

Book Review: Innovation and Culture in Public Services: The Case of Independent Living by Steven Demello & Peder Inge Furseth

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Recommended Citation

Quartaroli, Tina A. () "Book Review: Innovation and Culture in Public Services: The Case of Independent Living by Steven Demello & Peder Inge Furseth," *International Social Science Review*: Vol. 92 : Iss. 2 , Article 9.
Available at: <http://digitalcommons.northgeorgia.edu/issr/vol92/iss2/9>

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Demello, Steven, and Peder Inge Furseth. *Innovation and Culture in Public Services: The Case of Independent Living*. Northampton: Edward Elgar, 2016. xii + 182 pages. Hardcover, \$110.00.

In *Innovation and Culture in Public Services: The Case of Independent Living*, health technology researcher, Steven Demello, and leadership and innovation strategy researcher and professor, Peder Inge Furseth, examine the relationship between innovative technology and the larger culture. In particular, Demello and Furseth use the example of health technology innovation developed for the benefit of older adults, as well as persons with disabilities living independently, to illustrate their thesis that “culture”—the “customs, arts, social institutional, and achievements of a particular nation, people or other social group” (p. 3)—is the primary determinant of successful innovation and integration of ground-breaking or disruptive technology within collective social groups.

Demello and Furseth assert that understanding certain culturally-defined attitudes and behaviors, specifically attitudes about the role of government in society and the willingness to try new technologies, is key to successful innovation in public services. They begin with an analysis of the United States, Scandinavia, the United Kingdom, and Japan, looking at five major characteristics of each: attitudes about the role of government, overall health and rates of disability, status of technologies already in place, whether innovation and service delivery are funded privately or publicly, and the current state of state-supported innovation and adoption.

The core of Demello and Furseth’s analysis rests in the use of what they term the Service Innovation Triangle, or the SIT model, which is a multi-layered, business-based framework of variables designed to determine innovation outcome, aid in policy decision-making, and encourage successful innovation. To test the SIT model for usefulness in constructing integrated business models to meet the unique needs of each “culture” or country, the authors use data from an internet survey of approximately 1200, 50-to-60 year old respondents residing in the target cultures. They look at a variety of socio-cultural attitudes related to independent living such as expectations of government responsibility, consumer confidence in needs-based service provision, family caregiving expectations, technology use, privacy concerns regarding in-home technologies, and public and private payment expectations. In doing so, they found that even though respondents across countries share characteristics in terms of *user*-based needs expectations, they hold different *citizen*-based views on policy issues related to the role of government, concerns of privacy, and so on, depending on the social policies of their country of residence.

Demello and Furseth use these findings as validation of their thesis that socio-cultural characteristics are key in terms of understanding technology innovation and integration. They believe that future study should pay attention to the intersection of a respondent’s individual

needs and the overarching culture, particularly in terms of identifying whether a respondent's answer is based on s/he being a potential end-user of a product or being a resident of a certain country. The main message of the book is that there is no one-size-fits-all solution. The consideration of location-based culture is critical when developing public service innovation.

This conclusion is well-known to sociologists, anthropologists, and other social scientists. Research on technology innovation and integration for independent living environments using culture-based approaches abounds in academic and professional journals in such fields as gerontechnology, applied sociology, anthropology, gerontology, and interdisciplinary cross-cultural studies on aging. This book is more successful at testing the boundaries of usefulness for a business-based modeling aid than it is at making the case for cultural considerations in public service innovation, and is thus best suited for a business-based audience outside of the social sciences.

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