# PREFACE

Though we didn't know it at the time, the idea for this book came about in 2012, during a hallway conversation at a professional conference on evaluation. Pablo and I, both graduate students then, had just served on a panel with several senior scholars. We had never met before and immediately bonded over shared frustrations and interests connected to feeling isolated in our respective academic foci on topics far outside the traditions and norms of our fields.

Pablo, trained as a systems engineer, was starting his doctoral studies trying to find ways to model food systems and value chains to shift the ways we produce and consume food to benefit farmers and local ecosystems. He got into evaluation because he wanted to learn methods to assess the impacts of different interventions on food systems, especially on people's lives and livelihoods. Research institutes and philanthropic foundations were commissioning him and other systems engineers to design and evaluate ways to change food systems in Spain and Latin America.

I (Emily) was in the middle of a doctoral program in evaluation in the United States, learning theories and methods to evaluate programs while putting them into practice through my work on educational evaluations funded by the federal government. With prior professional experience in nonprofit organizations and as a classroom teacher, I was in graduate school to learn better ways to evaluate. I had heard and seen many practitioners' disregard for evaluation, which they experienced and situated as an accountability check-the-box required by funders that distracted them from serving their missions and communities.

From these different starting places, we found ourselves asking similar questions:

- If social (ecological, health, and other) problems are influenced by multiple, intersecting systems, why are most interventions designed in silos to target single-factor solutions?

- Why does so much evaluation settle for incremental change, assessing individuals' knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors? How can evaluation contribute to deeper, lasting, transformative change?

- Given how diverse we are as people, with differing cultures, expertise, livelihoods, values, and worldviews, how do we work together to frame and try to advance change? How can we incorporate diverse values into how we define and assess success?

We knew only a handful of others asking these questions within the evaluation field, so we sought answers and possibilities in adjacent fields.

We turned to the systems sciences, an interdisciplinary field about studying systems. Pablo delved into system dynamics modeling, a way to diagram and mathematically test the causal relationships of systems, and soft systems methodology, a participatory, practical problem-solving process. I combined my graduate training in mixed methods for social research with critical systems theory, an area focused on boundary setting, power dynamics, and ethics. The promise we found in systems methods, we both came to understand, remains constrained because systems methods are primarily being used in evaluations of individual programs and policies. We thus share hope, ideas, and expertise regarding an alternative way of thinking about and working toward change that focuses on systems.

To make the world a better place, we need to engage with the systems that shape our lives and influence these systems toward what we value, now and into the future. Since we are diverse, as people and as ecosystems, and the world around us continuously changes, navigating how to influence change and evaluate our efforts are ongoing practices. Our motives for change are inevitably motivated by and toward some idea of what is and is not valuable. Centering systemic change around the development of value is a way to ensure that we continuously work with, for, and toward collective ideals of what a better world means. This requires dialogue across differing roles and perspectives, and welcoming critique of potential risks and harms.

The catch is that most of us were not trained to engage in systemic change or evaluative inquiry in this way. We do not work in places where this is familiar, with colleagues who immediately get it, or in professions that esteem social purposes and collaboration over self-interest and competition. Deep knowledge (from lived experience and/or academic or professional training) and plans will not take us where we aspire to go; we need to recognize that unknowns exist. The "inevitability of the unknown" stems from our limited knowledge about the shifting situations and systems we seek to influence, and about the perspectives of those involved and affected. It is necessary—practically and ethically—to navigate our way forward by learning and adapting together.

We find hope in the paradoxical idea that, at once, we are prepared and unprepared for the journey ahead. As illustrated in Figure 0.1, while it may be tempting to turn to our prior experiences and expertise for assurance and guidance, we will come up short. We must begin from who and where we are. Move forward with humility and in purposeful coordination with others. Hold a sense of smallness in what we individually bring, in the face of a bold quest for systemic change. Balance conviction with openness to critique, as we move toward what we imagine as better, recognizing that accomplishing sustained better is impossible alone. The quest is about developing value together, in every phase of the journey. And the journey is about what it means to be humans who care in a constantly changing world.

**FIGURE 0.1**
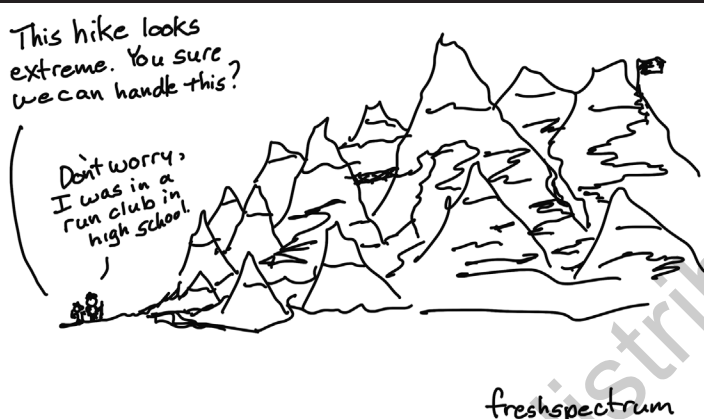


## Typical Unknowns/Challenges, Our Guidance

We wrote this book for people wanting to go "beyond fixing." For people like us, fed up with quick, targeted, short-term solutions for complex problems, people willing to change systems and looking for foundational theory and practice to get started or deepen their efforts.

