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Methodological Craft: Comparing the Hunches and Assumptions Behind Social Change

Sarah Schulman

METHODOLOGICAL CRAFT

COMPARING THE HUNCHES AND ASSUMPTIONS BEHIND SOCIAL CHANGE

Social innovation labs are emergent spaces for naming social challenges, testing hypotheses, developing and spreading interventions. Despite the common denominator of experimentation, they vary in methodology. **Dr Sarah Schulman** makes explicit her observation of the hunches and assumptions embedded in the current social change methodologies.

Dr Sarah Schulman spearheads InWithForward, a social start-up that's developing and testing methods and mindsets for changing people outcomes, and system behaviours. InWithForward comes from lessons learned over the past 10 years co-designing informal social supports, but rarely shifting formal systems. From 2009 to 2013, Sarah co-ran InWithFor and helped to launch two new social programmes including "Weavers" and the award-winning "Family by Family." She holds a DPhil in Social Policy from Oxford University.

Mo was 18 when I met him. He sometimes showed up to school, but still struggled to read and write. He and his mates dabbled with drink and drugs, but rigorously followed Ramadan. He had no real idea what he wanted to do with his life, but busing tables at his parents' Indian restaurant was the obvious option.

Mo wasn't yet a drop-out. He wasn't yet a welfare recipient. He wasn't yet a criminal. He wasn't yet a government label. But Mo was one of about 13 per cent of young people for whom school just wasn't working.[1] He was fast disengaging.

School disengagement is one of those wicked social challenges. There is no *single* root cause, and therefore no *one* solution. Yes, formal institutions are breaking down and leaving groups of people out. But so too are informal community systems. And like chronic disease, unemployment, homelessness, criminality, and so much of the interconnected wickedness, there's a window. To intervene. To change life outcomes. Before the cycle of marginalisation entraps and hardens.

The big question is: when and how do we best intervene? And where do the ideas for interventions come from?

Answers to these questions lead to some very different social change methodologies, and reflect some very different values about what constitutes a "good" social outcome for whom. I would argue that too often we lump these methodologies and values together under the trendy title of social innovation. We confuse the *vehicle* for social innovation—lately, the social innovation lab—for the *theory* about how change unfolds and for the *ethics* about what is good.

Social innovation labs are emergent spaces for naming social challenges, testing hypotheses, developing and spreading interventions. But just because social innovation labs share a belief in experimentation, doesn't mean we are all experimenting for the same purposes. Nor should we be. Plurality can be a strength—provided we're explicit about our divergent hunches and assumptions. T.J. Cartwright in his article "Problems, Solutions and Strategies" reminds us, "Problems and solutions are based on the perceptions of individuals. They are not objective conditions of the real world."[2]

In the pages that follow, I hope to embrace the subjective and make explicit (some) of the hunches and assumptions embedded in social change methodologies. So that we can start a conversation about what these hunches and assumptions mean for our formal institutions, for our informal systems, and ultimately for the Mos of

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the world. Which methodologies might actually shift behaviours and life trajectories?

SELECTING METHODOLOGIES

A methodology is a set of principles, practices, and procedures for answering a question or solving a problem.[3] There are many ways to break down and categorise methodologies. By who is involved; by *what* disciplines and *what* techniques are drawn upon; by *when* and *where* interventions take place. Doug Reeler, in his article "A three-fold theory of social change,"differentiates methodologies according to how they bring about change: through learning, through un-learning, through problem-solving, through envisioning.[4]

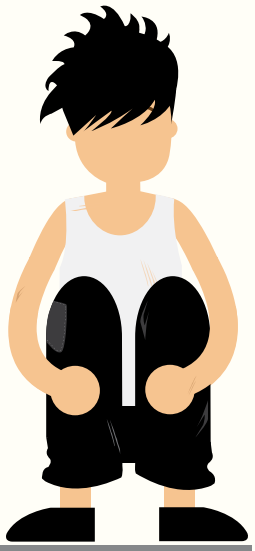
I follow a similar path, though far less tidily, grouping social change methodologies by the *source* of the underlying ideas for change. Do ideas come from the elites —from the statehouse or the ivory tower? Do ideas come from the meritocracy—from professionals, representative community leaders, anointed stakeholders? Do ideas come from inspired individuals—from entrepreneurs, designers, local problem-solvers? Or do ideas come from the people left out, disengaged, and unaffiliated?

