Abstract

The ecological, social, political, technological, and cultural disruptions of our time require new responses. They require more than just reacting to the problem symptoms, more than just replacing one mindset with another. The future requires us to shift from fighting the old to co-sensing and co-shaping a new set of emerging future possibilities. It requires a shift from an ego-system awareness that cares about the well-being of few individuals to an eco-system awareness that cares about the well-being of all. To make this shift, we need to embody new ways of knowing, relating and doing, that operate from changing the deeper structures of social systems and social fields. Social field theory maintains that the most potent leverage for social change lies in the hidden dimensions of social systems—the deep structures or sources from which thought and action arise. The ability to sense the interior conditions of social systems is a prerequisite to catalyzing profound change. The scarce resource in this transformation is not knowledge. It is awareness. The leverage point for shifting the awareness in a system from ego to eco lies in making the system sense and see...
In this chapter, we provide an overview of the framework and the method of awareness-based action research.

**Introduction**

We live in times of disruption. The melting of the poles and the accelerating climate chaos require coordinated collective action at an unprecedented national, regional and global scale. For example, of the 100 highest impact solutions that collectively would successfully address the current climate crisis, the top 20 concern four sectors: renewable energy, regenerative land use and food systems, universal health and education, and refrigerant management. If you add finance as a fifth sector, you see the bigger landscape of sectors that need to go through a profound transformation within the next decade or two. While the need for transformation processes that work across these sectors (eco-systemwide) has increased, the actual capacity to work ‘across the aisle’ (particularly in political processes) appears to be going down, as we are reminded by the rise of autocrats and neo-national populists in all major world regions who work inwardly and solely with their own popular bases.

Theory U is a participatory action research methodology that focuses on building collective capacity for collaboration, co-creation and profound systems change at the scale of the whole eco-system. It is a method that connects sensemaking of the current reality with processes that allow stepping into emerging future possibilities. Through these actions and a process of opening the *mind, heart*, and *will*, the U-process can guide change-makers to
catalyse systemic change.

Kurt Lewin famously said that ‘you cannot understand a system unless you change it.’ Only by participating in real-world change can we open the door to a deeper understanding of the dynamics of social systems. Inspired by Lewin, our work draws on social field theory to focus on the deeper structures of social systems. Social field theory explores the interiority of social systems— their deeper and often hidden dimensions—and its role in generating transformational change at scale.

The following three principles describe the path from Lewin to our version of a contemporary social field theory:

1. You cannot understand a system unless you change it. (K. Lewin)
2. You cannot change a system unless you transform the consciousness of those enacting the system
3. You cannot transform consciousness unless you make the system sense and see itself.

In other words, if Lewin argues that understanding the system requires changing the system, then changing the system requires a shift in the underlying assumptions and intentions of the members of that system. This shift opens up new sources from which the actors in a system can operate. The awareness of these sources, and choosing among them consciously, shifts the system’s dynamics and, consequently, its outcomes. Transformation of this kind requires both an inner and an outer journey, which happens both individually and collectively.
Social Fields vs. Social Systems

A social system can be understood as a patterned network of relationships between individuals, groups and institutions that form a continually emerging whole. Much of what we know about social systems comes from a third-person perspective—that is, from the outside looking in. For example, typically when we ‘map’ a system, we stand outside it, identify its constituent parts and then try to visually represent the relationships between those parts. While this perspective is necessary for understanding some key aspects of the collective phenomenon, it is usually not sufficient to change the system in view. What we witness in many social systems today is a profound knowing-doing gap—a disconnect between what we know (for example, the top 100 solutions that would successfully address our climate crisis) and what we do (i.e., that most of these solutions remain, by and large, unimplemented). Changes in our cognitive understanding do not necessarily equate to changes in our behaviour. To address the knowing-doing gap we need to go beyond third-person knowledge. We need to access and shift the level of awareness that gives rise to behaviour. What is missing is an understanding of the sources from which our thinking and acting are coming into being. To bridge the knowing-doing gap, to bridge the disconnect between head and hand, we need to inquire into and activate the knowing of the heart.