If you work toward social change, as a practitioner, activist, funder, or evaluator, this book is for you. This book is also for instructors who teach courses and workshops, and for students and early career professionals. We directly address unknowns/challenges common to specific roles, throughout, so focus on the sections you find most relevant. All sections are situated within a full rationale and process for influencing and evaluating systemic change.

| Typical Role-Related Unknowns/Challenges and Guidance We Offer | | |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Reader Roles** | **Typical Unknowns/Challenges** | **Guidance We Offer** |
| **Funders and investors** working within and across fields and sectors to fund change initiatives, including in government, philanthropy, and corporate contexts. | How to shift from grant-funded projects with independently commissioned evaluations to portfolios of initiatives purposefully designed to change systems. How to build the capacities of organizations, teams, and individuals to engage in systemic change. How to evaluate shared value that accounts for environmental, social, and governance dimensions. | Clarity around how systemic change differs from a "fixed" approach (Ch. 1), how to evaluate systemic change (Ch. 5), and ways to build field-level conditions for systemic change (Ch. 6). |

| Typical Role-Related Unknowns/Challenges and Guidance We Offer *(Continued)* | | |
|---|---|---|
| **Reader Roles** | **Typical Unknowns/Challenges** | **Guidance We Offer** |
| **Practitioners** who directly engage in change efforts, working in non-profits, government agencies, public institutions, communities, etc. | How to shift beyond direct services addressing targeted problems and populations to coordinating within and across agencies to change systems.<br><br>How to argue for and show the value of efforts to change systems. | Ways to facilitate five phases of systemic change (Ch. 4), engage with evaluators and shape evaluative inquiry (Ch. 5), and build self, team, and organizational capabilities (Ch. 6). |
| **Applied researchers and evaluators** hired to do research on and evaluations of change initiatives, in entry- to senior-level roles. | How to identify concepts and methods from traditional program and policy evaluation that do and do not apply to systemic evaluation.<br><br>How to set up contracts, scopes of work, and budgets to evaluate systemic change.<br><br>How to build knowledge and skills in systems theories and methods. | Clarity regarding how evaluating systemic change differs from program and policy evaluation and the meaning and implications of evaluating to develop value (Ch. 1, 2), and elements and methods to evaluate systemic change (Ch. 5). |
| **Instructors and students** who teach and take courses and workshops on social change and evaluation. | How to teach systemic change and evaluation in an accessible, actionable manner, with relevance across fields and issues. | Foundations regarding the what and why of systemic change (Ch. 1), five systemic change phases (Ch. 4), and core evaluation process (Ch. 5), as well as educational materials (see website). |

## Book Argument, Organization, and Features

In this book, we make two interconnected arguments. We critique what we call the "fixed" approach of traditional program evaluation and policy analysis, which predominates today's social change and evaluation landscape. We also advance an alternative approach centered on changing systems and developing the value of efforts toward change.

By **"fixed" approach**, we mean linear, deterministic, problem-solving logic: identify a problem or need, design and implement an intervention to address it, and evaluate whether and how well it appears to ameliorate the problem or need. With a fixed approach, evaluation is an independently commissioned activity, led by experts, to determine the value of programs and policies.

The alternative approach that we practice, and for which we advocate, centers efforts to change systems and develop the value of efforts amid changing circumstances. We call this approach "systemic change" and "evaluative inquiry."

**Systemic change** requires addressing the complexity of social problems embedded in multiple, interconnected systems through an iterative, cyclical process. This process includes five phases: (1) building vision, (2) mapping systems, (3) identifying leverage, (4) navigating futures, and (5) learning, adapting, and evaluating along the way.

**Evaluative inquiry** is a collaborative process of asking and answering questions about the value of change initiative(s) and using these answers to inform learning and action amid changing circumstances. This involves discussion about multiple values, perspectives, and ways of knowing, with attention to inclusion, exclusion, and marginalization. Centering normative questions of value over scientific, technical, or empirical concerns distinguishes evaluating from measuring change using indicators. To structure evaluative inquiry, we discuss in depth five elements: (1) purposes, (2) questions, (3) criteria, (4) evidence, and (5) synthesis with sensemaking. These elements provide a flexible way to evaluate within a systemic change process and assess overall value and impacts.

**Systemic change that embeds evaluative inquiry**—a way to assess and develop the value of change efforts—is a theoretically supported, practical way to work toward fundamental social change with lasting impact.

Collaborative processes are at the heart of systemic change and evaluation. To collaborate, we need to share a general framework and vocabulary to talk with, rather than past, each other. Given the interdisciplinary, sector-crossing, and geographically and culturally diverse nature of systemic change, general framework and vocabulary alignment is easier said than done.

We pitch this book as a framework and forum for dialogue across different roles and backgrounds, offering foundations for collaborative processes. We strive to offer the breadth and depth needed to cover such a significant topic in ways that are accessible and applicable. In style and format, this is a resource meant to be read on a bus, in a classroom, or in a board meeting.

