

# Co-design as a frame for researcher/practitioner collaboration

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In another paper presented at this conference (Britton, 2014), one of the authors examined an innovative approach to designing and delivering services based on co-design, as demonstrated in the Family by Family programme. Whereas that paper focussed on the way the approach enabled innovation, this paper examines the potential of co-design as a frame for understanding and facilitating research/practitioner collaboration.

### Family by Family

The Family by Family programme was developed in South Australia, with the aim of reducing the number of families coming into contact with crisis services, or re-engaging with them after having experienced an earlier crisis. Although the programme is relatively new, all indications are that it has had significant positive results for the families engaged in it:

*'... the outcomes to date appear very positive. The model appears to engage families in genuine need of support, including those who may be considered 'difficult' in traditional services and including those with child protection concerns. It appears to enable change and to enable different kinds of families to achieve different kinds of outcomes. It also appears to enable families to start with immediate goals and move on to address more fundamental concerns. The changes that families make appear to generate positive outcomes for both adults and children, the latter including some that are potentially very significant for longer term child development outcomes'(Community Matters Pty Ltd, 2012).*

The programme has won a NAPCAN (National Association for Prevention of Child Abuse and Neglect) award for innovation in child protection and an Australian International Design Award for service design<sup>1</sup>.

The effectiveness of Family by Family is clearly at least in part due to its relevance and close fit to the needs of the families that participate in it. This seems to have been achieved because the programme is '... a co-designed and co-produced solution' (Schulman, Curtis, & Vanstone, 2011: p 24). The originators of the programme, the Australian Centre for Social Innovation (TACSI) have described a general model of co-design (see Figure 1), which they call Radical Redesign or an 'innovation methodology'.

It is possible to understand this model from two perspectives, which are interconnected and co-evolve as the process continues. The first perspective, which is evident in the labelling of the various steps of the process, is the changing nature and focus of the work. Initially, this is outward facing, *looking*, or seeking understanding of context within an ethnographic frame. The second phase is *creating*, interacting with the understanding developed in the looking phase to produce ideas of where and how to engage with the general area in some more specific ways. The third phase is prototyping, *testing* these possibilities on a small scale to deepen and check the emerging understanding of the area.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.tacsi.org.au/about-tacsi/what-we-do/>

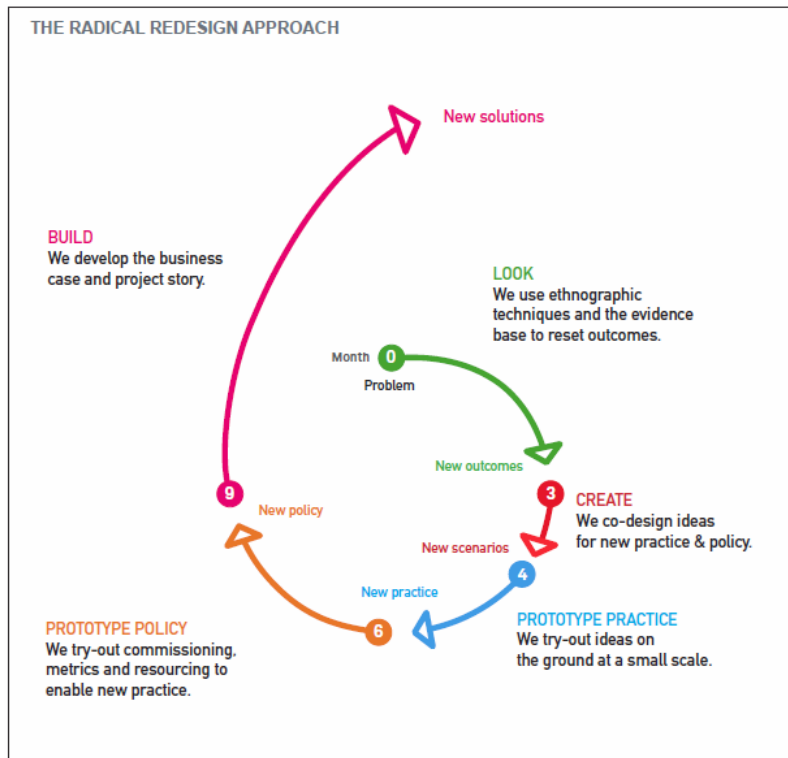


Figure 1: Radical Redesign (TACSI, 2010)

It is important to note that this third phase moves directly to practice, rather than first fixing high level policy. This co-design approach is not a linear methodology which moves from high level analysis and abstraction to concrete action: it intentionally moves forwards and backwards between levels or points of view, using each to challenge the other and produce an understanding which is both empirically grounded and sufficiently generalised to be seen as making sense of both the issue being explored and the action proposed in response to it.