To understand the source conditions of collective experience, we need to turn the camera around from the third-person perspective (I-it) to first-person (I-me) and second-person (I-you) views. What differentiates social fields from social systems is that social fields include
and illuminate the source conditions of collective experience. Social fields are social systems, but seen from within. When we shift our perspective on a system from an outside view to seeing it from within—when we begin to inquire from first- and second-person views— we switch our perspective from the social system to the social field. This doesn’t mean abandoning the third-person perspective. The term “social field” describes systems from both the outside (the third-person view) and from within (the first- and second- person views). It investigates the source conditions under which social systems shift from one state of interaction to another.

We define social fields as the entirety of the social system with an emphasis on the source conditions that give rise to patterns of thinking, conversing, and organizing, which in turn produce practical results. The source conditions of these patterns are co-shaped by the inner place from which individuals in the system operate and the ‘quality of the container,’ which we think of as the quality of the ‘social soil’ (See Figure 1). The container is the ‘holding space’ where the interactions of the actors in a system originate. Bill Isaacs, describing the role of the container, said, ‘often the missing ingredient for those who try to listen to one another is not just their individual effort, but a setting where it is possible to hear one another and speak safely together’. To describe this setting or space, we use the metaphor of the soil. Just as in farming, where soil is the dimension that will affect the quality of all that grows from it, the social soil is the dimension of the social system that, while not visible to the eye, will influence the quality of all interactions arising from it.

Taken together, the properties and dynamics of the social field can be visualized in Figure 1 below.
Operating from a social field perspective means addressing directly the least visible dimension of social change—our collective blind spot. The blind spot of current social science and social systems theory concerns the source conditions from which social systems originate. Awareness-based participative action research is a process of co-inquiry into the deeper structures of the social systems—the source conditions—in order to see, sense and shift them.

The Iceberg Model of Social Reality

To better understand the social field, it is helpful to look at the iceberg model originally
developed by Edgar Schein and Peter Senge. For example, in his work on organizational
culture Schein distinguishes 1) artefacts, 2) espoused values, and 3) deep taken-for-granted
assumptions as different manifestations of culture. Depicted as an iceberg, artefacts are
the most visible forms of culture whereas values and the deep taken-for-granted
assumptions are less visible.

Theory U then adds a fourth level to this iceberg model: the level of intention or source
from which our thought and action originate. Because this less visible but deeper level
consciousness is the foundation that shapes all other thought and action, changes at this
level tend to be generalized, far-reaching and enduring (Scharmer, 2018).

In an interview, the late CEO of Hanover Insurance, Bill O’Brien, summarized his leadership
experience as follows: ‘The success of an intervention depends on the interior condition of
the intervener.’ After years of leading change in his organization, O’Brien came to the
conclusion that leverage for change has to do with the intention and attention that leaders
bring to a situation. More than the tools, processes, and methods that are employed
during the change process, the interior condition influences the outcome. While changing a
system, change agents can take different perspectives, for example:

1) they can look at the results, the ‘what,’ and analyse the outcome of change
   processes;
2) they can focus on the process, the ‘how,’ and focus on how change happens and
   what methods are used; and
3) they can look at the source, i.e., the quality of intention and attention that give rise
to a specific activity.
These source conditions from which we operate both individually and collectively, suggest an extended self-awareness that we can have as human beings: I pay attention *this* way; therefore, it emerges *that* way.

The following image of the iceberg model (Figure 2) depicts these levels of social reality creation:

![Iceberg Model of Current Reality](image)

Figure 2: Iceberg Model of Current Reality

In our research with groups and organizations, we identified four sources (or structures) of attention—downloading, factual listening, empathic listening and generative dialogue—that give rise to four different qualities of relating and social fields (Scharmer, 2018). These
are perhaps best illustrated with the example of listening and conversing, something we do every day in all aspects of our lives.