Drawing on first-hand experiences and a review of the grey literature, I have selected one methodology emblematic of each of the above assumptions. The intent was not to conduct a rigorous analysis of all social change methodologies, but to gain a feel for what these assumptions look like in practice and how they might be mixed and matched. The goal is therefore generative, rather than analytic.

My interest in mixing and matching methodologies comes from the limits of my own methodology. From 2009 to 2012, I co-ran InWithFor, a social innovation lab with a methodology called *Working Backwards*. Working in, with, and for The Australian Centre for Social Innovation, we co-designed and prototyped three new social services. Whilst two of these services are now spreading, our single-minded focus on bottom-up solutions meant we had little to say about how to transition systems from where they were to where we wanted them to be.

Luckily a second generation of social innovation laboratories is springing forth and learning from past failures and oversights—the MaRS Solution Lab in Toronto,[5] The 27th Region in Paris,[6] the Human Centered Design Innovation Lab in Phnom Penh.[7] How might these new labs develop their own blended methodologies? Chart 1 offers an overview of the selected methodologies, and short descriptions follow.

"DO IDEAS COME FROM THE ELITES – FROM THE STATEHOUSE OR THE IVORY TOWER? DO IDEAS COME FROM THE MERITOCRACY– FROM PROFESSIONALS, REPRESENTATIVE COMMUNITY LEADERS, ANOINTED STAKEHOLDERS? DO IDEAS COME FROM INSPIRED INDIVIDUALS – FROM ENTREPRENEURS, DESIGNERS, LOCAL PROBLEM-SOLVERS? OR DO IDEAS COME FROM THE PEOPLE LEFT OUT, DISENGAGED, AND UNAFFILIATED?"



IDEAS COME FROM...	EXAMPLE METHODOLOGY	DRAWS ON...	PROCESS LOOKS LIKE...	RESULTS LOOK LIKE...	WHAT IT MIGHT MEAN FOR MO
international experts	thinkers in residence	political science, public management	convening experts, hosting meetings, making recommendations	new strategies, structures, political champions	Mo's principal sits on a high-level schools commission.
academics	evidence2success	public health, sociology, psychology, education	conducting empirical research, selecting and implementing evidence-based programmes	evidence-based programmes running with fidelity	Mo is enrolled in a dropout prevention programme at school.
community leaders & professionals	promise neighborhoods	community development	convening local coalitions, building professional capacity, agenda setting	coordinated community activities	Mo has access to after-school and weekend programmes.
stakeholder groups	reos change labs	organisational psychology, systems thinking	curating key stakeholders, observing and dialoguing, co-creating models	strengthened relationships and joint projects	Mo's school principal connects with community leaders and sets up a joint initiative.
charismatic individuals	ashoka fellowships	social entrepreneurship	identifying individuals, providing financial assistance and technical support	new enterprises	Mo has access to a new kind of charter school.
positive deviants	positive deviance	public health, community development	observing communities, identifying and spreading deviant practices	disseminated local practices	Mo gets homework tips from a peer a lot like him.
end users with designers, social scientists, community organisers	working backwards	social psychology, design, community outreach	forming interdisciplinary teams, recruiting end users, co-designing, prototyping	new networks, new practices, new services	Mo designs out-of-school experiences for himself; his family meets other immigrant families; his teachers take on a new role as a broker to community activities.