The book's seven chapters cover why we advocate shifting from a "fixed" approach and how to engage in systemic change as an alternative.

| From a "Fixed" Approach to Systemic Change | | |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **From** | **To** | **Where to Learn More** |
| Identifying and trying to "fix" individual problems with targeted interventions. | Ongoing stewardship, learning, and navigation amid uncertainty and complexity. | Chapter 1 |
| Value as whether targeted interventions worked to "fix" the problem, at what cost. | Value as an open-ended, multidimensional question. | Chapter 2 |
| A top-down, directed process initiated by funders/investors and implemented by practitioners. | Joining together across roles, with shared responsibilities and legitimacy. | Chapter 3 |

(*Continued*)

| From a "Fixed" Approach to Systemic Change *(Continued)* | | |
|---|---|---|
| **From** | **To** | **Where to Learn More** |
| Systemic change as altering a system through a collection of "fixes," or by adding up interventions to identify larger effects. | Systemic change as a process that involves building vision; mapping systems; identifying leverage; navigating futures; and learning, adapting, and evaluating along the way. | Chapter 4 |
| Evaluation as an official process led by experts to determine the value of an intervention based on evidence. | Evaluative inquiry as an open-ended, collaborative inquiry and action that uses five elements: purpose, questions, criteria, evidence, and synthesis and sensemaking. | Chapter 5 |
| Conditions as factors that incentivize and reenforce "fixing." | Conditions as areas we can influence as we advocate for and practice systemic change. | Chapter 6 |

Chapter 7 showcases an example to illustrate the process of systemic change and application of the five elements to structure embedded evaluative inquiry in a global effort to change the food systems, drawing on Pablo's work at the Global Alliance for the Future of Food.

After each chapter, take a moment to pause. Each chapter offers ideas that benefit from reflection and conversation. We've included a few guiding questions to help spark your thinking—feel free to adapt them to your context, discuss with others, or jot down thoughts for later. Together, the "Reflect Forward" questions at the end of each section offer starting points for putting the main ideas of this book into practice.

The glossary, located at the end of the book, provides the primary meaning for key terms as we define and use them.

## REFLECT FORWARD

Before moving on, take some time to engage with the main ideas of this section. These questions are here to spark your thinking and invite conversation.

1. Before reading this book, how would you describe what systems change and evaluation mean to you or within your work context?

2. What professional and personal experiences have shaped your perspectives on systems change and evaluation so far?

3. What do you hope to know, do, or practice after engaging with this book?

# 1 | SHIFT FROM FIXING TO SYSTEMIC CHANGE

This opening chapter advances a shift from "fixing" a social problem with a targeted intervention to "systemic change," a way to engage with complexity and influence changes to a system. Systemic change requires seeing and acting within the interconnectedness of the world and uses systems thinking and methods to change systems. We contrast fixing and systemic change, explore three rationales for systemic change (i.e., scientific, practical, and critical), counter five common myths, and showcase several examples. Readers will understand what systemic change means and why it is needed.

## SHIFT FROM FIXING TO SYSTEMIC CHANGE

It is tempting to believe that we can "fix" our way to a better world. If we could diagnose each problem humanity faces, tailor fit a solution, and assess how well the problem was "fixed," we could problem solve our way forward.

In this book, we use "**fixing**" as shorthand to describe an approach to problem solving that zooms in on a problem, analyzes each part or aspect separately, and comes up with a targeted solution. This approach uses systematic reasoning, dividing or breaking things down into separate parts or steps and focusing precisely on each one. At its most extreme "fixing" can mean filtering what we observe to really focus on what is wrong and coming up with an immediate response that could eliminate the perceived problem.

For example, as depicted in Figure 1.1, someone goes into a repair shop with a concern that their bike makes a loud, clicking noise. The repair person provides a head set to offer immediate relief and block out the noise.

While clearly an exaggeration, this illustrates the appeal and logic of fixing. Listen to what is wrong, which will usually be communicated as the most readily observable aspect of a focal problem that can be communicated quickly. Offer a solution that eliminates that observable aspect of the problem.

Take any one social problem, though, and explore its symptoms and causes. You will inevitably find interconnections with other issues and how these interconnected issues are embedded in large-scale systems. To make a lasting impact, we need to understand and change systems.

**Systemic change** is a way of seeing and working to influence changes within systems. We use the term systemic, instead of systems as in "systems change," a popular phrase. Systemic becomes both an adjective, describing an orientation to change, and a

**1**

**FIGURE 1.1**



noun, identifying a system as the object of change. This captures the dual meaning of this term: (a) a way of seeing and working to influence (b) changes to a system.

A systemic way of seeing looks at things together to try to see the whole or bigger picture, exploring the interconnections, relationships, and dynamics. Interconnections are considered through multiple perspectives or lenses and with consideration of boundaries that delineate what is included and excluded. Systemic changemakers are aspirational; we act with awareness of our interconnectedness, even as we recognize the limits of our awareness to fully comprehend the extent and influence of these interconnections.

A systemic way of working requires working with others across roles, disciplines, agencies, etc., and with awareness of what others are doing. It also means using concepts and methods from the systems sciences, an interdisciplinary area of research and practice all about understanding and changing systems.

And what do we mean by "a **system**"? Simply put, systems are elements organized or related to a purpose, and these elements can be actors, processes, material or immaterial factors, and/or anything that interacts toward a function or purpose.