The first quality of listening we describe as *downloading* of past experience. An example in an everyday interaction is the following: ‘Hi, how are you?’ ‘I’m fine...’ Nobody really listens, nobody expects anything to be relevant in this exchange. It is polite phrasing with little meaning. We use conversational downloading every day. I go into a meeting, person A starts presenting, and I am thinking ‘same old, same old.’ I know that person B will then challenge person A, and person C will try to bridge the situation. I only half-listen because I assume that I already know what is going to happen. I download my past experiences onto the current situation. In many social settings, particularly when the context did not change, this quality of interaction can be functional. But when we are confronted with disruptive change and profoundly new challenges, this quality of listening limits our capacity to adequately respond, let alone to innovate. Any action based on downloading tends to be limited to reenacting the patterns of the past.

A second quality of listening and conversing is *factual listening*: ‘How are you?’ ‘Actually, not so well...’ With this response, one person breaks through the pattern of downloading by speaking one’s mind. The social field then changes as actors listen from a place of greater curiosity, more open to information that is unexpected or might disconfirm previously held ideas and assumptions. The type of listening changes from downloading to factual listening: listening to what is actually being said.

The third quality of listening is *empathic listening*. ‘Oh, I see your point of view. Yes, I
understand what you mean...’. Empathic listening requires the actor to step into the other person's ‘perceptual world’ to understand their perspective. Empathic listening is the invisible side of dialogue—a process of ‘thinking together’ that enables teams and groups to reflect on their own assumptions, to see themselves. This is important because 50% of all change management is just about this shift: moving from a debate style of conversation, i.e., blaming each other, to dialogue, i.e., to understanding each other by seeing the problem through another’s eyes.

This brings us to the fourth quality, which we call generative listening and generative dialogue. In a generative dialogue each individual listens and speaks from the whole, from what is moving through. The actors in a generative dialogue are listening from what is emerging from the conversation, activating collective creativity in ways that allow something new to emerge and manifest. In short: generative dialogue means listening and conversing from source.

All social actions emerge from one of the four structures (or sources) of attention described above. Here we have illustrated the four structures through the individual process of listening. The following section describes the way different structures of attention manifest in groups, organizations and societies and why we believe that action research that focuses on shifting individual and collective awareness is a key leverage point for initiating sustainable systems change.

Matrix of Social Evolution
Table 1 depicts a matrix of social evolution according to various levels of systems and consciousness. On the vertical axis (first two columns), it outlines the four structures of attention discussed above and, on the horizontal axis, the four levels of systems change: listening (micro), conversing (meso), organizing (macro) and coordinating (mundo).

Table 1: Matrix of Social Evolution (Source: Theory U)

The U-process helps actors to become aware of their agency in all four levels of enacting social systems: micro, meso, macro, mundo. We have seen processes of profound changes across the entire Matrix in health care, education, food, finance, business, and governance. When the actors in social systems pay attention to the deeper source conditions from which they operate, these systems and situations begin to open up and to develop the capacity to change, to evolve and transform.
For example, in the Novos Urbanos Social Innovation Lab in Brazil, a diverse group of 50 stakeholders representing the local food system used the U-process to connect to the deep structure of the eco-system and collectively find innovative ways to provide healthy food for the most marginalized groups in the local communities. Together, they could see and sense that, in order to address some of the deeper systemic issues, many of their organizations such as Coca Cola and various local NGOs that opposed each other in public, needed to work together across these divides. Sparked by that insight, one team formed a coalition among Coca-Cola, Ambev, and Pepsi that, with the help of various NGOs, resulted in an official announcement in 2015 that they would stop selling sugary drinks in school cafeterias to children under age twelve. In addition, the companies agreed to stop all advertising targeted at children throughout Brazil. Another initiative created ‘Fonte da Juventude,’ a documentary series on national TV that helps children understand the need for fruits and vegetables in their diet. Since then, the participants have also created an organic farming lab and a leadership lab. The group was able to connect on the level of shared intention and develop action steps based on this common understanding.