Chart 1: Social change methodologies: an overview

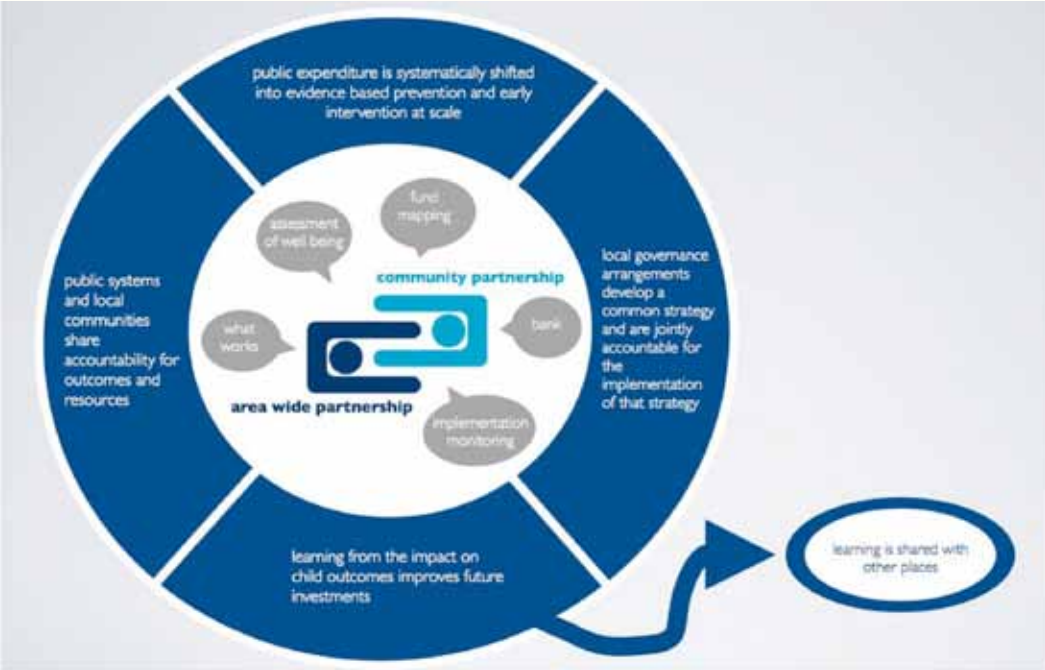


Figure 1: Evidence2Success process diagram
Source: The Social Research Unit at Dartington

THINKERS IN RESIDENCE[8]
Adelaide, Australia

The underlying assumption of this methodology? Social challenges are best addressed by importing external expertise, exposing local stakeholders to fresh thinking, and creating a political window for action.

State government, in combination with universities and third sector organisations, identify flashpoint issues—like the future of the manufacturing industry, the quality of early childhood programmes, an ever-growing ageing population—and sponsor an international expert to fly in a distinct point of view.

Over the course of a year, the expert spends about 12 weeks on the ground. They look at existing practice. They meet with politicians. They hold public meetings. And they are supported by a local group of partners—drawn from the sponsor organisations.

The product is a written report with high-level recommendations—often for new committees or institutional structures, for new funding streams, for new policies, and for new kinds of academic research. The report is launched at a high-profile public event, with both ministerial attendance and media coverage.

All of this activity is predicated on a belief that expert knowledge can and should drive local change. And that a change must start at the top—with strategies and structures—and trickle down to practice, and from practice to improved outcomes. Without the interest and support of the top, sustainable change gets stuck.

EVIDENCE2SUCCESS[9]
United States and United Kingdom

The underlying assumption of this methodology? Social challenges are best addressed by forming place-based partnerships, and using robust data to drive decisions about spending, programmatic design, implementation, and monitoring.