In Table 1.1 we compare "fixing" and "systemic change" by examining and summarizing the assumptions of each approach regarding problems, change processes, solutions, and evaluating success. These contrasting assumptions may hold true in varying degrees and ways, within specific practices and settings. Our purpose here is to highlight how systemic change frames a change process differently.

## From Fixable Problems to Complex Situations

To engage in systemic change, we need to shift from framing problems as fixable and in need of fixing to seeing complex situations we must navigate through. Here, we unpack the shift from fixable problems to complex situations; in the next section, the shift from fixing to navigating.

| TABLE 1.1 ■ Contrasting Features of Fixing and Systemic Change | | |
|---|---|---|
| **Shift** | **Fixing** | **Systemic Change** |
| From fixable problems to complex situations and systems. | • Social needs and problems are diagnosable and solvable with the right interventions.<br>• Interventions typically target knowledge, attitude, and behavior change of individuals and groups.<br>• Change happens incrementally, ultimately preserving existing systems. | • Social problems are reframed as complex situations and systems.<br>• Interventions should target underlying causes and conditions.<br>• Change can happen suddenly or over a long time, with the aim of altering existing systems. |
| From expert-led fixing to collective navigating. | Expert-led approach to fixing social problems using public policies and programs led by government and funders and informed by academic research. | • Bottom-up approach of centering people involved in and affected by a complex situation.<br>• Shared stewardship, social learning, and collective navigation. |
| From "fixes" to experiments and pathways. | Interventions as solutions to be designed, implemented, and evaluated according to whether they fix targeted problems. | Interventions as experiments and pathways to influence and learn about systems. |
| From evaluating whether "fix" worked to developing value. | Evaluation as expert-led applied research to determine the value of interventions using a hierarchy of study designs for evidence generation. | Evaluative inquiry to answer questions about value using diverse evidence and critical deliberation that inform learning and adaptation and enhance value development together. |

It is popular and often default to consider social problems as diagnosable and solvable. The word "problem," meaning an issue that requires resolution, suggests the need to figure out what is wrong and how to make it right.

In the social sciences and evaluation fields, areas in which we were both academically trained, social problems are framed as undesirable conditions or unmet human needs. Social betterment refers to the "reduction of social problems and the increased meeting of human needs" (Mark et al., 2000, p. 24). The whole point of a lot of social science research is to study and address problems separately, to develop in-depth knowledge that, in turn, can be used to identify solutions or strategies to ameliorate the problem. A tendency to assume that social problems remain relatively stable over time and across levels of analysis (e.g., location, size, scale) then allows for evidence aggregation across studies, to develop generalizable and transferable knowledge about the problem and the fix.

Making social problems into something fixable often means homing in on how the problem manifests in people's individual and collective lives. A needs assessment, often the first step in an intervention process, consists of understanding the problem, assessing its extent, identifying beneficiary targets (e.g., individuals, families, communities), and describing the service needs of these target populations (Rossi et al., 2019). Social problems become fixable by identifying what people lack, such as knowledge, attitudes, or behaviors, and then identifying interventions that could change these, to fix the problem. Individual-level focus increases the likelihood of successfully influencing and being able to show change.

Ultimately, social problem fixes achieve incremental change, at best, while preserving the existing societal systems. Conventional evaluation likewise serves incremental change (Shadish et al., 1991). This means that most evaluation practice functions as a "systems-preserving activity, an intellectual effort which is inherently conservative and that assists in defending rather than challenging the powers that be, the established wisdom, the current technologies and administrative practices" (Forss, 2019, p. 190).

In systemic change, on the other hand, social problems get reframed as complex situations found to be problematic, undesirable, and requiring change by particular people, in a particular place and time. Because such problems are continuously changing and involve differing perspectives, any attempt to bind them is temporary. Engaging in change is not about fixing a pre-defined problem but trying to understand a situation to figure out how to make it better through continual learning and ongoing navigation.

As used here, **situation** refers to a loosely bounded real-world set of circumstances perceived by one or more groups. Complexity characterizes the interconnectedness of multiple factors that influence a situation of interest and the plurality of perspectives, values, and interests brought by the people involved in and affected by the situation. Situations are inherently political, with conflicts about priorities and strategies that must be negotiated. Peter Checkland, in *Soft Systems Methodology* (2006), established this concept saying, "Nothing is intrinsically 'a situation'; it is our perceptions which create them , , , Some of the situations we perceive, because they affect us in some way, cause us to feel a need to tackle them, to do something about them, to improve them" (p. 5).

The term "situation" has its origins in the concept of a wicked problem, as identified by Rittel and Weber (1973). One of the characteristics of wicked problems is that the description determines possible solutions. For this reason, we use situation as an open-ended label that does not suggest solutions, strategies, or ways forward.

## From Fixing to Navigating

Conventional problem-solving processes focus on social problem fixes and needs through discrete policy, program, and service interventions that often aim to change individuals' knowledge and behaviors. Experts typically set goals and design interventions implemented by local organizations and communities, which are retrospectively evaluated by outside experts to assess whether and how well the intervention(s) worked.

Effective interventions may be replicated and scaled up to new contexts to improve existing institutions and spark or support incremental change over time.

Government and funding agencies set normative priorities that get translated into policies, programs, and services. These are then evaluated to determine the extent to which goals are met and intended outcomes realized. Social progress and betterment occur through discrete interventions. Evaluation contributes indirectly to betterment by helping to assess these discrete interventions. This familiar formula informs social science research and formal, democratic purposes within government institutions (Chelimsky, 2006).

