Introduction to the Special Issue:
The Processes of Methodological Innovation
Narrative Accounts and Reflections

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Abstract
In recent years there has been an upsurge of interest in methodological innovation and innovative methodologies in the social sciences. Driven by a wider, global impetus for innovation, discussions have centred on the use, application, diffusion and success of new methods. In the social sciences in particular, this upsurge of interest has been attributed to a need to respond to the complexities of the social world that has encouraged methodological, disciplinary and institutional interaction and cross-fertilisation. However, these discussions usually overlook the processes involved in methodological innovation and ignore their role in shaping innovative methodologies. This special issue aims to trigger discussion on the processes of methodological innovation in the social science community and beyond.

Keywords: social sciences, innovation, methodology, process

Methodological Innovation: recent trajectories
This special issue was inspired by the increased upsurge of interest and discussions on methodological innovation and innovative methodologies. The interest and discussions concentrated on the latter – innovative methodologies – often at the expense of the former – methodological innovation. In the process of working on identifying innovative methodologies (Xenitidou and Gilbert 2009), it became obvious that these cannot be set apart from the processes and actors (mechanisms, structures and agents) implicated in them.

This was particularly evident in attempts to define methodological innovations – in other words what counts as innovation in social science research methods (SSRMs). Such attempts were prompted as starting points in writing about, searching for or researching innovative methods. A recent attempt to frame ‘emergent methods’ for the purpose of publishing a collection of them was made by Hesse-Biber and Leavy (2008). They argue that emergent methods stress interconnections between epistemology, methodology and method. Thus, it is across all three levels that one should look for the emergence of new methods. The factors ‘pushing the
boundaries’ of methods and promoting innovation at these levels may be social, political, economic (all pointing to paradigm shifts and transdisciplinary research), and technological (e.g. advances in technology).

Attempts to define methodological innovations were also preceded by the disclaimer that defining innovation is not a simple task and that the substantive area of innovation should be considered each time as, for instance, definitions from the knowledge transfer literature were deemed not immediately transferable to social science research methods (Taylor and Coffey 2008). Notwithstanding disclaimers, researchers have engaged in continuous attempts to define innovations in SSRMs. For example, in order to identify forms of innovation in qualitative research Taylor and Coffey (2008) classified innovations into: (i) new designs or methods (including methods of data collection and analysis, techniques and software, representation of research), (ii) new concepts (including methodological concepts and frameworks) and (iii) new ways of doing research (including new applications and crossing disciplines), while distinguishing between invention and application, adopting a somewhat functionalist approach to innovation and acknowledging various ‘pressures’ to innovate (which might give rise to claims of innovation, see Travers 2009; Wiles, Pain and Crow 2010; Bengry-Howell, Wiles, Nind and Crow 2011).

Against this backdrop, a project titled ‘Innovations in Social Science Research Methods: An International Perspective’ sought to identify prominent methodological innovations outside the UK. For the purposes of the project, innovations in SSRMs were defined as research practices that have not yet filtered through to typical research methods courses or that impact on the research process in novel ways. These were expected to entail (i) technological innovation, (ii) the use of existing theoretical approaches and methods in new ways and (iii) interdisciplinarity. The project’s focus on innovative research practices ranged from data collection to analysis and covered all of the main social science disciplines. Information was collected between October 2008 and March 2009, gathering evidence by reviewing previous reports, carrying out desktop research, conducting an e-mail survey with academics, practitioners, research methods experts and others and holding interviews with gatekeepers and telephone interviews with nominated experts.

The conclusions of the project were: first, innovative methodologies primarily entail crossing disciplinary boundaries. Secondly, innovative methodologies usually entail the use of existing theoretical approaches and methods in reformed or mixed and applied ways. Thirdly, innovative methodologies entail the use of technological innovation (visual, digital or online), for example, new software or online methods. Fourthly, innovative methodologies reside both inside traditional academic institutions (universities) and outside (research centres, institutes, consultancy agencies and organisations), yet even in the latter locations methods developers and experts usually have academic backgrounds and sometimes previous or current academic affiliations. The institutional structures ‘hosting’ the innovations identified in the project are primarily academic followed by both academic and professional, then research centres and finally professional and consultancy institutions. These institutional structures and innovations were located mainly in North America, Italy, Germany and the Netherlands (see Xenitidou and Gilbert 2009). These conclusions provided valid grounds for further research as well as for organising a forum where the ‘innovators’ identified could share experience on working with new methods.