Our main lesson from manifold applications of Theory U methods over the past two decades boils down to this: the quality of results achieved by any system is a function of the quality of awareness that people in these systems operate from. In short: form follows consciousness. The essence of leadership and evolutionary change is to become aware of these source conditions (our blind spots) and then to shift the inner place from which we operate to respond as needed by the situations we face. In other words, our job as leaders and change-makers is to cultivate the soil of the social field.
The question though is: How? How do you shift the level of awareness in a given system from one level to another? This is a question for new social technologies—i.e., for new methods and tools that can help to re-link the broken feedback loop between the parts and the whole.

The Design and Application of Theory U Intervention

Theory U provides a social technology for accessing the deeper levels of a social field. In its essence, Theory U connects the four levels of the iceberg through the journey of the U: the left-hand side of the U represents a journey from surface to source, and the right-hand side a journey from source through different levels of action (envisioning, enacting, embodying). Figure 3 below shows the Theory U process.
Figure 3: The Theory U Process

Going through this process requires individuals and groups to engage in a number of essential practices:

- **Downloading**: As long as we operate from the cognitive social field of downloading, the world is frozen by our old mental habits and past experiences; nothing new enters our minds.

- **Seeing**: This step requires us to suspend habitual judgment in order to see with fresh eyes. Only through the suspension of judgment can we open ourselves up to wonder.
• **Sensing**: The moment we redirect our attention from objects to source, our perception widens and deepens. This shift bends the beam of observation back onto the observer. The boundary between observer and observed opens up, allowing us to go to the places of most potential in ourselves.

• **Presencing**: Entering a moment of stillness, we let go of the old and connect to the surrounding sphere of future potential. The boundary between observer and observed collapses into a space for the future to emerge.

• **Crystallizing**: As we “let come” and crystallize vision and intention, the relationship between observer and observed starts to invert. Envisioning happens from the field of the future (rather than from our ego).

• **Prototyping**: Here we explore the future by doing, by building small landing strips for the future that wants to emerge. Action happens from the field (rather than from our ego).

• **Performing**: As we embody the new by evolving our practices and infrastructures, the relationship between observer and observed completes its inversion: institutional change happens from the eco-system (rather than from our organizational ego-system).

Moving through the Theory U process, there are two characteristics of the learning – or generation of knowledge – that are distinct. First, knowledge is generated relationally; that is, in a context and through interaction. Learning surfaces through encounter with others. This is necessary because knowledge is embedded in context and context is co-created, so action and interaction are needed to surface that knowledge and make it visible. Second, knowledge generated through the Theory U process emerges from a shift in consciousness.
New knowledge surfaces when we shift the place from which we see, perceive and act.

Theory U is designed to help participants be aware of and deepen their awareness of the source from which they operate. It is this deepened awareness that can shift an interaction from one of reenacting habitual patterns to turning to an encounter with an open mind, heart and will, which then opens the possibility of surfacing something new.

**Case Study: u.lab Scotland** ([https://ulabscot.com/](https://ulabscot.com/))

u.lab, the massive open online course (MOOC) offered on the educational platform edX, provides an online-to-offline version of the U process. Through the MOOC, the process is available free to anyone with access to the internet. While some follow the course individually, it is largely supported and facilitated by a global network of self-organizing hubs—place-based, local communities of change where participants engage in the core practices of Theory U outlined above.

u.lab has been used as a participatory action research process to catalyse social change throughout the globe and in every major sector (150,000 participants from 186 countries to date). One of the largest-scale applications is in Scotland, where the Scottish Government adopted u.lab as a public participation platform to catalyse multi-local, community-led change initiatives. The case of u.lab Scotland is particularly powerful as it engages with the process on the micro (attending), meso (conversing), and macro (organizing) levels through individuals and hubs, and the mundo (coordinating) level.
Keira Oliver and Kirsty Deacon of u.lab Scotland describe its origins:

*The first u.lab course ran in January 2015 as a prototype (or experiment). A small group of participants from the public and voluntary/third sector took part who thought it would be of interest to a wider audience across Scotland. This idea was taken forward as a prototype by the group firstly by convening a series of three national gatherings ... over the summer of 2015 to explore the potential for u.lab in Scotland before it ran again in Sept 2015. Around 800 people attended these events and 900 people in Scotland registered for u.lab.*