The 4<sup>th</sup>, or *implementation*, phase then takes the understanding emerging from the testing and earlier phases and looks to both generalise it as policy and to make it visible and measurable, defining it sufficiently to allow it to be replicated. In the 5<sup>th</sup> phase, the policy and practice are *extended* to new contexts and become regularised in an institutional or organisational form.

The model, as applied to Family by Family, has gone through further iterations as the programme has been extended and adjusted to local conditions. Also, where a different need or context has emerged, the model has been used to generate new approaches. This adaptiveness was demonstrated when, during implementation of Family by Family, it was noted that the needs and responses to the programme amongst Indigenous families seemed to be different and a separate design process was established to better tailor a specific approach for those families.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, applications of the model can be seen as being ‘nested’ within each other – the 5<sup>th</sup> phase of Family by Family was itself described as co-design ‘...at the interaction level look(ing) at how families engage with each component of the activities: the materials, the offer, the roles, the training, the tools, etc’ (Schulman et al., 2011: p 26).

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.tacsi.org.au/solutions/aboriginal-families/>

It is even possible to see each 'link-up' (the formation of a relationship between a 'sharing' and a 'seeking' family - the primary delivery unit of Family by Family) as a local application of the co-design process. Because each seeking family chooses their own goals for the linkup, together with their sharing family, and they jointly decide what activities to pursue in order to reach those goals, in a very real sense each linkup is tailor-made for and by the families involved and they retain ownership of where it goes.

The second perspective from which to seek to understand this model of co-design is that of the different roles and groups that are engaged in each of the phases. We know that the starting point for the development of Family by Family was the formation of a team around a senior manager seconded from the relevant government department, who was to 'provide insight into the existing system and learn a new way of working', as well as a service designer and a sociologist, who had developed a methodology combining design methods and social science in the United Kingdom (Schulman et al., 2011: p 33). This team first conducted ethnographic research with 35 families, and determined a 'primary outcome measure' ('thriving') for what they wished to achieve. The creating phase that followed seems to have involved the core team both developing ideas about how create opportunities to thrive and engaging in 'codesign work with 30 families ...to test how to enable families to adopt thriving behaviours and build the necessary support networks' (p25). Having settled on a first direction for action, the team then developed a prototype, which was tested on a small scale with 20 families for 12 weeks. This was then further refined into an initial model for larger scale operations (p34), together with the definition of metrics and the development of materials to support the implementation of the programme. At some stage during this process, but certainly by the final phase, local government partners became actively involved. Also, during the development and implementation, the team benefitted from '...a sounding board of city, state government officials, academics and an NGO Director' which 'provided critical feedback and support' (p33).

Hence, each phase of the process engaged different groups and stakeholders (always including the intended 'beneficiaries') in a continuous and simultaneous process of building a more and more concrete and specific understanding of what needed to be done, as well as defining and testing action that might achieve that purpose. The different substantive activities of each phase of the Radical Redesign model both imply and require different participants; it is not possible to test a prototype without the involvement of families; the implementation of the final model requires the involvement of key delivery partners; making the necessary connections at each phase requires the existence, formal or informal, of a support network similar to that which seems to have been established in the 'sounding board'. With this in mind, it seems possible to see the model as regulating both the selection of participants in the co-design process and the nature of their interaction as they collaborate to develop a codified and institutionalised 'solution' to some problem of interest to them. It does this by starting out with a general area of concern (which itself will help identify the most appropriate collaborators) then, by moving backwards and forwards between the concrete and conceptual levels, narrows this down to a clearly defined set of procedures and roles that can be replicated and extended.