Further research focused on claims to and impact of innovations (Wiles, Pain, and Crow 2010; Bengry-Howell, Wiles, Nind and Crow 2011). This led to renewed attempts to pin innovations down for the purposes of research which mainly consisted of combinations of the afore-mentioned definitions with the addition of ‘uptake’ – measuring it quantitatively using citation metrics, yet acknowledging that this is not a straightforward process (Rogers 2003). Research on claims to innovation has classified innovative methods into innovations, adaptations and adoptions and identified a mismatch between claims and uptake (as over half of the claims to innovation made in the period 2006-2009 in papers published in peer-reviewed journals had between 0-3 citations) (Wiles, Pain and Crow 2010). The researchers concluded that innovations in SSRMs...
‘follow a complex and organic path in which adaptation is more common and diffusion is more horizontal than top-down’ (ibid, pp. 24; cf. Rogers 2003). They also argued that over claiming innovation for what, according to the definition might more appropriately be called ‘development’, is an endemic problem owing to external pressures, institutional (competition for resources) and peer (not to be left behind) pressures. More recent work concentrated on uptake, identifying a geographical and disciplinary clustering of citations to innovative methods (Bengry-Howell, Wiles, Nind and Crow 2011).

The above testifies to the fact that defining innovations in SSRMs is an iterative process whereby a starting point is attempted, revised based on emergent findings and so on, yet still succumbing to path dependence between definition and findings (thus the argument that the pressure to identify novelty in one’s work being endemic). One could resort to ‘the strength of loose concepts’ (Lowy 1992) in order to explain and consolidate the discussion thus far. According to this thesis – originally developed for the case of immunology – loosely-defined or ‘boundary’ concepts, such as innovation in this case, are important in fostering the construction of efficient inter-group alliances and disciplinary growth. In maintaining the concept loose and boundary in the sense of lacking an exact, shared definition but not an interest in studying it, the development of federative research strategies and the long-term maintenance of loose coalitions between different (professional) groups are made possible. Lowy’s (1992) thesis merits consideration here both as regards ‘methodological innovation’ as topic, and as regards ‘innovative methodologies’ themselves as located in trading disciplinary and institutional zones.

The research discussed thus far provides further grounds for focusing on the processes implicated in methodological innovation. The first attempt to do this was a forum where ‘innovators’ could share experience on working with new methods. This took the form of a workshop which brought together international experts to focus on the history behind methodological innovation(s) and on the processes and mechanisms of their development and diffusion. The workshop was titled ‘The Processes of Methodological Innovation: Successful Development and Diffusion’ and was held in Oxford in July 2010. The workshop discussed three aspects of methodological innovation: (i) Discovering New Methods – focusing on the history, processes and mechanisms leading up to methodological innovation; (ii) Promulgating New Methods – exchanging experience on the networks and diffusion mechanisms of methodological innovations and (iii) Supporting Innovation – structures, institutions and funding for innovators. Overall, the main themes that the workshop contributed were that it may be useful to talk about innovations in the research process as a whole rather than methodological innovation per se. It was stressed that both innovation and its diffusion are social processes. It is a challenging task to take a snapshot of such a process in order to pinpoint whether it is a case of methodological innovation or a case of adaptation. These processes are also often ridden by a tension between the need for a new approach and its diffusion, in which case enabling conditions and institutional support become decisive vectors of innovation. Tensions were also identified in trying to respond to interdisciplinarity while being faced with the challenge of communicating research ideas across different disciplines. Both of these tensions stirred a discussion of whether conditions for methodological innovation are more fertile when working from within or outside academia and whether that constitutes a criterion for choosing one’s affiliation. Who the ‘proprietor’ of methodological innovations is, affects the availability and accessibility of methodological innovations, and whether they become commercialised products and services or not. Finally, methodological innovations, especially those involving the use of new technologies, raise concerns about ethics and the need for consent.

This special issue constitutes the second attempt to focus on the processes implicated in methodological innovation. It, thus, aims to take the afore-mentioned discussions further by providing a range of answers to the following questions

- How are new methods ‘discovered’?
What are the processes they go through in order to be developed, promoted and disseminated?

Which actors and structures are involved in these processes and how?

The special issue includes five papers authored by contributors to the workshop, which focus on engaging with the ‘neglected’ aspects of methodological innovation and are located in ongoing debates about developments in social research methods, innovation and career trajectories. It consists of a constellation of papers written after reflecting on the talks and discussions that took place as part of the workshop. The papers draw on the authors’ responses to the workshop themes and their subsequent discussions with the other authors, and have, therefore, a high degree of interrelation and coherence. They provide insights on innovation as a set of processes and on the complex relations that drive these processes (Kozinets 2012; Wild 2012; Agar 2012). The authors also deal with practical issues in developing new methods such as funding, interdisciplinary communication, ethics and dissemination (Das 2012; Giglietto and Rossi 2012; Kozinets 2012).

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Practical issues such as funding, communicating across different disciplines and disseminating work seem to be central to the development of tools, techniques and methods. In this special issue, the authors address these issues in considering the development of online panels, the use of ‘new’ data available online and the study of online communities.