Place-based partnerships start by convening anchor partners: social researchers, philanthropic funders, and the leaders of a city experiencing poor social and health outcomes. Data collection is the focal point of activity. Validated survey instruments—like the Kids Count Survey—are used to dig deeper than existing indicator sets. The aim is to measure the risk and protective factors within the community. So, if there is a high rate of drug use, the researchers will attempt to measure what's influencing that number (social perceptions, family support, school structure, etc).

This local data is then used to make decisions about the distribution of health and social care dollars, and the best mix of programmes and services. Two groups are convened to analyse the data and make decisions—an Area Wide Partnership Group and a Community Partnership Group.

The Area Wide Partnership includes the Chief Executive of the city, policy-makers, and holders of the health, education, social care and youth justice budgets. The Community Partnership includes system leaders, voluntary sector representatives, parents and children living and working in a particular neighbourhood. Both

partnerships make use of a range of tools that synthesise results from evidence-based social programmes. For example, the Blueprints for Success database contains hundreds of peer-reviewed social programmes searchable by social problem (education, justice, health, etc.); target audience (children, teenagers, young adults, parents, teachers); and outcome measures.

The big idea is that comprehensive local governance and robust data will lead to better investments in social programmes and services, and better investments will ensure better practice, and better practice will result in better outcomes. Better outcomes are codified as a reduction in risk behaviours and an increase in protective factors.

The Evidence2Success methodology is predicated on the existence of evidence-based programmes. Rather than develop bespoke responses to social challenges, there is a belief that enough evidence-based programmes exist to meet local needs. Programmes fail because they are implemented without fidelity, not because they are a-contextual. Expert knowledge, provided there is also local buy-in, prompts change.

PROMISE NEIGHBORHOODS[10]
United States

The underlying assumption of this methodology? Social challenges are best addressed by bringing together local community initiatives, joining up services for vulnerable population groups, and improving social indicators (e.g., school graduation rates, drug use, etc.).

The focus, then, is on implementing multiple programmes at once. The goal is for communities to reach a "tipping point" where there is a critical mass of coordinated, supportive activity. This theory was developed and popularised by Geoffrey Canada and the Harlem Children's Zone.

Whilst the Harlem Children's Zone has concentrated their activities on children and adolescents, the core concepts—coordinated service delivery, high dosage, high intensity targeted to a particular population over a period of time—could be applied to other groups like disabled adults or older people living alone.

Promise Neighborhoods
Source: www.iStockphotos.com

In an attempt to replicate the Harlem Children's Zone model in more communities, the United States federal government established the Promise Neighborhood Institute. The Institute offers resources and guidance to build and sustain burgeoning Promise Neighborhoods—including linking federal, private, and public investors; providing coaching in leadership and communication; and spreading stories of emergent practice.

Like Evidence2Success, local coalitions are at the crux of decision-making and planning. These are coalitions comprised of community leaders, professionals, and service managers. But unlike Evidence2Success, Promise Neighborhoods generate their own bottom-up initiatives. They may draw on the know-how of other neighbourhoods, or on academic literature, but they are not confined to implementing evidence-based programmes. Interventions might include removing barriers to accessing services, streamlining rules and procedures, holding community events, and offering new programmes and services. There isn't an articulated point of view about how best to develop these new programmes and services.

The big idea is that if local professionals, managers, and community leaders come together and execute a comprehensive and collaborative plan of action, there will be enough good stuff going on to protect residents from risk and enable them to do well.

Reos Partners: Action Lab, Egypt

REOS CHANGE LABS[11]
International

The underlying assumption of this methodology? Solutions to social challenges come from convening a group of selected stakeholders and engaging in interpersonal learning and reflection.

An organisation with a stake in the social challenge typically invites key stakeholders to the table—such as policy-makers, managers, practitioners, community leaders and opinion makers. Social challenges tend to be framed at a broad societal level, rather than at a specific behavioural level (e.g., food insecurity versus obesity rates). Over the course of multiple days or weeks, trained Reos facilitators walk stakeholders through a group process of observation, introspection, listening, conversing, and narrating possible futures. This process draws heavily from Otto Scharmer's Theory U.[12]

What comes from the process includes personal insights, re-articulated values, revised mental models, and often a commitment to work together on follow-up projects —be it new initiatives or policy reforms. Unlike some other methodologies, the focus isn't on tightly defined or packaged solutions. Nor is there a codified structure, timeline, or approach for this follow-up work.

