and Simons 2009; Hoo et al. 2017). Elsewhere, studies of social design have discussed what is valued *in* design when used in public and third sector projects (e.g. Yee, White, and Lennon 2015) but not *how* it might be valorised or what shapes such assessments. One issue here is the agency of designers (and design researchers). Thorpe and Gamman (2011) argue that designers are only able to be *responsive*, rather than *responsible*, for how they do (or do not) deliver on social, political, and ethical objectives.

More generally, difficulties are often encountered by researchers in assessing the impacts of cultural and arts interventions, including design, on social issues such as health and well-being. For example, a report by the UK All-Party Parliamentary Group on Arts, Health and Wellbeing (2017) argued such evaluations tend to focus primarily on effects on individuals while social outcomes – such as a sense of belonging, identity or mutual support – are seen as secondary. Given the varied settings and organisations in which these take place, a wide range of measurement methods and tools are employed (see, for example, Daykin et al. 2017).

The challenges of co-production are evident too in related academic domains. For example, analysis of the UK Arts and Humanities Research Council’s (AHRC) Connected Communities programme carried out between 2010–15 revealed the difficulties in recognising and assessing the multiple locations and formats of knowledge that co-production generates (Facer and Enright 2016). Similarly, a UK study reviewing co-production in the social sciences concluded that ‘Co-production represents a qualitatively different form of research, and therefore the frameworks and criteria required to assess effectively the merits of such proposals, need to be qualitatively different too’ (Campbell and Vanderhoven 2016, 7). Elsewhere, there is increasing prominence given to the role of users in assessing research impact (Morgan Jones et al. 2013). Thus, the question of assessing value in the co-production of social design research may have a wider resonance.

To date, research that reviews social design, value, and co-production does not consider this sticky problem of the *realpolitik* of social design research that is set through this meeting point. The circumstances of social design research move it beyond simple, often quantitatively bound, conceptions of value. This requires looking at the broader institutional context in which such practice and research have emerged.

3. Institutional context: governance, bureaucracy, and audit culture

Social design practice often involves working closely in and with public sector bodies, government departments, consultancies, civil society institutions, and community and voluntary groups (Armstrong et al. 2014). Since the 1980s, Australasia, Canada and much of Europe have witnessed a progressive mixing up of these. This poses some particular challenges for valuing social design research.

The process started with the move from the bureaucratic organisation of the public sector to so-called New Public Management (NPM). With its target-setting, efficiency measures, outsourcing of functions to competitive tender and the pursuit of ‘best-value’, NPM instituted an entrepreneurial approach to public sector management that aimed to imitate private sector practices (McLaughlin, Osborne, and Ewan 2002; Martin 2000). This led to what Whitfield (2001, 2006) has called ‘agentification’ where functions – such as healthcare or social housing – are undertaken by mixtures of state, NGO, private, and voluntary sectors. This has become increasingly the case under neo-liberal austerity arrangements since the 2008 economic crisis. Facing budgetary cuts, the state sector has sought ‘best-value’ not merely through competitive tendering in its procurement processes, but in orchestrating complex of networks in determining the cheapest and most effective ‘best-fit’ of actors for service delivery. Actors in these ecosystems have different motivations and degrees of agency and, therefore, sometimes competing notions of value.

Variants of social design such as strategic design, service design, design for social innovation, and design thinking have been mobilised into this austerity narrative, often uncritically (von Busch and Palmås 2016). Designers’ skills in have produced new roles and rhetorics for design practice. This is evidenced through an energetic circuit of conferences, grey literature, social media, and the emergence of specialist consultancies and toolkits (Julier 2017: chp.8).

While a key driver for this new landscape of welfare provision has been financial – even before 2008 – this also represents a slippage from NPM into so-called ‘network governance’ or New Public Governance (NPG) (Dunleavy et al. 2006; Sangiorgi 2015). NPG relinquishes the notion that the state, or, indeed, any other organisation, can claim dominion. Collaboration, co-production, or co-creation are taken as the only viable route to addressing contemporary societal challenges such as migration, ageing, or housing (Quirk 2007).