Although the Family by Family programme was developed as an innovative solution to a social issue and is of interest in its own right, it also represents an interesting case study into the application of a

model of collaborative action which is potentially relevant in many other contexts. In particular, it seems to the authors to offer promise as a frame to understand and facilitate collaborations between researchers and practitioners in the public sector.

The co-design framework seems well-adapted to contexts where purpose is not clearly defined, where contexts are complex and multi-faceted, and where multiple responses may be necessary. In these complex contexts, it has been proposed that small-scale actions or 'probes' should be undertaken, then their effects observed and built on as potential solutions emerge (see, for example, Snowden & Boone, 2007). In the context of the research/practitioner relationship, such approaches seem to be sharply distinguished from 'aqueduct models' (Nicolai, 2004), which assume that the 'purpose' of research is to respond to some pre-defined 'problem' that already exists in the 'real' world. This position seems hard to maintain when the production of well-formed questions around which research can be designed almost always arises from some form of interaction between practitioners and researchers in the first place and when it is also far from certain that waiting for the emergence of a need which is sufficiently well-developed for research to respond to will leave enough time for the research to be take place before the practitioner must act.

Furthermore, the co-design process seems to offer the possibility to bring together a number of different perspectives, not only from research (presumably academia) and practice (presumably from government), but also other stakeholders who are potentially deeply implicated in an area of concern, allowing each to contribute and treating each contribution as valuable, so validating rather than diminishing their diversity. It also implies a way of approaching complex issues through interactions that build both an expression of an issue and a response to it that is acceptable to all concerned. This is quite different from approaches that assume the issue is objectively evident and that some 'correct' response exists that needs to be discovered and imposed.

Because of this focus on building understanding and response as an integrated whole, co-design specifically challenges any particular given definition of an issue. In the research/practice context, the 'real world' problem is often privileged, placing 'practice' in a preeminent position, to which the research role should be subordinated. Aside from the ideological baggage that such a conceptualisation carries with it, it ignores the fact that the issues being faced in practice are in good measure the product of past practice. Merely responding to the needs asserted by practice may therefore simply perpetuate the problem. Research, on the other hand, is well-placed to question the assumptions of practice, but not necessarily to propose workable action to reframe or resolve a concern. Co design appears to offer a way to balance and integrate both innovation and practicality.

The conceptualisation of a problematic 'gap' between research and practice has been critiqued (Bonser & Britton, 2013) because it ignores the already significant interactions at both the intellectual and the organisational level between the two spheres and because it emphasises differences rather than proposing more productive forms of engagement. The authors have previously suggested that it might be productive to apply instead the concept of the 'borderlands', a collaborative space that does not form part of the territory of any of the participants but might instead be seen as an emerging space encroaching on all. Co-design seems to offer a possible way of conceptualising what might actually happen in the borderlands.

We have already noted that different phases of the co-design process imply taking different perspectives, some seeking understanding and some generating and testing new ideas. This can also be seen as an interaction between temporal perspectives – the existing context of the past and present and the evolving response presenting a future. Drawing on the work of Morson (1996), we propose that design could be seen as bringing together three ways of understanding time, two linear and one less so:

- Foreshadowing – most characteristically present in innovation and strategic and other forms of planning.
- Backshadowing – the focus on evidence and ‘reality’.
- Side-shadowing – in which there is a recognition that there are a range of possibilities – many more than are realised.

Of these temporal perspectives ‘side-shadowing’ is the least familiar, pointing as it does to a ‘middle realm’ in which ‘... things could have been different from the way they were, there were real alternatives to the present we know, and the future admits of various paths’ (p4). It is this sense of ‘open’ time that we find helpful, particularly as a way of keeping what might happen in the ‘borderlands’ open to further discovery and for further specification. To Morson side-shadowing ‘... suggest(s) humility and an awareness that our opinions are just that. It teaches us the contingency of each particular opinion and a “Galilean consciousness”<sup>3</sup> with respect to our own beliefs’ (p267).

An important aspect of this is the way it directs attention to the ‘eventness’ of our choices, that is to a ‘... sense of life as an open process, in which actions in the present truly matter’ and which allows for each moment of possibility and choice to be truly creative. In Bakhtin’s terms such choices are not the inevitable outcome of earlier events but have something else, a ‘surplus’ of possibilities which endows them with ‘suprisingness’.

