

Introduction: *Transforming Culture*: to what and how?

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This Human Ecology Forum 2014 and 2015 Seminar Series wants to elaborate the theoretical, methodological and practical aspects of a program for change. To this end, change theory (there are many formulations of this; for one method see <http://www.theoryofchange.org/what-is-theory-of-change/how-does-theory-of-change-work/#6>) advises a sequence that answers these questions:

1. What do we want – what does it look like and how might it work?
2. Why do we want this?
3. What specifically needs to change in the current system to get us there?
4. How do we make those changes: at various levels?
5. What will help make those changes?
6. What blockages/ barriers are likely to emerge and how can we get around them.

This paper will explore these questions briefly to give some background to the seminar series.

So 1. What do we want?

Our purpose is to bring about a Biosensitive (ecosystem respecting) and therefore Ecologically-Sustainable society.

Stephen Boyden's term biosensitivity (Boyden 2004) refers to an understanding of the place of humans in the environment that is truly in tune with, sensitive to and respectful of the processes of life; an understanding which can therefore bring clearer insights and strategic guidance to the urgent local and global task of reversing humankind's excessive pressures on nature's systems.

Biosensitivity provides a lens through which to assess current and future human development proposals. The 'life' focus means that both the natural environment including other species and the physiochemical systems of the ecosystem and human societal systems (including the built environment) are respected. Consequently a biosensitive society will result in healthy biosphere supporting healthy people in a healthy society.

Ecological sustainability has these components (drawn from multiple sources):

- It operates within the limitations of the Earth's biophysical systems
- It recognises and acknowledges the links between human societal behaviours and the effects on the natural world
- It recognises that the interests of non-human species and future generations need to be taken into account in the present
- It promotes the links between a just and equitable human society and respect for Earth's biophysical systems/ Nature.

Both terms are complementary, putting the focus on slightly different aspects, but united in their view that humanity sits within a greater whole – the biophysical systems of planet Earth.

Biosensitivity focusses on how humans regard the living, biological systems of the planet while ecological focuses on the interaction between living things and between them and the physical world. In some respects, Tony McMichael caught the essence in describing biosensitivity as a pre-requisite for ecological sustainability. One is an input state, and the other the outcome.

Project participants may seek to explore what a society operating within these sets of principles might look like in more detail. Readers of the magazine Solutions would remember several articles that explore this (<http://www.thesolutionsjournal.com/>). But what are the social, political and economic institutions and arrangements of such a society? What would it be like to live in? How would it feel?

2. Why transform?

To ensure human wellbeing and health by conserving human civilisation in the immediate future, and ultimately ensure the survival of the species *Homo sapiens*. The reasons for this are spelt out in the assumptions listed above. Put the other way, the present and future wellbeing (that is the health, security, political freedoms and material prosperity) of humanity is being threatened by the current disregard of the biophysical realities by the practices of the dominant socioeconomic system. These practices are defined by culture.

Transformation is a term with multiple meanings. I use it here to mean a shift in the worldviews, governance and socio-economic practices within human systems to a significantly different state than they are now (see discussion in UKCIP report (Lonsdale et al 2015)).

3. Why culture?

Again culture carries multiple meanings. It embodies worldviews, beliefs and assumptions, practices of thinking and living, and the ways these are communicated through the 'arts' (stories and songs, literature, theatre, music, art) and cuisine of the particular society of which it is a part. In this discussion by culture I mean the default operating system for a particular human society. In saying this, I recognise that there is within societies a dominant culture, and that other non-dominant sub-cultures exist, that may, or may not, align to some extent with this dominant cultural system.

Culture has two aspects: the behavioural which includes social practices, arrangements and institutions, and the beliefs, assumptions or worldview that underlies and explains or justifies behaviour. These are in dynamic equilibrium with each influencing the other.

Therefore to change how humanity operates on the planet, we need to re-design the operating system and reboot the system in that new mode. Both behaviours and beliefs need to change in parallel.

Culture also operates at lesser scales within society; the individual institutions and organisations of the several realms (to borrow Fotopoulos' model (Fotopoulos 1997)). Realms include the political, economic, ecological, social and personal. Social and personal realms overlap and encompass home life, leisure, the workplace, and so forth. There are also cultural factors relating to societal sectors: energy, habitation, transport, industry, agriculture, etc..

Answering the remaining three questions, specifically how to make change and how specifically to bring about change in this culture, are the focus for the rest of this series. Questions at this level look at what current arrangements particularly needs to change and how.