In this, responsibilities for welfare are re-scaled. The Keynesian social contract of the welfare state is abandoned at national level. Instead, responsibility is effectively ‘downloaded’ to assemblages of local government, NGOs, community organisations, and other entities (Donald et al. 2014). These, in turn, become spaces of experimentation where forms of management, implementation, and service improvement are explored (Peck 2002). This is a space where social design research has become active.

However, this downloading does not necessarily open up unconditional spaces of and infrastructuring for experimentation. Alongside this change of emphasis in governance has come an intensification of audit systems to measure the effectivity of service management and delivery of welfare in the public sector and related organisations (Van Dooren, Bouckaert, and Halligan 2015; Parker, Jacobs, and Schmitz 2018). The criteria for such measurement are predominantly set at state level. Thus, while there may be some freedom for local collaborations to develop place-based initiatives and experimentation, they are also bound by external expectations and resource envelopes tied to state-defined audit systems and, therefore, definitions of value (Swyngedouw 2005).

Concurrently in universities, there has been a rise in the auditing of research outputs, environment, and impact (Watermeyer 2016). If, in its emphasis in co-production, social design research is hybrid, favouring complex, inter- and cross-disciplinary practices, then it may not sit easily with current regimes of the academic audit, performance

measurement, and career paths. Taking the easier route of demonstrating already-known registers of value encourages a retrenchment of traditional disciplinary arrangements. Rather than risk baffling research managers and auditors with unfamiliar articulations of research value, universities will continue to reproduce the safer option of the *status quo* no matter what calls are made for cross-disciplinarity for the creation of social goods (Fuller 2016). Current academic bureaucratic regimes do not sit easily with social design research, therefore. Accounting for its value is made harder by this misalignment of its practices with the internal realities of academic systems.

The move from bureaucratic governance through NPM to NPG presents associated challenges of identifying and calculating the value. By introducing a wide range of actors, interests, and politics into the mix of policymaking, planning, and service delivery, the landscape becomes more varied and unstable. The practices of social design research step into this space. Social design research experiments with insights, methods, data, formats, and socio-material configurations to explore, prototype, test and problematise possibilities and understand their implications and consequences. Through participatory modes of engagement, it positions broader publics as participants in the research process, beyond named investigators on a grant proposal. Its orientation to change, multiple disciplinary lenses, emphasis on co-production and the hybridity of its outcomes bring one challenging context of valorisation and measurement into contact with others. In short, the different audit demands of governance and university systems place any possibility of agreed notions of value under strain.

4. Theorising value in social design research

Thus far, we have identified two bureaucratic contexts shaping social design research: network governance (or New Public Governance) and audit culture within public organisations and universities. In terms of the assessment of value, both create problems for social design research through their internal devices, practices, and infrastructures. Indeed, they may even come into collision with one another: the former emphasising complex and experimental, inter-disciplinary and inter-sectorial arrangements while the latter potentially privileging singular methodologies and accounts of value. As such, notions of value and accountability are constantly destabilised. Current logics and accountabilities are not adequate to the challenge of understanding and assessing the outcomes resulting from social design research.

This raises a number of questions. How can researchers and participants articulate and measure different, possibly conflicting, accounts of co-produced value? How do researchers and participants deal with the dissonances produced when distinct bureaucratic regimes of accountability sit behind a variety of participants in co-production? What research methods are appropriate for understanding value as a collective and contested achievement in a variety of spaces and over different timescales? How are different disciplinary notions of value reconciled in multi- or cross-disciplinary contexts, as found in social design research?

To answer these questions, we turn to other domains discussing the value of research that aim to intervene in a setting in order to produce a theoretical grounding for understanding value in social design research. In particular, we draw on a discussion in social research, innovation policy, sustainable HCI, and studies of evaluation.

