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SOU SOU: Supporting transitions through ritual, friendship, and play

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This work aims to act as a case study for how we might establish different conventions in how colleagues and communities of practice convene to make progress on large-scale transformation or systems change initiatives. We propose a small, intentional, relational unit with the core elements of commitment over time, thematic cycles, events led by contributors taking turns within a given cycle, a safe place to lead and participate in different practices, opportunity to experience and to learn together, and ritual as a wrapper around it all. In this case study, we share a path using the construct of a “Sou Sou”—a group savings club—over several yearly cycles in which the value contributed has been both literal and metaphoric currency toward a shared pool of practice and the pleasure of growing friendships that enrich the lives and competencies of the contributors.

The authors believe others leading change initiatives or working through transitions themselves might find inspiration in a ritual-based approach that amplifies the skills of the contributors while also providing an ongoing platform for creativity and fun.

The presentation and workshop are about how we might support ourselves and others in transitions through ritual, friendship, and play, where relationships are the essential

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element in any system change, and the pleasure they provide in sustaining energy for ongoing transitions.

KEYWORDS: sou-sou, ritual, friendship, play, practice, social infrastructure, transitions, systems change

RSD TOPIC(S): Methods & Methodology (RSD11: Methods and the Worlds They Make), Cases & Practice

Introduction

The SOU SOU sessions relate to the theme of *methods and the worlds they make*. The presenters sought to move beyond the individual limitations of systems thinking and design by embarking on a collaborative process infusing ritual, friendship, and play into a transition design initiative—where they tested how relationships played a key role in systems change and weaving the fabric of the “dark matter” of a system. This work aims to act as a case study for how we might establish different conventions in how colleagues and communities of practice convene to make progress on large-scale transformation or systems change initiatives.

The goals of the sessions are to:

- Share our “Sou Sou”—a group savings club—ritual design process with systemic designers looking to embark on a transition design journey with their team or a community of practice
- Provide an opportunity for workshop participants to jointly reflect and build on the process with the presenters
- Prototype elements of the Sou Sou ritual in real-time with participants

The sessions are about how we might support ourselves and others in transitions through **ritual**, **friendship**, and **play**, where relationships are the essential element in

any system change. We believe this matters not only because 'who we are in community with' informs our strengths as individual practitioners to lead and influence change in the world, but also because communities themselves and the relationships that make them up are ultimately where the change happens.

Sou Sou and Ritual

As Margaret Atwood says, money derives its value entirely from whatever it can translate itself into (Atwood, 2007). Framing the site of that translation (the financial exchange) as a ritual could allow ritual design principles to explore, shift and change what values are imbued into a monetary exchange and held by the currency that mediates it.

We have seen examples of this in the past where ritual has been used within an exchange to exemplify, exchange, and capture specific values. One example is the potlatch, a gift-giving feast practiced by the indigenous peoples of the Pacific Northwest Coast of Canada and the US. High-value items are accumulated by high-ranking individuals and bestowed upon invited guests (or sometimes burned) in a ritualized value exchange that foregrounds abundance, community solidarity, and hierarchical relations within.

The Sou Sou is another example where values are ritualized inside a value exchange. As the peer lending group meets consistently to gather the funds from all individuals and pass the amount (the hand) to one individual, there is an opportunity to infuse or allow the emergence of ritual in those events. In the case of this group, the telling of a story by everyone on what they spent the money on was ritualized and embedded into food and friendship steps that elevated the meaning of sharing the story. This process gave rise to a curiosity the group could not suppress to push the boundary of Sou Sou to support values held dear and to explore alternative forms of currency exchange together over time.

Theory of change

Over the course of the past five years, the presenters have been working on a theory of change for working through transitions whether on a systemic level or at the personal level. Our theory of change is that one avenue to support transitions in gaining traction is for them to be pleasurable. We know that transitions can be challenging. And we acknowledge that enacting systemic change is by nature a complex undertaking. But we are interested in how supporting and amplifying ecologies of friendship can embolden those involved mutually toward personal and collective systems change.

We believe that *ritual* can be a powerful psychotechnology and design practice within complex processes of systems transition (Mentor & Venkataramani, 2020; Hsu, 2021). Ritual practices have long been used by cultures to create intentional containment for what anthropologist Victor Turner calls “liminal states of *communitas*”, a space where new relationships and selves can arise and re-integrate back into the mundane world. As systems designers, we wanted to design containers of collective practices that deepen **friendship** (relationality), **ritual** (meaning), and **play** (creativity) through times of deep change.