It seems to us that these three conceptions of time are, to some degree, intertwined in the radical redesign framework. It draws on description and evidence, back-shadowing the present against what has gone before and what is already known but does not necessarily allow that to drive the design or the prototyping. It side-shadows a wide range of possibilities, doing so often, it would seem, by introducing, at critical moments, new participants and therefore new perspectives. It foreshadows visions of a better future without assuming that the shape of such a future is there simply to be discovered. This is implicit especially in the use of prototyping. Most importantly, it seems to us, this framework relies heavily on the inter-action among experiences, ideas and practices of diverse groups each drawing on different experiential, professional and personal backgrounds. Inevitably, when these experiences, ideas and practices are allowed to ‘diffract’ – to interact and spark off each other generating unpredictable effects, some of the ‘suprisingness’ becomes apparent and can form the basis for experiments in thought and prototypes in practice and

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<sup>3</sup> ‘Just as Galileo maintained that the earth was but one of many planets, so it might be useful to assume that there are always a multiplicity of temporalities to consider. Often the hidden problems with a social doctrine concern something it presupposes but does not articulate, its sense of time. If one enunciates that sense, draws out its consequences, and suggests alternatives, one can often deepen an understanding of what the doctrine entails and which other doctrines might be more acceptable. One needs to develop a ‘Galilean’ temporal consciousness’

implementation. This kind of ‘diffractive’ reading of a situation can give rise to ‘... an emergent sense of the dynamically changing possibilities that become available to us “from within”’ (Shotter, 2013) the processes and situations within which we find ourselves.

Part of the power of the co-design process also stems from its ability to operate at multiple levels, as noted in the Family by Family example. Iedema *et al* describe this in terms of ‘four discursive domains:

1. Codesign as “deliberative” process that engages patients and caregivers;
2. Codesign as reflexive process that enables frontline staff to appreciate the effect of their practice and the clinical environment on patients and caregivers;
3. Codesign as a research methodological capacity-building process for project staff;
4. Codesign as a dialogic process through which practical solutions can be derived’ (p79).

Hence, codesign is a process that regulates participation and interaction and which produces both new ‘knowledge’ as well as new practice: ‘... design acts as the dialogic interstice that mediates evolving practices, multiple realities, and emergent collaborations. Design cranks up the functional efficacy of skills, knowledge, and capacities in our effort to accommodate the intensification of feedback from an increasingly complex world’ (p88)

In short, it seems to us that there is a case to be made for exploring co-design as a framework to structure collaborations between researchers and practitioners, which may be capable of producing concrete, creative responses to complex, unstructured problems; which is likely to draw on and integrate a broad range of perspectives and viewpoints in both defining the issue and its response; and which suggests not only that such collaboration might be productive but provides some indication of how it might actually be promoted and how it might work.

Some suggestion as to how such approaches might work are emerging from work in the Netherlands on ‘Transition Management’ (Voß, Smith, & Grin, 2009). Transition Management is an approach being implemented by the Dutch government since 2001, as a means to establish a long-term policy approach to achieving transition to more sustainable development and ultimately more sustainable societal forms. It is being adopted against the background of the recognised failure of

*‘an earlier generation of positivistic long-range planning and control approaches. Instead, this new generation of policy design emphasises reflexive governance concepts. These aim at inducing and navigating complex processes of socio-technical change by means of deliberation, probing and learning’* (Voß *et al.*, 2009: p 275).

Transition management is described as consisting of ‘...five main components: (1) Establishing a transition arena, (2) developing a vision, (3) pathway development through back-casting techniques, (4) experimenting with pathway options and (5) monitoring, evaluation and revisions’ (Loorbach, 2007). These components appear to be broadly consistent with the co-design approach already outlined, starting with a broad area of interest defining an ‘arena... (to) facilitate creative interaction, knowledge exchange, learning and discussion among “frontrunners”—innovators and strategic thinkers from different backgrounds’ (Kemp & Loorbach, 2006: p 113). These frontrunners then ‘...adjust their own problem definitions and perceptions because of a better understanding of the nature of the problem and the perspectives held by other actors’, based upon which ideas are

produced about what needs to be achieved and possible ways to achieve them. These become the base for experimentation and then institutionalisation. 'The general approach is one of nurturing and growing rather than planning and controlling long-term societal change' (Voß et al., 2009: p 277).