A voluntary holding team was formed, made up of participants from the Scottish Government, voluntary sector, National Health Service (NHS), and private sector who had participated in the first u.lab course and wanted to support the growth of a peer-support network. The intention of the network was to connect individuals in local areas and sectors to co-inspire and deepen learning through sharing stories, experiences and prototypes. In addition to convening national events, the network was strengthened through the use of social media platforms, including a blog, Facebook, and Twitter, to share these stories and connect individuals and groups. The holding team also created tools to support those using u.lab in their local contexts, such as the ‘taster session pack,’ which provides guidance on hosting an information session for potential participants prior to the start of u.lab. Finally, content specific to the Scottish context was embedded in the online course hosted on the edX platform. This included videos of u.lab participants in Scotland illustrating phases in the learning process with their own experiences of co-sensing, presencing and prototyping.
To date, over 1,500 individuals from diverse sectors in Scotland have taken part in u.lab, including local authorities, government, universities, public health, charities, social enterprises, and business. They have used u.lab to shape initiatives that, for example, bring together educators and auxiliary service providers to make all services more available to children and their families, that bring front-line medical staff into greater contact with the lived experience of their patients, that convene community groups to collectively decide how to use common spaces, as well as many others.

Many u.lab participants in Scotland choose to learn in a community, for example by joining a Coaching Circle or a hub. More than 100 hubs have been formed, often facilitated by volunteer hosts. Some of these hubs are ‘open,’ meaning that anyone with an interest in the process can take part, and some are “focused” in that participants share a common interest, such as healthcare provision, or are members of the same organization.

Participants move through the U-process engaging in various practices: deep listening exercises such as empathy or dialogue walks, where participants are invited to make a conscious effort to understand the experience of another; learning journeys to gain insight into the experiences of those on the margins of a situation, system, or issue of interest; stakeholder interviews to better understand the needs and perceptions of those within their own system; guided meditation and journaling exercises to surface and capture insights; and prototyping exercises to help participants generate action. In addition to individual exercises, u.lab participants take part in the ongoing formal practice of meeting in Coaching Circles. Coaching Circles are groups of 5-7 people that meet weekly, either in-person or online, and work with the ‘case’ of one of the group members, using a process that
integrates a moment of stillness and the sharing of metaphor, feelings, and visual art to help participants develop insight into their situation.

Impact

The u.lab process connects individual capacity-building with outward action. As such, it integrates individual, interpersonal, collective, and eco-system learning-in-action, generating knowledge for social action at each level. Below we draw on comments from a study of u.lab Scotland participants to illustrate this impact.

Individual/Intrapersonal

Many u.lab participants in Scotland describe a shifting sense of self, seeing oneself differently or more clearly, or feeling somehow more like oneself.

  *u.lab has made me look at myself and reflect about myself in an even deeper way and ask those questions...it has helped me to visualise my future self much better than I was doing on my own.*

  -Sandra

They also describe a change in thinking, including looking at things differently, seeing disconnects, and taking a broader perspective.
So, I know what I can do within my own sphere of influence but I think it’s probably looking beyond that and thinking, ‘Well, why are we disconnected over here and why does this part not speak to this part?’

- Robert

Seeing and sensing the system differently, as described in the two quotes above, often inspired a different quality of relating to others in the system.

Interpersonal and Group

At this level, deeper listening is the most commonly reported outcome, including listening with a more open heart, with greater empathy, with less judgment, and with a desire to understand the other.

One of the big things for me was the non-judgemental part of that, so, the impact that that’s had on me as a professional and as a person is that constantly checking in on where the judgement’s coming in and trying to keep an open mind and an open heart about things.

- Katherine

Connected to deeper listening is a shift to working more collaboratively than individually, reaching out to a broader range of people (both clients and colleagues), including those at the margins of the system, and designing processes that create a space for more meaningful conversations.
What’s happened is we are much more in connection with the world. Now, a year later, our entire organisation is shifting its axis towards direct relationship with the public.