By intentionally creating and enacting a “Sou Sou” inspired ritual over the course of five years, we learned the value that any one individual can bring is strengthened by the relationships we build. Nurturing these relationships can lead to attributes that allow us to generate something new together—where enhanced honesty, integrity, hope, security, and trust are the bedrock. These attributes represent some of the finest human qualities yet can be subverted in quotidian challenges of doing the hard work of facilitating and influencing change, whatever spheres one might orbit within or around.

We propose an intentional relational unit, one with the core elements of commitment over time, thematic cycles, events led by each contributor within a cycle, a safe place to lead and participate in different practices, an opportunity to experience and learn together, and ritual as a wrapper around it all and within each event. Crafted in this way, the Sou Sou functions as a living lab where value is the cumulative pool of practice

and nourishment to the contributing practitioners as they turn their individual practices to the world.

Having done multiple cycles, we believe others leading change initiatives or working through transitions themselves might find some inspiration in a ritual-based approach where close relationships form an intentional unit of practice and energy.

Ritual Prototype: The Sou Sou

The presenters began their five-year transformative collaborative journey in October 2017. This convening began as an opportunity to revisit each other's Master of Design major research projects from the Strategic Foresight and Innovation program at OCAD University—to honour and amplify the work around the futures of currency and financial systems, housing, and human interaction with technology. These initial quarterly meetings were set to support the major research project authors in furthering their work by establishing a rhythm of engaging in reflective practice and continuing to synthesize and make meaning from the findings or identify the next steps for implementation. The process also involved considering potential overlaps between the projects to identify potential ways forward.

Over the year, the community of practice took on the form of a "Sou Sou", the Caribbean or West Indian version of a rotating savings and credit association (ROSCA). "The basic idea is that a group of individuals meet together on a regular basis, placing money in a pot, which is then allocated to a particular group member. The meetings continue, with a different member of the group being selected for the pot at each date, until everyone has received it once" (Levenson & Besley, 1996). The Sou Sou represented the first iteration of the ritual prototype, a spin-off of the quarterly meetings of the major research projects.

The Sou Sou participants (the session presenters) initiated the Sou Sou as a way to carry on the ritual of a supportive community of practice, to convene the group on a quarterly basis around storytelling and personal growth. Soon, the group recognized the role of a

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Sou Sou extended beyond exchanging currency to exchanging time, energy, sweat equity, and the love and care needed to support human passion and energy towards systems change initiatives.

This moment was a turning point for the Sou Sou group, as we began to codify this arrangement among friends. The group set out to more formally design the Sou Sou ritual, with the help of the Ritual Design Toolkit (Menter & Venkataramani, 2019). The first intentional ritual emerging from this work was a series of “learning journeys” designed to spark curiosity, imagination, and critical thinking around a topic, method, or reflection point.

Key Takeaways

Presenters will reflect on the process of how carrying out the design and execution of a ritual developed reliable social infrastructure (Van der Bijl-Brouwer, 2017). Attendees will take away the ritual design steps crafted by the presenters and what worked and what did not over the three iterative cycles of the Sou Sou.

Ideally, attendees will take away the presenters' pattern of a ritual designed with the purpose of centering friendship, play, and pleasure into a transition process. Attendees will leave with a sense of how they might create their own ritual that can develop or amplify the conditions for easeful flow within a social context (Csikszentmihalyi, 1998), by ritualizing pleasure and friendship into the process.

Complementing the Presentation with a Workshop

In addition to the presentation, the presenters offer a RSD11 workshop. workshop is designed to be an immersive experience, bringing systemic designers into the “world of the Sou Sou” through a prototype experience of ritual design using this example as a case study.

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The workshop starts by grounding the ritual in systems thinking and systemic design practice. The presenters will recount how the Sou Sou ritual came to be, including a walk-through of the emerging ritual design components and criteria. The presentation will then move into breaking down the key elements of the Sou Sou ritual and their significance: friendship, play, and relationships. In keeping with the spirit of the ritual, the workshop will rely on storytelling as a key vehicle for communication and change.

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