Despite significant issues, which we will touch on later in the paper, the experience of Transition Management '...both as a conceptual framework and a range of concrete policy experiments, does open new avenues for long-term policy design. These could lead us out of some of the conceptual dilemmas of planning and offer a real alternative to short-term oriented market-liberalism' (p294).

It seems to us that the sort of collaboration we are proposing would display three fundamental attributes.

First, it would see the collaboration as a process, not a project. By this, we mean that if an area where research input is needed is already susceptible to tight definition and the establishment of clear outcome targets, it is probably better to treat it within existing frameworks of research procurement and governance. However, where the issues are, at least in part, difficult to define or tightly interconnected and the possible responses are widely divergent or controversial, a collaborative co-design process could be envisaged. In establishing such a process, though, it would be important to emphasise the establishment of the desired form of the collaboration, including its general area of interest, but not insist on a specific issue to be 'solved'. This might be represented, for instance, by the difference between forming a group to examine the development of effective approaches to rationalising tax collection, as distinct from briefing a group to produce plans to consolidate different types of existing tax collection and achieve a given target reduction in costs of the system. In the former case, the stakeholder group can address issues of framing and prioritisation in ways that might not emphasise consolidation over other possible approaches; in the latter, they are obliged to develop plans with reference to existing institutions and are unlikely to engage in building anything novel, either in terms of understanding the issue or responding to it.

The second aspect of the collaborative co-design approach would be its recognition that participation in the process would best be based on the diversity of participant perspectives and the importance of the issue to them, rather than having them selected purely on the basis of their 'expertise' or position. As already noted, the definition of the area of common interest would have a significant effect on the identification of participants in the process: in the case of the tax collection process, a core team might be formed around tax authorities, accounting professionals, appropriately specialised economists and, perhaps, researchers in the areas of behavioural sciences such as anthropology or social psychology, but they should quickly become engaged with the people who actually pay taxes, for example small and large businesses and various types of individual taxpayer, to understand what issues are encompassed in the broad area of concern. Few of these could be considered as experts, though all are deeply engaged with and affected by the issue being considered. As the process developed, it would be likely that participants in it would change; this should be foreseen and clearly understood by all from the beginning.

Consistent with both of these aspects of the process, it would also be critical to establish a way of relating that, on the one hand, established that no participant would have pre-eminence or the ability to direct the collaboration, but also ensured that all were encouraged to reveal and explore



their own perspective in relation to others in a way that may not always be consensual or comfortable. This would be a robust process requiring respect but also the willingness of all participants to challenge and be challenged. There should be no problem to confront theory with practice, or to challenge practice with a provocative application of theory. Establishing such an environment may well benefit from the definition of facilitative roles that assist participants in maintaining the necessary interactions, as well as the support of external groups, like the Family by Family 'sounding board', that could challenge the direction of the participants, or assist in making useful connections for them.

As a corollary, it seems likely that collaboration would best take place separately from and independent of any of the organisations that may be engaged. This would not only mitigate to some extent the risk that the collaboration process was co-opted by any one stakeholder but, perhaps more importantly, it would also remove some of the potential that specific participants would be privileged over others because of their affiliation. In the case of Family by Family, it is very hard to see how the programme could have credibly engaged and enabled families that were in many cases significantly disadvantaged in defining and directing their own changes, if it was seen as a government programme designed to get those families to conform to some pre-established standards of behaviour.

It is possible to envisage formal structures that represent this independence (in fact, in some ways it is reminiscent of the Cooperative Research Centre concept which has operated in Australia for many years). However, depending on the issue and the stage of the process, collaboration may not need to be formalised. This is particularly the case for early phase, highly complex areas, where much of the exploratory work could be done within working groups, networks (or Special Interest Groups), leading to more defined collaboration in more tightly specified areas.

Sustaining collaborative research relationships requires considerable effort and mundane work (CRESC, 2013: p 24) and the outcomes of the process are not predictable and can be in very diverse forms. This reinforces the suggestion made earlier that the framing of a collaborative research effort in such a way as to manage expectations would be vital, as well as the suggestion that researcher/practitioner collaboration is not an appropriate approach where tightly framed problems require rapid production of solutions, particularly where several competing possibilities have already been defined and are being fought over.