First, we note a growing interest in sociology in rethinking the relation between research and action (or intervention). One emerging strand within science and technology studies (STS) draws on Alfred North Whitehead's concept of the *invention*. As Barry puts it, 'What is inventive is not the novelty of artefacts and devices in themselves, but in the novelty of the arrangements with other objects and activities within which artefacts and instruments are situated, and might be situated in the future' (2001, 211–212). Building on this, researchers have sought to re-work the relations between research and what might unfold from or through research. For example, a review of inventive methods (Lury and Wakeford 2012) highlighted a wide range of methods, including some associated with design and the arts, oriented towards making a difference in a social world, not (merely) to studying or attempting to represent it. Other researchers have developed accounts of inventive social research which re-articulate the relations between research, representation, and intervention (Marres, Guggenheim, and Wilkie 2018). The concept of inventiveness foregrounds the processual and unfolding nature of research that opens up new possibilities, whose value cannot be assessed by the antecedent frames. The implication for understanding value in social design research is seeing it as exceeding beyond its starting conditions and framings.

Second, we note discussion within science and innovation policy that points to the challenges and limitations in constructing understandings of value in programmes and projects that seek to transform settings. There are growing numbers of intersections between the unfolding global imperative to transform how humans live within planetary resources, articulated by the United Nations' (2015) Sustainable Development Goals for 2030, and innovation policy and research.⁴ For example, Schot and Steinmueller (2018) argue for the need for a new framing for innovation policy oriented to transformative change. This framing aims to change systems, understood as socio-technical configurations. They argue that this requires deliberating and reconfiguring social and sustainability goals, and the values that are embedded in them, through experimentation and social learning.

Third, there is an increasing awareness of the ethics and politics of research and design. Within participatory design, for example, while there are multiple accounts of participation, what is meant by participation is rarely critically assessed (Halskov and Hansen 2015). There is also growing awareness of the need to decolonise design away from Western- and capitalistic-mindsets (e.g. Schultz et al. 2018). Social and cultural research offers a long history of critiquing research that perpetuates Western modes of knowledge production by colonising indigenous perspectives (e.g. Tuhiwai Smith 2012). In sustainable HCI, researchers are highlighting questions facing the academic community in relation to the challenges associated with climate change and equitable, sustainable futures (e.g. Brynjarsdottir et al. 2012; Knowles, Bates, and Maria 2018). Others are 'unsettling' assumptions in research, including building in ways for research teams to acknowledge and address conflicting understandings about value in a project (e.g. Nathan et al. 2017).

Finally, studies of valuation and evaluation point to the dynamic interplay between actors, framings, devices and infrastructures through which value is assessed. Introducing critical realism into evaluation practice drew attention to the specific, local factors shaping programme outcomes, asking 'what works for whom in what circumstances?' (Pawson and Tilley 1997, 405). Such 'realistic' evaluation emphasised

attending to the local conditions that made interventions effective, including being attentive to values. However, while values and valuing are sometimes seen as central to evaluation practice (Scriven 2016), the ways that value and valuing are conceptualised in research on evaluation are surprisingly underdeveloped (Coryn et al. 2017). An emerging sociology of evaluation (e.g. Lamont 2012) argues for the need to be attentive to the institutional mechanisms and practices that define who ‘belongs’ and whose views matter in defining and assessing worth.

Synthesising our discussion above with these contributions, we argue that social design research is *inventive*. It foregrounds as its mode of inquiry the interplay between the actualities and potentialities for creating knowledge and for intervening into and transforming a situation. Through the principles and practices of social design research, insights and outcomes from a project and their value are discovered through the emergence and the iterative and collective (re)negotiation of insights, possibilities, directions, and outcomes.

Social design research is therefore *contingent*. Valuation practices and devices and project outcomes are *made* during social design research. They do not have to be taken as given, pre-existing, or pre-determined. Their value comes into view through their unfolding materiality and performativity. As such, social design research offers a distinctive approach relevant to contexts in which knowledge is co-produced with, for and by social actors. Such knowledge is co-emergent with contemporary developments resulting from neo-liberal agendas such as narratives about austerity, requirements for universities to demonstrate performance, and efforts to reconfigure resources to produce new solutions to public policy issues.

