



The Design Studio for Social Intervention

The “Five S” Methodology for Designing Effective Social Interventions: Structure, System, Scale, Symbol and Sensation

At the Design Studio for Social Intervention (DS4SI), we use our “Five S” research methodology as the first step to designing effective social interventions. We use it to fully explore the terrain we’re working in before we begin selecting our approach. Now we’re sharing this tool with all who want to think with us. Let us know what you think and what you try!

***The Design Studio for Social Intervention** is a creativity lab for social justice work. It is a space where activists, artists and academics come together to imagine new approaches to social change and new angles to addressing complex social issues.*

***Social Interventions** are actions taken to reconfigure social habits, unspoken agreements or arrangements that, prior to the intervention, add to the durability and normalcy of a social problem. Check out our website for some examples of social interventions by us and others. (ds4si.org)*

STRUCTURE

Kinds of order – structures can be emergent and historical like cities, identities or language, or they can be intentionally designed and built like an institution or physical infrastructure. Structure forms the conceptual and physical scaffolding that informs how people come and go, belong and don't, etc.



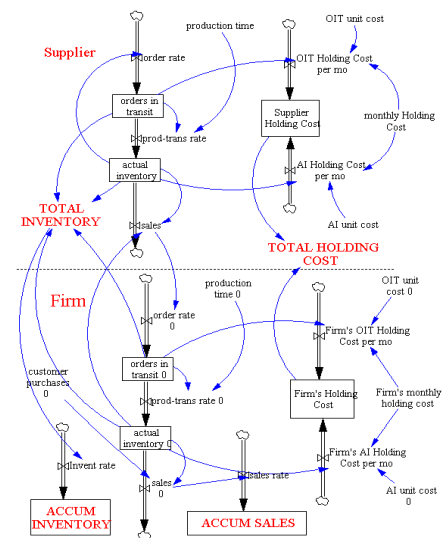
Not paying attention to structures means we can miss important arenas for intervention, like doing immigration rights work without challenging existing language like "aliens" and "illegals".

*What structures are connected to the situation you are intervening in?
How do you intend to affect the connected structures with your intervention?*

SYSTEM

When multiple points of input are at play in a situation, it's called a complex system. While the idea that one particular cause created a particular effect can be attractive, it's probably not true. Complex systems usually follow nonlinear patterns of cause and effect, which means that most of the situations requiring social interventions require looking for complex forms of causality.

Not paying attention to the complexity of systems means we can mistakenly assume that since A caused B one time, it will always do so. And then we're shocked that too much A causes C to show up or B to go down!

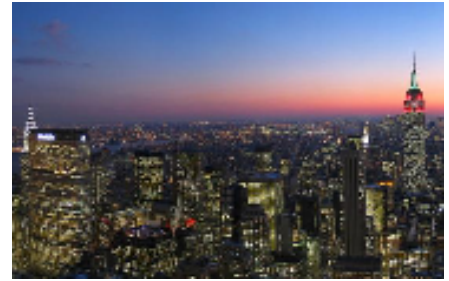


*What are the patterns of cause and effect at play in your situation?
How does your intervention intend to interrupt the pattern?*

SCALE



Ways in which we determine different sizes of place, space and time. The distinctions made between a block and a city or a day and a year are distinctions of scale.



Not paying attention to scale means we could work intensively at a small or large scale without making connections to allies working at a different scale. Or it could mean we're taking on an issue that exists at one scale with an intervention that hits at a much smaller scale.

*At what particular scale is the situation at play?
How will your intervention impact that scale?*

SYMBOL



People, communities and cultures use symbols to make collective meaning, including agreements around desires and aversions, practices and taboos. For example, sagging your pants is as relevant in the symbolic universe of certain young people as wearing a suit and tie is to the symbolic universe of certain professionals. Both practices "make sense" and provide meaning within their symbolic world.



Not paying attention to the symbolic means that we frequently put too much emphasis on the rational, underestimating the power of symbolism and cultural meaning. We could work to create (underused) bike paths because we haven't addressed that within the local culture cars symbolize success.

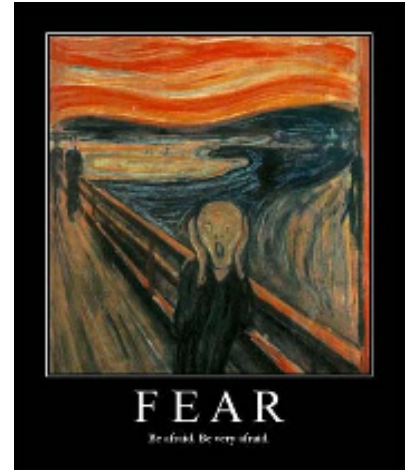
*What symbolic universe is at play in the situation you are intervening in?
How will the intervention intersect with that symbolic universe?*

SENSATION

The ways in which we are stimulated by surroundings, circumstances and proximity to other people. We tend to give certain names to differentiate states of stimulation: anxious, calm, bored, excited, afraid.

Not paying attention to sensation can mean we design interventions that don't match the intensity of the situation we are intervening in. If folks are deeply afraid and we offer them the chance to write postcards to a senator, we are not creating an intervention that responds to their state of sensation.

*What sensations are at play in the situation you are intervening in?
How are you trying to affect the sensations at play with your intervention?*



CONCLUSION

As we said, the “Five S” methodology represents just the first phase of designing social interventions. Using this tool to explore the terrain you’re working in will sharpen how you approach your situation, help you recognize new possibilities and shape many aspects of your intervention.

The next phase involves incorporating what you find with the “Five S’s” into the work of imagining many *possible* interventions. These you’ll whittle down—with input—to a handful that are worth testing, and then one that really pops the door off the hinges! Feel free to contact us as you go through this process—check other readings on the site, email us questions, or send us your results...