Equally, it seems that the 'spaces of collaboration' (p25) would be important. It has long been understood that place affects interactions within and across organisations, and the absence of co-location subtly impacts on the ability of groups to collaborate. In fact, work on cultural interactions suggests that geographical separation can become a boundary marker which produces identity effects (Britton, 2007). Also

*'(a case by Ruppert)... describes arrangements for managing a group of 70 researchers distributed across five sites, which included the development of a set of rules and protocols for interpreting, transcribing and coding the data. Yet even with these technologies of standardisation in place, in practice, the project operated with a high level of "individual discretion" across the sites' (CRESC, 2013: p 25).*

This suggests that attention should not only be given to the selection of participants and the facilitation of their interactions, but also the mix of physical and virtual connections which act as a platform for the interactions and how the process proceeds in these various spaces.

Perhaps the most significant issue that we would predict occurring in the establishment of a collaboration of the sort proposed is, however, the challenge it implicitly creates to the established roles of the various groups who would need to participate. We have alluded to the 'research/practice gap' as a conceptualisation which devalues the collaboration that is already occurring. We believe it also impedes the establishment of new forms of collaboration precisely because it establishes the roles of research and practice as quite distinct and even distant. We have also advocated for the establishment of relationships within a collaboration that are at the same time respectful and robust; and the need to establish a frame for the collaboration which allows participants from widely differing power-contexts to relate openly and on an even footing. Issues around power would be central to forming and effective collaboration:

*'Who gets to "participate" in a problematic and on what terms? Whose voices are prioritised and whose are heard in collaborative work? Can collaboration serve to empower otherwise marginalised groups in ways that conventional research cannot? Is collaboration across difference more difficult than amongst those with similar epistemic viewpoints, and does this play a role in who collaborates? Finally, who gets to say what is "collaborative" or when "collaboration" can be said to be happening?' (CRESC, 2013: p 26)*

This suggests that the role of the academic in collaboration may need to evolve in some way into some sort of arbitrator: '... collaborative research often leads to academics occupying a coordinating position, in which part of their work and perceived value is to perform a "neutral" or objective role in politicised contexts' (CRESC, 2013: p 24). It is also possible to envisage the role of the academic being somewhat more active. Ramsey (2011) suggests that there are two common understandings of the relationship between management theory and practice —explanation and sense making— and suggests a third, 'provocative' use of theory. The cases studies she uses illustrate managers engaging with ideas, practicing inquiry and paying attention to moment-by-moment relating within their practice. She proposes that these three processes could constitute a scholarship of practice, where scholarship is seen in amidst the moment-by-moment activity of evidence-based management.

It is also important to recognise that any collaboration will need to exist in a governance context which is unfamiliar with, and arguably ill-equipped for, handling emergent processes which start with ill-defined issues and produce unpredictable responses. This is a fundamentally political question:

*'Transition management in practice is currently right in the middle of trying to extricate its envisaged design from established governance patterns. The coming years will be crucial for shaping the pathway of transition management as an innovation in governance. The process may be drawn back into the power games, paradigms and institutions of "politics as usual"; or it may overcome teething problems and give shape to new actor networks and reflexive governance practices that develop some robustness and promise. A lot depends on how the design of transition management itself becomes adapted and reinforced with a view to anchoring new governance practices in the context of established democratic politics, whilst*

*at the same time facilitating the transformative potential of a new democratic politics' (Voß et al., 2009: p 294).*

There are therefore many obstacles to establishing the sort of collaboration we suggest. Hence, while we believe such approaches hold potential, it is also important not to present them as panacea, or as if the ways of working they suggest have never been tried before. As has already been pointed out, collaboration already takes place and contributes significantly to the development of both research and policy in the public sector. Rather, '...the distinctiveness of collaboration lies less in a deviation from some kind of imagined, non-collaborative research process, than in the way it forces a reflexive acknowledgment of the emergent quality of knowledge in research relationships across time and space' (CRESC, 2013: p 2). It is this subtle shift to a more aware, more flexible approach which opens up possibilities rather than mandates new routines.

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