As a result, social design research is *political* in the sense of posing difficult questions a funder, institution and project team will have to answer about whose perspectives and framings count in the determination of its value. While social design researchers may have intentions to produce positive impacts on the places, communities, and organisations they work with, their research and its valorisation is contingent on its mutual entanglements with the institutional framings, practices, and devices they work in relation to. Social design research requires determining and critically reflecting on the ways it does the practical work of categorisation and legitimisation as it assesses its outcomes.

5. Valuing social design research: a space for confronting bureaucracies

Against this background, assessing the ‘value’ of social design research requires one to be aware of the devices, practices and infrastructures through which valorisation is practically achieved. Thinking of value as co-created emphasises outcomes as resulting from the mutual interactions between participants within a research environment. The value of outputs (such as prototypes, reports, frameworks, toolkits, or analysis), and hence their impact, emerges as participants and broader actors in the research landscape take up, engage with, adapt, and re-assemble them within their own contexts.

In the context of bureaucratisation and audit in the public sector and universities outlined above, social design research has the potential to make two moves. Firstly, it can *problematise* value and its assessment within the co-production of knowledge and unfolding of interventions. Secondly, it can *co-constitute* new ways of constructing and assessing value, via active collaboration with actors in a research ecosystem. It can

emphasise research as an inquiry into a phenomenon and into current and future relations among actors involved while surfacing the politics and ethics of so doing. In so doing, social design research encounters and engages with bureaucratic practices and structures in partner organisations as well as in university departments, government organisations or funders.

In social design research, a project's objectives, intended outcomes, constituencies of actors, participants and stakeholders, its questions, methods, data and its outputs have the potential to be reassembled and reconfigured. Issues, questions, publics, relationships, methodologies and artefacts are not specified in advance or pre-determined. Instead, the exploration and (re)-assembling of these is an intrinsic part of the research practice. We propose this as a means of prototyping the co-production of knowledge, where participants iteratively materialise their issues, questions, publics, data and outputs through socio-material practices of knowing, doing and researching. Thus, new publics, also as constitutions of their various bureaucratic logics, devices, practices, and understandings, are prototypical: hence, they are proto-publics.

Alongside encounters between social actors in different bureaucratic settings are the negotiations between participating fields, domains of expertise or disciplines. Recognising the complex and intertwined histories that shape how disciplines relate (Barry, Born, and Weszkalnys 2008), social design research identifies and brings into view different kinds of cross-disciplinarity including agonistic relations, in which one discipline challenges the core assumptions of another, which may or may not be productive. Participating actors and their fields may work within varying conditions of bureaucratic organisation and valorisation that are difficult to align. Differences in employment contracts, institutional support, recognition and rewards for research, teaching and knowledge exchange, as well as norms about what counts as 'research', also play their part in shaping the possibilities and consequences of cross-disciplinary and co-produced research.

Our provisional suggestion for how to operationalise this is an outline of a generalised process to be used in different research settings that we call two-stage social design research. Aware of the dangers of proposing a one-size-fits-all approach, we emphasise the framings, practices and devices through which a research project can be iteratively re-configured and performed in relation to its specific issue and context.

During the first stage, participants organise themselves to develop a 'proto-project' and begin to examine its potential outcomes, while attuning themselves to its unintended consequences. Research questions, participants, stakeholders and publics, methods, data, outputs are explored and defined through a collaborative inquiry. The short and longer-term implications of research practice are articulated, problematised and discussed, leading to changes in how the research is carried out. Value is performed, discussed and reconfigured relationally and contingently during this stage. Outcomes are anticipated including, potentially, new forms of knowledge, and insights that sit uncomfortably with the scales and devices of existing disciplines. The valorisation practices and processes within partner and stakeholder organisations are surfaced to reveal their underlying logics, drivers and the political, social and economic commitments that inform them. Unintended consequences of the research, identified by reviewing early findings or the practicalities associated with doing participation work,

are identified, probed and can be addressed. One key outcome of this first stage is a shared researchable problem.