The big idea is that common values will drive problem-solving and future-setting. If stakeholders share a common understanding, then they will change their own organisational practices, and this will, in turn, change the broader social ecosystem. How a change in the broader social ecosystem translates to improved outcomes for people like Mo is not readily articulated. Nor is there a pre-existing point of view about what constitutes an improved outcome.

ASHOKA FELLOWSHIPS[13]
International

The underlying assumption of this methodology? Solutions to social challenges come from individuals with good ideas. Good ideas are those that are sufficiently new, potentially transformative, and imminently practical. By identifying and supporting these individuals, we can hasten and deepen the impact of their ideas.

Selectiveness is the crux of this methodology. Individuals must be nominated, and are then shepherded through a rigorous selection process. This process involves site visits, in-depth interviews, a judging panel, and the vote of Ashoka's executive board. Selected individuals join a community of 3000 fellows from 70 countries, and receive financial assistance, international connections, coaching and technical assistance, along with the use of a trusted brand.

The big idea is that entrepreneurial individuals, given effective resources and connections, can develop and implement new products, programmes, services, and campaigns that will shift outcomes in their communities and their countries. What makes for a good outcome does not seem to be standardised or defined.

POSITIVE DEVIANCE[14]
International

The underlying assumption of this methodology? Solutions to social challenges already exist—we just need to find the everyday people who are putting them into practice, understand why, and enable more people to do the same. These everyday people are the positive deviants —individuals who face the same challenges and barriers as the rest of the population, but who have somehow adopted a different set of behaviours and experience good outcomes.

Core to this methodology, then, is identifying and learning from the positive deviants. The methodology

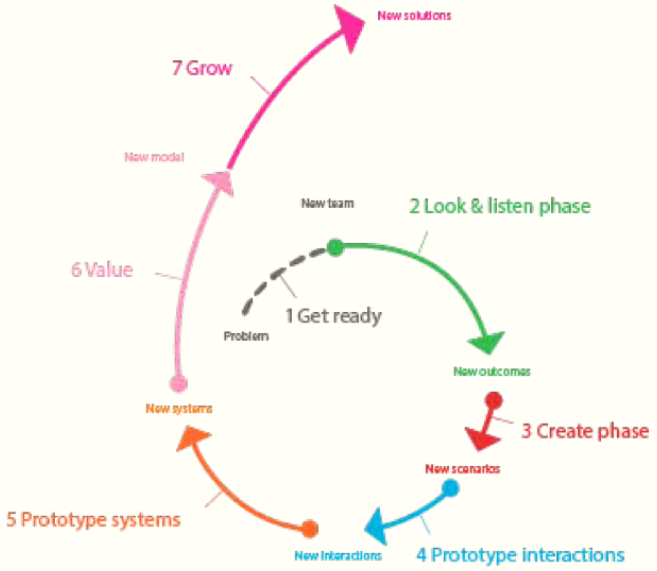


Figure 2: Working Backwards
Source: Schulman and Vanstone, InWithFor, 2010

InWithfor, TACSI 2010

starts with community members identifying both a specific social problem (e.g., childhood obesity) and a desired social outcome (e.g., active children with a healthy body mass index). Community members seek out individuals experiencing the desired social outcome, but who share the same risk factors as those living the social problem. Using interviews and observational techniques, community members look for the positive deviant's uncommon behaviours and specific practices. These uncommon practices are home-grown solutions. Home-grown solutions are then spread through campaigns, trainings, events, and peer-to-peer exchanges.