Systemic change is about coming together to purposefully co-create and coshape change about complex situations and systems we engage in and with, directly or indirectly. People and agents involved in and affected by the situation are central to a systemic change process and evaluative inquiry. Such persons are conventionally called stakeholders, connoting individuals and groups who "hold stakes" (have interests in) the change initiative or the evaluation. This term has a problematic history and reinforces a default assumption that different groups are in disagreement and competition. We instead use the longer phrase "those involved and affected by the change initiative" to describe who might be considered, involved, and affected.

Relationships between those involved and those affected are interdependent and essential, within systemic change. Nonhuman species (e.g., bears, bees) and beings (e.g., rivers, forest), nature (e.g., coal, wind), ecology (landscapes), and other actors from the natural environment can also be considered. Future generations are among those affected who/that will not sit at the metaphorical table.

**Boundaries**, such as a timeframe, scope, disciplinary lens, or worldview, inevitably limit our awareness of and engagement with complexity (Midgley, 2016; Gates, 2018). Even while recognizing the need to draw boundaries, it can be tempting to try to pack all the complexity in (as illustrated in Figure 1.2).

Systemic change positions people as stewards and caretakers for the "greater good and future generations" (Armstrong, 1997). In professional settings, **stewardship** requires accountability for the "wellbeing of the larger organization by operating in service, rather than in control, of those around us" (Block, 2013). In the context of policymaking, stewardship, sometimes called system stewardship, requires "thinking in terms of overseeing an overall system, rather than in terms of launching another stand-alone initiative that tries to ignore or supplant all its predecessors" (Hallsworth, 2011, p. 13).

**Sensemaking** is the process through which people work to understand issues or events that are novel, ambiguous, confusing, or in some other way violate expectations (Maitlis & Christianson, 2014). **Social learning** refers to how a collective engages in learning together in ways that allow and equip them to generate, apply, and act on knowledge (Collins & Ison, 2006). Learning occurs iteratively, in cyclical phases that move from exploring a situation, to emerging coherence around shared values and vision, to identifying desirable and feasible actions, to taking or influencing focal action(s), which lead(s) to new understanding of the situation (Checkland, 2006).

**FIGURE 1.2**



freshspectrum

we ran out of board space so we started taping paper to the wall. Then we ran out of tape and started using sticky notes. Then we all decided it made a good metaphor for complexity and broke for lunch.

Sensemaking and social learning contribute to the coproduction of knowledge. **Coproduction** is a term used in sustainability science and other areas to refer to interdisciplinary, participatory processes in which teams of people with varied lived, professional, and academic expertise coproduce knowledge about a particular situation. It offers a way to generate knowledge and take collective action in relation to shared resources or the commons (Ostrom, 2015; Ostrom, 1996).
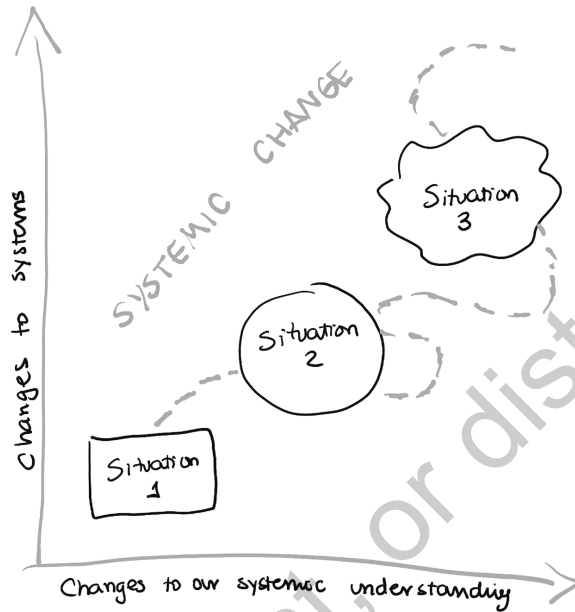
## From Fixes to Experiments and Pathways

Conceiving of social interventions as fixes centers an intentionally planned, organized, and implemented activity supported by resources to ameliorate a social problem or need. Interventions include policies, programs, and projects. Policies are formally established through government and other institutions with political power and authority. Programs are the administrative enactment of policies, translating them into practices within existing institutional structures. Projects are local implementations of programs (Shadish et al., 1991).

Interventions can be simple or complex and range widely in scope of coverage and intended beneficiaries. Interventions as the unit of analysis for change, understood linearly and mechanistically, as visually depicted in logic models, typically focus on outcomes/impact as individual-level change in knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors. Developing and testing a bounded intervention is the start to longer-term scale-up and replication.

After a group comes together and develops a nuanced understanding of a situation or system of interest, action implications arise. Rather than one-off or complementary discrete interventions to accomplish specific goals and outcomes, a systemic change

**FIGURE 1.3**



approach frames actions as experiments and as pathways to influence change. As illustrated in Figure 1.3, systemic change occurs over time as we make changes to systems and enhance our systemic understanding. This takes us from one situation to another in an ongoing way. This hand-drawn image is based on Ray Ison's work on social learning through systems practice (Ison, 2017).