We bring this to life with a brief illustrative example of a fictional cross-disciplinary research project which aims to come up with innovative solutions to the challenge of providing care for older people in the UK. First, the funding bodies construct a scheme to encourage consortia to come together including novel combinations of disciplines, expertise, scales of the organisation including municipalities delivering statutory social care services, as well as voluntary and private providers. They provide direction, funds, mentoring, workshops, and other spaces during which several consortia form and reform, emphasising social learning as one important outcome. During this phase, social design research methods enable the consortia to visually and materially map out their perspectives, commitments, stakeholders, assets and resources and begin to construct, frame and articulate together multiple understandings of the researchable problem. They identify different framings and practices through which expertise relating to social care is legitimised and valued. The consortia craft plans and pathways for participants through the research by iterating together the design of organisational devices such as criteria, job descriptions and definitions of work packages which materialise the planned direction for the research. In so doing, the lack of alignment between different actors is surfaced and explored. Discussions about conflicting framings, work practices and priorities of stakeholders are brought into view leading to the creation of shared strategies and plans for negotiating these. The funder reconfigures its criteria for peer review and actively engages a broad group of people to take part in the review process.

During the second stage, participants continue their research, which begins to look more resolved, to address the researchable problem. Research questions, participants, publics, methods, data, outputs are re-worked, now with more confidence, coherence and consensus. Outcomes are better understood and the implications for participants, actors and broader stakeholders are identified, reviewed and addressed. The valorisation practices and processes within partner and stakeholder organisations are further identified and explored. Participants begin to understand the implications of the research in relation to its different constituencies, refine understandings of how to assess it and negotiate its unfolding impact. Unintended consequences continue to emerge. Relations between the first and second stage are not simply temporal. The first stage precedes the second but there may be overlaps as the research transitions from the former to the latter.

Returning to our fictional example, what this might look like is a commitment at high levels in the partner universities, with accompanying resources, to recognise the contributions of the 'non-academic' partners in the project. This includes new teams, projects, roles, job descriptions, guidelines and criteria that enable and encourage translations of insights, expertise and people across research, knowledge exchange and teaching that extend beyond the funded project. For example, partners create new career pathways with associated legitimising governance, resources, structures and processes. One other result is the funder changing its criteria for schemes that aim to address social issues, to enable peer reviewers to assess the contributions and achievements of non-academic partners.

6. Discussion

Our sketch of two-stage social design research provides a solution to the problem of a one-size-fits-all approach to research that aims to intervene into or transform a social issue. It foregrounds and articulates the different kinds of value and valorisation practices that shape co-produced social design research and its assessment.

However, this proposal for two-stage social design research remains, for now, untested. This opens it up for future study.⁵ New research questions that follow include examining how these principles might be implemented in practice in research projects that aim to intervene into or transform a domain associated with a social or public policy issue. In particular, there are deeper connections to be made with efforts towards decolonising academia and acknowledging indigenous research. Other areas for further exploration include understanding the intersections with the social sciences and humanities, in particular projects aiming at transformative innovation.⁶ Together these will help illuminate how creativity, materiality, and mediation – routinely enacted in social design research – can shape the co-production of interventions and research with non-academic partners, funders, or between disciplines.

Nonetheless, there are implications of our conceptual study for at least three audiences: research funders, researchers and university administrators. First, funders which configure processes and structures for awarding and assessing funding can benefit from this problematisation of value in social design research. Our discussion urges caution and awareness of the limitations of claims made for such research, by revealing the complex landscapes and histories in which social design research takes place. This awareness can be used to shape future calls, specifications and criteria in schemes for design research.

Second, the proposal for two-stage research can potentially be applied to any cross-disciplinary research which aims to result in societal change, intervention or transformation, including those involving design researchers. Two-stage social design research highlights the contingencies and politics in any consortium doing research through which value is understood and assessed and the inventiveness through which new knowledge is generated. It suggests how design approaches can help participants iteratively explore, materialise and render visible the ‘proto-publics’ for the research. In so doing, this has the potential to operationalise critical perspectives on agnostic interdisciplinarity and the ethical co-production of knowledge.