What comes from the process, then, is a range of locally evidenced behavioural interventions. The big idea is that lived experience, rather than expert knowledge, unlocks social challenges. If people experiencing a challenge can learn a new way of doing something from their peers, they will experience better outcomes.

WORKING BACKWARDS[15]
Australia

The underlying assumption of this methodology? Solutions to social challenges come from a creative partnership between the people directly experiencing the challenges, and an interdisciplinary team of designers, social scientists, and community organisers.

Like all of the other featured methodologies, this one begins by naming a wicked social problem and pooling project funding from organisations with a stake in the issue. Problems are framed in terms of a group of people ill-served by current programmes and policies (e.g., families from a particular area repeatedly interfacing with crisis services). These are people that often do not engage in formal institutions and settings. They don't show up at community meetings. Or respond to consultation surveys.

Working Backwards, then, is all about engaging these people, the unusual suspects, first through community outreach techniques like door knocking, and later through ethnographies, co-design sessions, and prototyping. Like with Positive Deviance, interviews and observations are used to identify *existing* behaviours and practices. Which behaviours enable people to flourish—to use and develop their capacities? And which behaviours keep people stuck? Unlike with Positive Deviance, service design and social psychology techniques are used to generate ideas for *what could be*—for interactions that could be added or taken away from people's contexts to change outcomes and behaviours. Prototyping—or the act of repeatedly testing and improving ideas—enables us to learn if what seems good on paper actually attracts people and prompts change.

Prototyping tends to yield new kinds of user-facing interactions, value propositions, roles, materials, and tools – along with new organisational facing processes like hiring, training, and backend systems. Taken together, prototyping results in a solution that can be packaged, branded, marketed and spread. Yet because the focus is on *a* solution, the risk is that there's insufficient political capital to take the solution forward or to dismantle systems that stand in the way.

The big idea is that to shift outcomes, we have to first attract the *hardest* to reach, then understand what they do and want, and only then design programmes, services, and policies to prompt change. Current programmes, services, and policies are too often unable to get at the disconnect between what people say, what people do, what people want, and what society says is good for them.

NO MAGIC BULLET

No one solution, or one methodology, can do it all. Inventor Temple Grandin chastises us, "People are always looking for the single magic bullet that will totally change everything. There is no single magic bullet."[16] Indeed to budge a stubborn social challenge like educational disengagement, we would probably need to shift Mo's motivations and behaviours; his interactions with family, peers, teachers, and future employers; how his teachers are trained and supported; how his school is funded and held to account; and broader political mandates and cultural norms surrounding adolescence and schooling.

The question, then, is not which social change methodology to use, but in what order and for what ends? The social change methodologies highlighted here offer different, and at times, conflicting starting and ending points. Are we to start at the top, by re-setting the political mandate? Or at the bottom, with Mo's behaviours? Are we to end with improved interpersonal relationships in one particular context? Or with a solution that can scale across contexts?

Were we to start at the top, we might reform standards, only to find they entrench a "schooling as accreditation" worldview and further alienate young people like Mo. Were we to start at the bottom, we might develop an alternative to school with young people like Mo, only to find our solution conflicts with existing standards and resource flows. Could some sort of hybrid methodology allow us to work bottom-up and top-down at the same time—to shift the values and behaviours of end users *whilst* simultaneously shifting the values and behaviours of policy-makers and professionals? And could we actually shift values and behaviours in complementary directions—towards a shared vision of what could be?

As we mash up methodologies, and play with permutations, it's *our* values, behaviours and vision as social innovators that deserve scrutiny. We are not neutral facilitators of social change. The language of laboratories and evidence creates the illusion we are objective scientists, rather than curators of a craft. Craftsmanship focuses far less on codifying methods and tools, and far more on redefining and pursuing "quality" work. And good, quality work the author Richard Sennett tells us is not a "finished end" but an ongoing exploration.[17] So let's keep going. ■

Endnotes

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