Instead of interventions, we use the term **change initiatives**, undertakings to influence change within situations or systems. It is more flexible. An intervention implies interruption to fix or modify, with those intervening separate from those being intervened on.

Considering which experiments or pathways to pursue is guided, in a change initiative, by principles of **multisolving**—integrating "expertise, funding, and political will to solve multiple problems with a single investment of time and money." (Sawin, 2018, p. 1). Unlike interventions focused on individual change in knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors, the unit for change tends to extend across multiple scales and pathways (Westley et al., 2011, p. 767). Systemic design is another process used involving collaborative process to (re)design systems (Jones & Van Ael, 2022).

## From Evaluating Fix Success to Developing Value

Funders, policymakers, program leaders, and others involved in interventions commission evaluation studies primarily to determine how well the intervention accomplishes its goals and intended outcomes. This can inform and improve their decisions and, across studies, contribute to the knowledge base about intervention effectiveness.

Whether evaluations focus on needs, design, implementation, outcomes, or impact, it is necessary to clearly and definitively determine an intervention's value. Without **value determination**, the intervention cannot be considered a useful way to solve social problems or listed as an evidence-based practice. The level of confidence and certainty in evaluative claims comes from scientific procedures such as the study's design and instruments, statistical analyses, and hierarchies or standards of evidence (Puttick & Ludlow, 2013). Resolving an intervention's value is thus primarily an empirical matter, based on evidence (Schwandt & Gates, 2021).

The main role of evaluation in conventional social problem solving is providing or testing knowledge about addressing a focal social problem (Rossi et al., 2019; Andrews et al., 2017). Traditional evaluations primarily support **single-loop learning**, asking, "Are we doing things right? Are we getting the results we intended?" The idea is to reduce uncertainty via evidence generation, determining the value of various interventions in relation to a specific problem. Evaluation is thus leveraged to help support the adoption and implementation of interventions that reliably accomplish intended results. Neither the process nor the evaluation lens or evaluation goals emphasize questioning how the problem has been defined or considering alternative goals (Mark et al., 2000).

In systemic change, on the other hand, we believe evaluation (and evaluators) must drastically shift roles (Schwandt & Gates, 2021). Evaluation does not (cannot) begin with the questions and information needs of expert policymakers, funders, or academic researchers asking about social problems and which interventions work to solve them. The impetus for evaluation instead arises from people involved in and affected by a complex situation, as they navigate it. Questions center on the value of their past actions and efforts, and what they should do next. Evaluation provides a way for, and is grounded in, **value development**, a collective process to develop multi-dimensional value and impact using a mix of methods and processes to inform action amid changing circumstances.

Evaluations in/for systemic change support **double and triple loop learning**. **Double-loop learning** asks whether what we're doing is right, and on what basis we can know. This provokes us to examine what is happening and our mental and social models. **Triple-loop learning** takes another step back, or out, to reflexively explore how we're examining what we're examining. This requires recognition of our worldviews and potential blind spots and limitations (Argyris & Schön, 1996; Cabaj, 2019). Schwandt (2019a) refers to this as a shift from "normal" evaluation, aligned with scientific rationality and a delivery mode of governance, to "post-normal evaluation," grounded in practical reasoning, participatory politics, and ethical accountability (p. 324–326).

Evaluating in/for systemic change addresses questions that include (Schwandt, 2025):

- Given what we know and what we can imagine is possible, what should we do now?

- How well did our efforts accomplish the multiple goals and desired outcomes agreed on by several groups?

- How, if at all, should our goals and desired outcomes change considering shifting or differing value perspectives?

- What assumptions underly our understanding of the situation and efforts to address it?

- Who gains and who loses from what we plan to do or have done?

- What should we do to address potential exclusion and marginalization?

In Chapter 2, we further unpack the difference between value determination and value development, setting the foundation for evaluation in systemic change.

## RATIONALES FOR SYSTEMIC CHANGE: SCIENTIFIC, CRITICAL, AND PRACTICAL

Three distinct rationales are evident in calls for systemic change: scientific, critical, and practical. Each has unique origins and contributions. Scientific rationales tend to study complex systems to build general theories and models, critical rationales question the ways injustices are built into and maintained by systems, and practical rationales position learning and adaptation as ongoing processes amid uncertainty.

In discerning and articulating a rationale for systemic change regarding a specific problem area or situation, one must consider whether one or several of these rationales provides justification. Otherwise, divergent actors and organizations may align around the need for systemic change with divergent reasons, divergent understandings, and divergent expectations.