Third, administrators in universities can examine how the ways that career pathways and institutional ways of valorising and rewarding research and knowledge exchange might be changed to enable cross-disciplinary, co-produced social design research. For example, they can build processes and criteria and provide resources that acknowledge and legitimise projects which require expertise in co-production and result in a range of outputs and media. These should be reviewed and assessed holistically to understand and assess the research and its multiple translations into practice.

7. Conclusion

Social design research and practice overlap when it comes to considering how research is undertaken through co-production with social actors such as community groups or municipalities oriented towards change. Addressing societal issues may provide the motivation and grounds on which participants can work together towards intended outcomes, while also pursuing the production of new knowledge and understandings and recognising the unintended consequences of research and action.

We have identified two potentially dissonant background contexts in relation to which social design research has emerged. The first is developments in the public and social sectors – in particularly New Public Management and New Public Governance – where dense and complex arrangements of outsourcing and strategic partnerships reproduce sometimes contradictory and competing sets of value priorities. The second is in the promotion of inter- and cross-disciplinary research in universities that has societal benefits. Here we argued that dominant regimes of accounting and organising research – in its management, systems, and processes for awarding funding, and auditing – do not map easily onto the messy and contingent realities of social design research.

Either way, we suggest that – in the co-production of spaces of social design research – these tensions will swiftly become apparent. We propose two-stage social design research as a way of addressing such challenges. In this, we see a first stage acting as a ‘proto-project’ where questions, methods, the range of potential outcomes, unintended consequences and forms of valorisation are identified and explored by assembling ‘proto-publics’ for the research. This agonistic space of co-production may not only exist at what management scholars call the ‘fuzzy front-end’ of a project or programme (Khurana and Rosenthal 1998). It may be re-visited at several points during the research as a form of attunement. Equally, it may aid with surfacing, understanding and addressing dissonances.

Ultimately, such research challenges the established and dominant bureaucracies of universities and the public and social sectors. Trusting that part of research is, in fact, about the exploration of what the salient research questions might be rather than assuming to know these first; understanding that inquiry includes methodological exploration; taking on board that outcomes cannot be pre-determined: these all necessitate a different managerial and bureaucratic sensibility. This suggests a different kind of politics in the academy.

Notes

1. There is a growing awareness of the ethical and political challenges of bringing approaches from design practice into social issues, even while the activity grows apace through the activities of funders, government bodies, consultancies and the translation of design approaches into toolkits (e.g. the Development Impact and You Toolkit, <http://diytoolkit.org/> accessed 10 July 2018). See, for example, von Busch and Palmås (2016) and Fisher and Gamman (2019).
2. Through 2015, we directed a programme to explore the potential and limits of social design research in terms of its academic practices and the bureaucratic conventions that it might challenge, commissioned by the UK Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC). The programme was entitled ‘Developing participation in social design: Prototyping projects, programmes and policies’ (a.k.a. ProtoPublics; see Julier and Kimbell 2016). It included 14 interviews with academics and practitioners including

those working in urban studies, mobilities research, science and technology studies and geography; three workshops; and five commissioned cross-disciplinary projects involving 34 people from four universities and four partner organisations working with 12 collaborating organisations. This study followed on from two other initiatives that we led: a series of public talks and debates on social design through 2012 and 2013; and a study for the AHRC in 2013–14, that resulted in an argument for building capacity in social design research (Armstrong et al. 2014).

3. The first author is based in the UK working in a university specialising in design and the arts; the second author has for many years worked in the UK but is now in a design department of a university in Finland.
4. The European Commission (2018) frames its future innovation and research strategy partly in relation to global issues including sustainability.
5. Both authors are using the approach to shape new research projects but this is at an early stage.
6. See, for example, the international Transformative Innovation Policy Consortium bringing together policymakers and funding agencies. <http://tipconsortium.net>, accessed 29 November 2018.

Acknowledgments

We thank the anonymous reviewers whose detailed feedback allowed us to significantly improve this paper.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Funding

This work was supported by the AHRC under Grants AH/L503952/1 and AH/N504269/1.

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