- Dorothy

Changes in interpersonal relating are then seen reflected and scaled in system-level changes.

System

A wide variety of new initiatives were reported, all of which echoed the themes of reaching out to wider groups of people, creating spaces for meaningful exchange, and/or engaging stakeholders in collaborative decision-making.

For example, Outside the Box\textsuperscript{14} is a social enterprise that provides development support to individuals and groups across Scotland who want to make a difference to their communities. When the team participated in u.lab, one impact was that they began to think about reaching out to older people in their region by asking questions. Drawing on the principles of sensing described above, they asked stakeholders, ‘What does a community that works well for older people look like and feel like? Tell us what you think would be part of a good community for you?’. Anne O’Conner, Executive Director, said, ‘people told us things, some of which were ones we expected and some of which were ones we completely didn’t expect, which is the joy of talking to people and saying, “How does life look to you?”’. A number of actions emerged from the initiative, including applying for funding for a long-term project focused on the needs
of rural seniors. One of the initiatives that came out of the group’s u.lab participation was the development of a series of Happiness Habits Cafes. Rather than hold information sessions on mental health, the organisation invites citizens to come together and share their happiness habits, or the ways in which they enjoy good mental health and wellbeing.

Eco-system

The nationwide support provided by u.lab Scotland has enabled a national cross-sector network of awareness-based practitioners. Perhaps the most concrete example of impact at an eco-system level is the contribution of the u.lab experience in Scotland to the creation of the Collective Leadership for Scotland initiative in the Scottish government\(^{15}\). Within the context of public service reform across the UK, this initiative aims to spark a conceptual and practical shift in public sector leadership in all sectors from a traditional/hierarchical to a collaborative/collective approach by offering pairs of facilitators from within the public sector to provide developmental support to cross-organizational groups of practitioners working with complex problems. Key to this work is building the capacity to stay in the uncomfortable space of ‘unknowing’ long enough to allow new, and collective, knowledge and action to emerge, rather than succumb to the pull of ways of working from the past.

Underlying the learning at all levels of change (micro, macro, meso and mundo) is a subtle, yet fundamental shift in participants’ relationship to action. There are two characteristics of this shift. First, the source of action shifts from habit or external motivation to deeper sources of knowing. Second, the purpose of action shifts from performance to learning.
I think the learning from u.lab and also that exploration of creativity has, kind of, really freed me up to go, ‘Well, do you know what, I’m just going to do this,’ and there’ll be learning out the back of it and then we’ll do it differently the next time.

- Theresa

What it did to us as an organisation, I think one of the main lessons I think we got from u.lab was be braver, just, you know, stop worrying about things so much and just try it and see what happens.

- Jules

As illustrated above, the changed relationship to taking action that underlies all levels of impact is expressed as a greater sense of confidence and courage to move into action — a phenomenon we call action confidence \(^{16,17}\).

**Knowledge Generation for Social Field Change**

We began this chapter highlighting the need for a system to see and sense itself as a precursor for transformational change. As reflected in the examples above, when systems are able to see their own disconnects and experience themselves from multiple perspectives, the knowledge surfaced leads actors in the system to create new structures that are more inclusive, collaborative and system-conscious.
This brings us to the next evolution in our work: deepening and scaling our capacity for making deep structures in social systems visible. Unfortunately, methods and tools to capture this data and make it readily available largely do not yet exist. There is no research method that allows us to reliably illuminate the hidden dimension of social change—the deep structures of systems—and to make them the subject of scientific inquiry. The creation of such a methodology requires us to integrate three perspectives usually thought of as separate:

1. **First-person methods**: protocols that allow us to access and explicate the deeper layers of our personal experience.
2. **Second-person methods**: tools and methodologies that allow us to access, visualize and capture the deeper layers of our collective experience.
3. **Third-person methods**: approaches that capture tangible, observable data about the inner experience of social systems from an outside-objective perspective.

Many of us know from personal experience that the social field shifts when we engage in profound transformational change. Yet, what we lack are the concepts and language to consistently and coherently capture these data. New methods are emerging that have helped us begin to surface and articulate the source conditions of the social field. We highlight three.