Das starts by noting that the use of online panels in long-term social science research is limited and then goes on to describe the development and use of such a facility, the ‘Advanced Multi-Disciplinary Facility for Measurement and Experimentation in the Social Sciences’ (MESS). This draws on a representative panel of about 5,000 households based on a probability sample drawn from population registers in the Netherlands (called the ‘Longitudinal Internet Studies for the Social Sciences’ (LISS) panel). The facility is open access and aims at building an infrastructure for data collection that will boost research in the social sciences using new technologies in survey research. The author emphasizes the opportunities arising from establishing such an infrastructure ranging from dealing with issues of ‘undercoverage’ and self-selection in the sampling of populations to testing new forms of data collection or conducting research only possible with online panels, in other words ‘achieving economies of scale and a richer environment for analysis’. Examples of studies conducted using the LISS panel and possibilities for the further development and use of infrastructures such as MESS are provided.

Giglietto and Rossi argue that the process of methodological innovation in their case was triggered by a technological and social innovation. The article describes the complex set of practices behind the emergence of a computational data-driven sociological research study by showing an example where this methodology has been used. The data here refers to using user-generated content online, which, according to the authors, may be considered an extension of – the more traditional – content analysis of data produced by mass media. Thus, the prerequisite for a methodological innovation is, primarily, the identification that a gap exists between these new unexplored research potentials – user-generated content online – and the methodological practices that are usually available as standard tools for social researchers. The phases of the process of conducting research using digital user-generated data proposed are: data identification; data acquisition and cleaning; and data interpretation. In addition, the authors address issues of representation and ethics concerned with the use of large quantities of unfiltered user-generated content or information by focusing on specific examples taken from the authors’ research experience.
Kozinetz’s article, on the other hand, focuses on dissemination. The author presents scientific methodological diffusion as a specialized form of the marketing of ideas using – as a case – the development and spread of netnography. The article explores the role of academic, geographic, and pragmatic target research audiences in reinforcing the adoption of netnography. In particular, it argues that the process between the proclamation of a methodological innovation and the adaptation and handing off of that innovation to the people includes the following stages: branding (test marketing, ‘advertizing’, publicizing and publishing), segmentation (disciplinary, geographical, etc.), legitimation within academia (conference presentations, top-tier publications), geographical, disciplinary and extra-academia expansion (adaptation and dissemination), partnership and application. The author reflects on this process and the extent to which it can be applied to methods in the same ways as it does to products and concludes that successful practices should spill over.

Wild’s article offers a narrative account of the development of the Water Cooler Logic methodology and stakeholder ethnography – as its most innovative feature – locating it conceptually at Silicon Valley from the nineties onwards. Through the case of the methodology in question – Water Cooler Logic – the article touches upon issues related to working at the boundary of university and industry. It also focuses on how innovations build on other innovations over time before they develop a ‘corporate frame of their own’. In so doing the author takes us through: artificial intelligence, neural nets, corporate ethnography, learning as apprenticeship, etc. So, ‘the story told is one of conceptual composting’ as the author claims, of novel combinations of existing ideas. In addition, it seems that for such a story to be told in the first place, a position of stable institutional identity and method as well as the benefit and bias of hindsight are needed.

Finally, Agar reflects upon what counts as innovation in social science, pinpointing it at the conceptual level rather than at the level of tools and techniques (including technology). The author reviews four examples to exemplify the argument: Zadeh’s fuzzy set theory, Goffman’s presentation of self, Bartlett’s schema, and Glaser and Strauss’ grounded theory. These are then used as examples to consider issues of diffusion, institutional and peer support, etc. The article brings in the discussion on the relation of innovation to the world of the ‘innovator’ and based on inferences drawn from this discussion, the author offers some thoughts on the conditions necessary for the establishment of an ‘organisation type’ for conceptual innovation.

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**Biography**

Maria Xenitidou, Research Fellow in the Department of Sociology, University of Surrey, has a background in research methods, social, rhetorical and discursive psychology and social geography. Her main interests are in Identity Issues (Cultural, Ethnic and National Identities), Migration and Minorities (Social Impact, National and EU Policy Framework), Research Methods (Qualitative, Quantitative and Mixed Methods, Methodological Innovations and Developments) and Social Norms (as dynamic, shifting, situated and situational understandings of conduct). She has worked on projects involving the identification of methodological innovations and the exploration of normative behaviour, has been part of the SIMIAN node of ESRC’s National Centre for Research Methods (NCRM) and is currently involved in the EU QLectives project tracing the discursive production and reproduction of understandings of quality in science.

Nigel Gilbert, Professor of Sociology at the University of Surrey, read for a first degree in Engineering, intending to go into the computer industry. Lured into sociology his research and teaching interests have reflected his continuing interest in both sociology and computer science (and engineering more widely). His main research interests are processual theories of social phenomena, the development of computational sociology and the methodology of computer simulation, especially agent-based modelling. He is director of the SIMIAN (Simulation Innovation) node of ESRC’s National Centre for Research Methods (NCRM) and the author or editor of several textbooks on sociological methods of research and statistics.