**FIGURE 1.4**
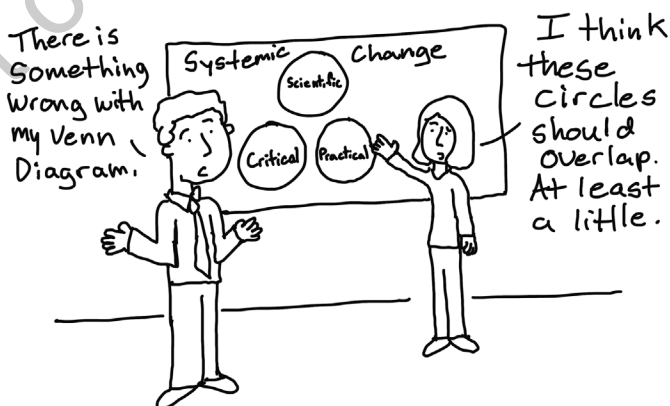
Each rationale takes a unique stance on why systemic change is needed, what it entails, and how to do it. Yet, when building your rationale for systemic change in relation to a particular issue, place, situation, or system, reasons from each rationale will likely have relevance. Be thoughtful and transparent about whether you personally emphasize a particular rationale or point above others and whether those you will work with hold similar emphases, when they make the case for systemic change. Getting clear about your rationale and others' rationales can inspire ways to integrate reasons or even reframe or reprioritize why the work matters. Also consider those you wish to invite, or those you should partner with, as well as the audiences you might want to persuade about the value of this approach.

## Scientific Rationale: Study Complex Systems

Scientific rationale for systemic change centers on how we investigate the world to understand the nature of complex systems and how they change. Shifts to systemic ways of working center on incorporating **systems science**, interdisciplinary fields focused on the study and intervention of systems (Hieronymi, 2013).

To unpack this a bit, core assumptions of Newtonian science include reductionism (i.e., understanding the whole through careful study of the parts), linearity (i.e., outputs follow chronologically and proportionately to inputs), and predictability (i.e., by studying the influence of parts effects can be predicted). Core assumptions of a complexity or systemic worldview, on the other hand, include the expectation that a system's elements and the interrelationships of those elements are greater than a sum

| TABLE 1.2 ■ Three Rationales for Systemic Change | | |
|---|---|---|
| **Rationale** | **Why** | **How** |
| **Scientific** | Our world is composed of complex systems and science should study these systems using interdisciplinary approaches. | Use systems and complexity theories, concepts, and methods to develop data-based models of why and how systems work. Focus on generalizable knowledge that can transcend disciplines and contexts. |
| **Critical** | Root causes of social problems are/include unjust systems that we must critique, resist, and reimagine. | Interrogate the maintenance of injustices within existing systems, especially as shaped by history. Center direct knowledge and lived experiences of those most affected by injustice(s). |
| **Practical** | The world continuously changes in uncertain ways, and we need to practice learning and adaptation. | Work together to influence change through an iterative cycle of collective learning, prioritizing, and action taking. Focus learning on present understandings and future possibilities. |

of parts, due to nonlinearity (i.e., the output not being directly proportional to the inputs), emergence (properties of a complex system that cannot be reduced to its parts and interactions of those parts alone), and other attributes. For an introduction to complexity science and its applications, see Siegenfeld and Yaneer Bar-Yam (2020).

Scholars charting the historical evolution of systems fields (e.g., cybernetics, operational research, complexity theory, and complexity science) over the past century sometimes differentiate hard, soft, and critical systems traditions, which diverge around specific assumptions and approaches to researching systems and complexity. In all these traditions, though, people grounded in scientific rationale seek to influence systemic change by advancing collective human intelligence *and* informing policy, advocacy, and governance priorities.

People working from a scientific rationale prioritize knowledge generated through processes to theorize, model or simulate, and observe real-world. They aim to build knowledge about how and why systems work that is generalizable. Systems analysts, for example, use modeling to explore dynamic complexity: "counterintuitive behavior of complex systems that arises from the interactions of the agents over time" (Sterman, 2006, p. 506). Whereas time delays, stocks, flows, and other features of complex systems make it difficult to learn from research evidence, modeling complex systems can help a group identify and overcome common barriers to learning and change (Sterman, 2006).

## Critical Rationale: Challenge Roots of Injustices Within Systems

A second umbrella of rationale for systemic change comes from critiques of unjust, entrenched societal systems and those who advocate for equity, justice, liberation, and decolonization. Contemporary social problems have deep roots in formal legislation and ideological and institutional cultural norms that have impacted lived experiences for generations in ways that reproduce and entrench injustices.

Default dynamics, lenses, processes, priorities, and expectations in the sciences, social sciences, and applied areas reflect these norms and often reproduce inequality. Problematically, the people most harmed by current injustices are too often excluded from debates and decisions about change.

Indigenous-led critiques of settler colonialism and climate coloniality, for example, bring a critical lens and firm reminder that colonialism has always been about change: "changing the land, transforming the earth itself, including the creatures, the plants, the soil composition, and the atmosphere" (Davis & Todd, 2017, p. 770). Change as enacted settler colonialism began with the violent separation of families and communities, the forced replacement of effective social systems, and the physical, ideological, and spiritual separation of human populations from ecological systems they had stewarded wisely and been interdependent with for millennia. Climate coloniality relatedly occurred and occurs "where Eurocentric hegemony, neocolonialism, racial capitalism, uneven consumption, and military domination are co-constitutive of climate impacts

experienced by variously racialized populations… disproportionately made vulnerable and disposable" (Sultana, 2022, p. 4).

While these truths remind us that systemic change has often enabled and perpetuated extractive extremes and human and ecological destruction, systemic change can also provide prioritized space and process accountability for reparations, restoration, and self-determination. Equity-focused critical rationale for systemic change to challenge and upend injustice from the roots centers the need to better understand and address structural, systemic, cultural, and historical factors—slavery, systemic oppression, white supremacy and privilege, etc.—that normalize(d) ongoing patterns of trauma, harm, inequity, and marginalization (Farrow & Morrison, 2019).