*Micro phenomenology* is “a new scientific discipline that enables us to explore our lived experience very finely.” Micro-phenomenology asks what is happening when we have
an experience— for example, when a thought comes to us, or when we tap into our own intuition. Because these phenomena are difficult to describe, they have been excluded from scientific investigation. By bringing them into the realm of systematic inquiry, micro-phenomenology as a methodology accesses and articulates deep first-person knowing.

*Social Presencing Theatre* is a new social art form that synthesizes social science, theatre, embodied presence, dialogue, and presencing. The word theatre comes from the Greek *thea*, which means “the act of seeing,” and Social Presencing Theatre provides a practice and methodology for the social field to see and sense itself—i.e. to generate second-person knowledge. By embodying the system, stakeholders gain insight into system dynamics and reality not previously visible. Our experience is that the act of stepping into the system in this way significantly accelerates the transformation of collective awareness.

*Generative Scribing* is a social art for sensing into the social field from its rim. Our colleague Kelvy Bird describes the task of the scribe: The generative scribe calls particular attention to an emerging reality that is brought to life by, and for, the social field in which it’s created . . . . Scribes represent information, in as neutral a way as possible, to craft living artefacts. Really good generative scribes act as instruments for the collective, consciously and intentionally offering themselves up as conduits for the collective consciousness. They play a unique role inquiring into the system from its edge to sense into the deeper structures of the social body and then visually representing the inner nature of the system from a third-person perspective.
Each of the processes described above requires and develops our capacity to engage in three actions, or gestures, identified by cognitive psychologist Francisco Varela as key to becoming aware. These are suspension, redirection, and letting go. Suspension means abandoning habitual patterns. Redirection is about turning our attention from the ‘exterior’ to the ‘interior,’ toward the source of a mental process rather than its object. Letting go is about going to a deeper place of stillness, relinquishing the old and connecting with higher-order intentions. Engaging in these methods deepens consciousness and shifts paradigms of thought, generating new knowledge about the source condition of systems. This knowledge, we believe, is at the heart of social field change.

Table 2 suggests an initial landscape for framing research into the source conditions of social fields. It distinguishes between first-, second-, and third-person perspectives, and asks:

1. What is being researched?
2. How is the research conducted?
3. From what source?

Using the emerging research methodologies described above as examples, we outline different areas of inquiry into the interior nature of social systems.
Table 2: Matrix of Awareness-Based Action Research: Integrating First-, Second-, and Third-Person Inquiry

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>What:</strong> Suspension</td>
<td>Descriptive level of Micro-phenomenology</td>
<td>4D Map of System Sculpture 1: Embodiment of present system</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>How:</strong> Redirection</td>
<td>Evocation level of Micro-phenomenology</td>
<td>Shift to System Sculpture 2: Interior transformation to emerging future</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Who</strong> (from what source/intention): Letting go</td>
<td>Deep pattern languaging/presencing (Beingness of the individual Self)</td>
<td>Deep pattern languaging/presencing (Beingness of the collective Self)</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Deep pattern languaging/presencing (Beingness of the collective Self—seen from the rim)</td>
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Integrating the above methods into a field research methodology is part of a larger process of *bending the beam of scientific observation back onto the observing self* and its system.

We aim to make visible the least visible realm of social reality creation by developing the methodologies needed to see, sense, articulate, and shift the deep structure of social fields.

For example, in India our colleague Manish Srivastava has been working with Theory U to co-create an ecosystem that transforms the challenge of human trafficking in that country. In the early stage of the work, he brought together two key organisations and a number of stakeholders to co-initiate a process of awareness-based systems change. The process began with bringing the stakeholders together to try to better understand the complex
system around human trafficking and to generate insight about potential leverage points for change.

