Chapter 11 Facing accelerating change: the role of research in Transforming Culture

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Mark set out an architecture for change within which he advised how the research could make a contribution. In so doing he acknowledged that research questions and processes are not value neutral; whose research, done how, by whom, etc. are all relevant. He briefly outlined how the Future Earth Project might contribute to a research agenda.

There are four aspects of an architecture for change:

- The Sustainable Development Goals
- Tipping points and thresholds
- Measures of Wellbeing
- Narratives of self-identity

Within the Future Earth project, their third research theme is Transformation to Sustainability, into which the co-design and co-production of knowledge with decision takers has a place.

The Sustainable Development Goals provide a package of goals that give us the basis for a global narrative of where we, humanity, need to be heading within social and economic domains.

There are likely to be biophysical and social tipping points, both advantageous and deleterious, that we will cross on out journey into the near future. With social tipping points in the context of cultural transformations, one research question would be 'what is the minimum level of societal change necessary to for a transformation to occur?' The work of Bina Agawal in India with rural land use management suggests about a third of participants need to be engaged.

In regard to measures of wellbeing, clearly research has a role in defining those measures, but also research crosses into practical matters such as how to get measures of wellbeing onto the evening TV news.

Narratives of identity are a powerful influence on action (see Solutions Journal 5(1) Jan'Feb 2014 p.31). Identity as a city dweller, as a consumer, as an indigenous person, all direct how we think and respond. So research questions here include: how to change identity; how to move beyond consumption as an identity?

Discussion

Issues raised in discussion included:

- The need for equity in transformation processes
- Going against the dominant paradigm may provoke a strong reaction if ignoring change agents is insufficient.

- Malcolm Gladwell identifies critical mass as only one of several elements for crossing a tipping point: the situation, key communicators, key facilitators and the stories used all contribute.
- Resilience in a system that maintains the status quo, is also a factor.
- Uncertainty and complexity are two related elements and how they are managed is critical to any outcome. There is both uncertainty of situation and of the outcomes once a change has been begun. Often change is not initially recognised as it often happens on the fringe. In starting a change, one need not have all the answers and indeed need recognise that one doesn't.
- Transformations are non-homogenised; they are plural and have multiple elements. Three types of transformation become evident:
    o Emergent– undersigned, emerge from current situation
    o Facilitated – facilitated by social processes, not master planned. For example changes in consumption occasioned by corporations in a capitalist economic model.
    o Designed – a central planning agency designs and sets off a transformation, such as the 5 year plans in China.

(Lorrae vK)

- Each type of transformation leads to different types of research question and roles for researchers. Drivers, feedbacks, unintended consequences, thresholds, are all topics for research.
- Resistance to change can be overcome by framing the situation differently. Climate change is a social and economic problem. There are links to enlightened self-interest; an engagement strategy can start in any sphere of social interest; different narratives for engagement for different social groups.
- Understanding the narratives of past transformations can help inform future transformations, subject to recognition of the role of uncertainties. And one may not be able to recognise which changes are beneficial or not.
- Transformations are likely to be chaotic; how to provide a lighthouse to help navigate through the chaos and fear. Do the SDGs give some guiding principles? Frameworks for change can guide if not totally remove uncertainty; provide a compass as to the course even if there is no map.
- The option of muddling through is not an option. Therefore we need to plan options to influence how change might occur.

Summary

Research can help transformation by seeking the questions that need to be answered and then to provide a framework for designing and planning change, by giving information however incomplete to assist with managing uncertainty, by providing a compass to help people navigate the chaos and fear, by monitoring progress along the journey and advising course corrections.

Ref: Frantz CM. Tapping into core social motives to drive sustainable transformation. Solutions. 2014;5(1(Jan-Feb 2014)).