



Faculty of Design

2020

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Suggested citation:

Jones, Peter (2020) The Social Construction of Systemic Change: Our Working Theories of Change. In: Proceedings of Relating Systems Thinking and Design (RSD9) 2020 Symposium., 9-17 Oct 2020, Ahmedabad, India. Available at <http://openresearch.ocadu.ca/id/eprint/3700/>

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The Social Construction of Systemic Change: Our Working Theories of Change

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I propose a formative discussion to inquire theoretically and pragmatically into “theories of change” (Tapling & Clark, 2013) and the quasi-systemic logic models employed to communicate them. “Systems change” has emerged as a major movement in the worlds of impact investing, philanthropy, and the NGOs they fund. The RSD community has a responsibility to better understand the framing, theory, and proposals entailed in systems change, even if only to better collaborate as designers working with the social change community. A larger theoretical question is considered. Do Theories of Change reflect a coherent model of change in real systems, or are they primarily mental models for explaining the preferred causality of desired outcomes?

What are the meanings, purposes, effectiveness, basis in systemics, their common applications, uses and misuses of Theories of Change? Both systems and design studies deal constantly with theories of change (TOC), whether or not they are explicitly presented in program reasoning and design briefs. We can observe from the practice of constructing change logic models that the presentation of a preferred theory of change represents an advocacy for adoption of a common narrative shared by changemakers in a social system. The acceptance of a theory of change denotes the adoption of a systemic model for a preferred outcome, especially in the types of social change projects supported by philanthropy. Accompanying the discourse of TOC, and associated with many funding application is the logic model for a TOC, representing a presumed template for action toward outcomes. The endorsement of a given TOC is sustained by persistent reference to it within organizational discourse, in a shared language between an organization and its sponsors or stakeholders, and through presumption of individual updates to mental models.

The users of TOCs have expanded from funding agencies (many of whom are known for requiring a logic model of change with applications) to impact investing, normative social research, government policymakers. The provision of a theory and logic model was presumed to represent an empirical and measurable basis, encoded in causal logic, to define how a program’s implementation would develop or result in preferred definite outcomes. However useful these models might be for the organizations involved, the pragmatic effectiveness and the theoretical support for such models is open to question. As systemic designers, we are expected to be familiar with or to develop sophisticated logic models demonstrating effects and outcomes of change interventions. What should we know about the state of the art of TOC and the systemic reasoning for their rationale?

In social innovation studies, Paul Brest (2010) discusses both their value to philanthropy, and their issues, and the responses from “skeptics and agnostics.” Agnostics in particular raise the questions to which systemic designers should be attending: “They believe that it is difficult to create a meaningful theory of change because social problems are complex and ever changing. Rather than spending time and money trying to craft or assess theories of change, agnostics think it is more productive for funders and grantees to focus instead on building great organizations.” We might consider this outlook representative of *any* change model

however. There are tensions between direct action (that benefits from relationship and learning) and designed interventions (that benefits from analysis of leverage anticipated to effect long-term impacts).

Typically, systems approaches value and build upon systemic reasoning from careful observations, such as leverage analysis of complex systems to determine the most productive investment of efforts or programmatic support. *Complexity* approaches favor more short learning interventions, coordinated iterations, and experiments to deploy proposals as learning probes. Might there be systematic differences in supportive systems theories underwriting theories of change, if we analyzed their different applications?

A non-comprehensive analysis of theories of change reveals references across several application domains:

- Lewin’s model of social and organizational change
- Management studies referencing Lewin
- New management theories (Wheatley, 1995, 2011)
- Social science references (Parsons and Gestalt)
- Program Evaluation (MQ Patton, Westley, etc.)
- Social innovation (Carman, 2010, Brest, 2010)
- Innovation studies

Remarkably, the expression “theory of change” appears to be consistently employed as a term of art in these different domains. A small number of expressive models can be found and reproduced within and between these domains. The effective uses of logic models for TOCs might be characterized as “working theories of relevant causalities for anticipatory sensemaking of future outcomes.”

The analysis provides a framework for exploring the trade-offs (a trade space) between the underlying models of change, based on their system-theoretical underpinnings. The most common change models across these domains were analyzed and isomorphism identified to evaluate their goodness of fit for the design of change logic in strategy development, in foresight-led planning and visioning, and systemic design for largescale system change. The source models include (citations not in references):

- Lewin’s Unfreeze-Refreeze
- Impact Mapping (Outcome relations)
- Influence Map (e.g. ISM, Eigenvalue, Reach efficiency)
- Adaptive Cycle (Panarchy)
- Diffusion of Innovation (Moore, Crossing the Chasm)
- Multi-level Perspective (Geels, sustainability transitions)
- Three Horizons (Hodgson and Curry, 2008)

A range of deeper issues of relevance to systemic design are expected to emerge in full development of this thesis, to note a few:

- The problem of inherent and inaccessible social complexity within all social change contexts ensures most logic models are merely guidelines for structures of action, and not effective predictors of causal relations.
- Underpinning system theory insufficiently accounts for the biases of pre-change anticipation and the difficulties in updating change models as more is learned by the stakeholders engaged in any program.

- Theories of change are recruited for both normative and descriptive explanations of change outcomes; there should be different representations for “as is” and “ought.”
- Logic models can be developed to represent social innovation equivalent to business models.
- We need criteria for assessing TOC logic empirically to determine their efficacy in different contexts.
- We might advance some early proposals for the design to logic models, Stages of design, use of Toolkits.
- Assessment by their effectiveness in demonstrating systemic design principles (Jones, 2014).

The talk and paper would address a number of questions our community should consider, several of which will be helpful in engaging discussion in RSD9. I suggest the following questions are raised:

- Can we count on TOCs if they are not developed uniquely and systemically for each program?
How might we improve the science and design of Theories of Change?
- How do TOCs anticipate emergent events arising from relational complexity in social systems?
- Logic models do not account for the cycles of iteration and learning that any action research would demand.
How might TOCs adapt to the changes in learning during a system change program, and in implementation?
- Do these causal models represent the most-probable or most-desirable outcomes from presumed actions taken in service of a mission or design?
- Do we relegate our planning practices to the equivalent of waterfall methods in an iterative agile world?

In conclusion, systemic design is significantly concerned with the effective use of system change theories and we ought to be better positioned to inform practices that employ such models based on theory and method. The pragmatic aspect of the talk and paper is to position our community to better address the need for effective models of change that are designed for clarity of understanding in use, have empirical realism, entail knowledge of real complexity, and address gaps and weaknesses in current uses.

Although theories of change specifically represent types of system dynamics models in their representation of causal influences on outcomes over time, they did not arise from systems theory, but primarily from social change and social praxis. A serious inquiry into their uses and meanings in systemic design must acknowledge the sources, epistemic cultures, and proposed uses from the originators.

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