To generate these insights, the group used a Social Presencing Theatre based stakeholder mapping tool called 4D. Embodying the roles within that system (e.g. Government, Family/Community, NGOs, Girls & Women, Judiciary, Shelter Home, Police), the group first created a sculpture representing their current reality (see Sculpture 1 in Figure 3).
The participants then took a moment to feel the resonance of the whole before sensing more deeply into their role. From that place of deeper sensing, participants in their roles moved into a second position, forming a second map (Sculpture 2) reflecting the emerging future. They then sat with the resonance of the new sculpture – the emerging future before extending the exercise and moving more deeply into the emerging future expressed in a third position (Sculpture 3).

**4D Mapping:**
Making visible the inner field of our ecosystem

![4D Mapping Diagram](image)

Figure 3: 4D Mapping of Human Trafficking Eco-System in India
By seeing, sensing and working with collective resonance as a source of knowledge, the group gained insight into how the very eco-system they created to help trafficking victims also played a role in exploiting them. They unearthed two blindspots in the system: the assumption that dignity was an outcome of justice when it needed to be the primary purpose for action, and the disconnect between judiciary and community. This new ‘knowing’ led to two related prototypes. The first was an intervention in the Shelter bringing the voice of survivors into the conversation on dignity through supported storytelling and the other a 2.5-day workshop for powerful stakeholders and community members in one district to work together on solutions to human trafficking. Subsequent iterations of this work have led to the strengthening of the partnership among NGO partners and a renewed focus on their collective advocacy for an anti-trafficking bill in India.

The social technology of 4D mapping, helped the group move from a description of the current situation (the ‘what’) to a deeper understanding of the dynamics of the system (the ‘how’) through to the deep pattern language, largely embodied rather than spoken, of the collective (the ‘who’). The insight generated from this collective place enabled the group to move forward into effective action.

**Issues and Challenges**
As we aim to bring the field of awareness-based social field research into being, there are a number of challenges to confront.

(1) Rigor vs. relevance: There is a long-standing tension in action research in that efforts to make the research more generalisable run the risk of jeopardizing the relationships with practitioners necessary for effectively creating change. Methods that lead to claims of generalisability can lead to a feeling of being ‘researched on’ that runs counter to the sense of collaborative inquiry inherent to participative action research. Our challenge is to develop methodology that stands up to academic standards of rigor while also, and primarily, serving to amplify and enhance the change efforts of practitioners.

(2) Methods and tools: As discussed, the methodologies to reliably and replicably illuminate the hidden dimension of social change do not yet exist. We have mentioned some of the methodologies in the making above. We need to deepen our understanding and refine the application of these methods, as well as explore new tools.

(3) Access and scale: To bring social field work to scale, we need to establish a new kind of research community, one where research and practice join in the act of generating and integrating the first-, second-, and third-person knowledge needed to change social systems.

U.School For Transformation
We return now to the initial question of how to address the disruptive challenges we currently face and the role of participative action research in doing so. Based on two decades of cross-sectoral work, we argue that developing the capacity to access and activate the deep structures in social systems is a critical skill set. Individuals, groups, organizations, and societies need this new capacity, which allows actors to methodically access the blind spot that locks our current social systems into their old ways of operating.

How can we cultivate the soil of the social field at scale that is commensurate with our current challenges? Our approach is threefold: build the capacity of individuals and collectives to operate across intelligences (open mind, open heart, open will); create labs for innovating across sectors (business, government, civil society); and, generate the knowledge and ways of knowing necessary for sustainable systems change (first-, second-, third-person methods and tools).
To accelerate the integration of these methods and tools, the Presencing Institute launched an annual research summer school that focuses on advancing and applying the integration...
of the three perspectives of consciousness-based social field research outlined in this chapter. Bringing together reflective practitioners and action researchers from around the world, our intention is to establish a global School For Transformation that democratizes the access to transformation literacy, that is, that gives broad access to the methods and tools of awareness-based system change to support the movement for reshaping our societal institutions towards flourishing and wellbeing for all.

End notes


10. https://www.edx.org/about-us


12. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UojZULMCbPw&list=PLgADJtUItqNAxWZhwwQ2UrXqRnWwYba


https://www.microphenomenology.com/home


20. https://sacredwell.in/2019/10/07/longing-for-dignity/