Cultural Transformation

Stephen Boyden has written, in relation to the role of the Frank Fenner Foundation, that it will convene integrative transdisciplinary discussion and debate on:

(a) The changes in human activities that will be necessary to achieve the transition to an ecologically sustainable and healthy society of the future (e.g. changes in energy use, transportation, food production, forestry practices, manufacturing, consumer behaviour, lifestyles)

(b) the changes in societal arrangements that will be necessary to bring about the necessary changes in human activities (e.g. changes in economic arrangements, the occupational structure of the work force, urban design, government regulations, and educational programs).

This seminar series seeks to explore how this might be done.

Processes of Cultural Transformation

Change requires both motivator and a belief that change can occur. We have a motivator (the concerns outlined in the assumptions and aims in the Introduction), but how to harness this so those in power and our fellow citizens move? More importantly, how can we communicate concern and simultaneously engender hope? Concern or fear without hope stymies change and reinforces both the status quo and black and white thinking.

In changing behaviour, we don't have to waste effort on changing people's minds and worldviews, which are generally very resistant to change as they are the emotionally charged basic assumptions and beliefs a person has about the world and how it should work. This set of beliefs constitute a person's identity, and identity is the most strongly defended psychological construct. We also know that if people are put into a situation of psychological dissonance (where their identity and values conflict with an aspect of their perceived reality,) they will react in one of three ways. Usually they just ignore the dissonance and get on with living. However sometimes if compelled by emotions or arguments, they will change their behaviour, and then change their beliefs retrospectively to justify this behaviour change. This is the basis for motivational interviewing. Occasionally however, if the cause of the dissonance is too threatening, people will deny reality and hold to their belief.

We have historically been wedded to the 'information deficit model' theory of change. That is the belief that if people only knew the correct information they will change their behaviour. We now know that this belief is mistaken. Other psychological steps are required. However, information is important for change; it is just not usually sufficient. People require information both about what change is required, why it is needed and how it can come about. Additionally, people need a set of structures and processes that set up the psychological conditions in which behaviour will change.

Change come about because people come to believe that a different way of doing something will be better than what happens at present AND that change is possible AND that the pain of change will be worthwhile. There needs to be acknowledgement of the barriers and ideas for how to get around these. So at a personal level, it is discomfort about the present + hope / vision + practical steps for making change that enables the change to occur.

Reuben Anderson (<http://vimeo.com/26943709>) outlines Ten Myths of Behaviour Change. His focus is on changing individual's behaviour to achieve ecologically sustainable societal goals. Distilling this into a series of principles we have, in no particular order:

- Make the wanted option the default option: structures and regulation at a societal level designed so doing the right thing is easy and automatic
- Create new habits; changing behaviour is about changing people's habits: alert people to new habits, focus attention by: legislation and regulations, incentives, costs, prompts; help people to practice new habits; rely on intrinsic rewards
- Appeal to emotions not intellect: use insightful story telling
- Renormalising: people do what friends and neighbours do. So use social marketing to spread this message and develop social proof for people that this is what is normal
- Design systems for people, according to how our brains actually work, taking limits to cognitive capacity into account

Communicating needs to be undertaken with careful forethought and planning. Again, communicate in a manner and with methods that are going to get your message to the people you intend to receive it. Additionally, there are some critical factors to be born in mind with messaging effectively:

Framing and language show your audience the aspects and meanings of the message you want them to receive: [Lakoff](#) (framing)(Lakoff 2006) and [Senior](#) (working with people's own concerns)(Senior 2014) and [Jonah Berger](#) (viral stories)(Berger 2013) and others explain in more detail.

Beware reinforcing your opponents message. John Cook & Stephan Lewandowsky in *The Debunking Handbook* (Cook and Lewandowsky 2011) explain about three 'backfire effects':

- familiarity - repetition reinforces belief ('Goebbelization')
- overkill - a simple myth is accepted more than a complicated correction
- worldviews - very difficult to change - this change may be traumatic

So, only mention your opponent's message (briefly in outline) to say it is false then give brief succinct reasons why, and then repeat your message. Keep the correction clear and simple; if necessary provide options for more detailed explanations nearby. Avoid threatening worldviews; work with them by speaking to values and framing acceptably.

So far this discussion of change has focused on individuals. But what about transformation at a societal level? Since culture is the operating system of society, to change how society operates, we need to change culture. What do we know about changing culture? We know about changing people's behaviour individually; how does this translate to a community level? We know a lot about effective communications. We can use this knowledge to designing a cultural transformation.

References

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