Decolonization concerning climate work, for example, includes "self-governance for Indigenous peoples, the return of stolen lands, and reparations for the descendants of captured Africans" (Davis & Todd, 2017, p. 774). This movement/work involves environmental foci as core to "accounting for and reflecting on the past and present, in order to configure future pathways to remove colonial and imperial powers in all their forms" (Sultana, 2022, p. 6). It also requires centering the voices, philosophies, and values of Indigenous communities, argue Pasifiki authors (Bhagwan et al., 2020).

Pursuits of decolonization and racial equity have also led to critiques and alternative ways forward for knowledge generation and applied research. Key aspects of related rationale and action include:

- acknowledging that research always advances some values—and not others

- promoting equity and social justice

- questioning the way interventions frame underlying problems to challenge deficit assumptions and identify structural causes of/for inequity

- building a culturally diverse and competent team

- using methods that build on the values, knowledge, and experiences of marginalized groups

- critiquing the status quo and seeking change

Failure to center equity brings the risk of exacerbating inequities in problematic and potentially irreversible ways. These include reinforcing the power of some groups (e.g., policymakers, program leaders, researchers) over others (e.g., intervention "beneficiaries"), perpetuating deficit perspectives that blame/problematize individuals and cultural groups rather than systems, missing important positive and negative intervention consequences, and failing to generate multiculturally and contextually valid inferences about intervention value.

Feminist work around entanglements, power, love, and relationality also offers grounds for systemic change (Awid, 2019). Philosophically, Barad (2007) shows nature

and meaning as intertwined, drawing on quantum physics and critical theories to do so: "To be entangled is not simply to be intertwined with another, as in the joining of separate entities, but to lack an independent, self-contained existence. Existence is not an individual affair. Individuals do not preexist their interactions; rather, individuals emerge through and as part of their entangled intra-relating" (p. x). Practically, the Feminist Realities Toolkit (Santos-Lyons & Taubenfeld, 2019) inspires and guides users through processes of unearthing and cocreating those parallel phases of systemic change covered in Chapter 4. "Unearthing" engages people oppressed due to their gender identity, nonconformity, or other attributes around sharing their experiences and envisioning change. "Cocreating" addresses power disparities and strives for collaboration.

## Practical Rationale: Continuously Learn to Coshape Systems

Ways to manage, learn, and adapt amid ongoing change continue to gain traction, within systems practice communities, in particular. People in leadership and management roles, action researchers, organizational learning consultants, and social movement organizers discuss systemic orientations for managing the ongoing, uncertain nature of change (Ison, 2017).

Within this rationale, the primary aim is not studying systems to develop theoretical explanations or eradicating injustices within systems. These may be combined *with* a practical rationale, but the impetus is to influence change in an ongoing manner. Many systems methodologies developed out of this orientation. Systems theorists and thinkers brought their ideas to industry, organization, and community settings to quickly discover the challenges of engaging real people in real time (Ramage & Shipp, 2009). Concerns about problems were always emerging and experienced in different ways by people of differing professional roles and personal identities. Changing systems is as much about how people experience and sense-make as about shifting patterns of focus.

Key to this rationale is centering real people in real situations who want to influence change. It assumes the inevitable complexity of any situation in which some people, in particular time and place, have concerns about what is going on and ideals regarding what could and/or should be better. Uncertainty, disagreement, and shifting conditions are inevitable. Therefore, a systemic approach to change becomes a way of seeing, relating to, and engaging in the world as people.

The rise of complexity in policymaking reflects a range of concerns and perspectives under the shared belief that conventional approaches to economic modeling and policy analysis are insufficient for interconnected challenges (Love & Stockdale-Otárola, 2017). Examining the economy as a complex system has implications for policymakers calling on them to, "be constantly vigilant and more humble about their policy prescriptions, act more like navigators than mechanics, and be open to systemic risks, spillovers, strengths, weaknesses, and human sensitivities (Gurría, 2017, p. 14).

Practical rationales are evident in the sustainability sciences. The interdependent nature of people and ecosystems, referred to as "social-ecological systems," means we cannot address the climate crisis without changing people and social institutions. This change must be done with a forward-looking view to anticipate "unforeseen shocks by absorbing, accommodating, or embracing change (adaptation), or to fundamentally reorganize as a response to challenges that are impossible to address within a current social-ecological system state or regime (transformation)" (Barnes et al., 2017, p. 1). Supporting the resilience and adaptation of social-ecological systems requires cultivating the capacity to "learn, combine experiences and knowledge, and adjust responses to changing external drivers and internal processes while continuing to develop within the current stability domain or basin of attraction" (Barnes et al., 2017, p. 2).

## FIVE MYTHS ABOUT SYSTEMIC CHANGE

Even as systemic change grows in popularity, misconceptions remain. We unpack these as a list here and revisit each later in the book.

1. **Systemic Change is NEW**. [It is ancient.]

Recent and rising calls for systemic change and transformation sound and seem unfamiliar, to many. Yet, experiencing and situating oneself as interconnected is intuitive, to others—and a sociocultural norm in numerous non-Western cultures and Indigenous communities. Sheryl Petty says, in "Systems Change and Deep Equity," "It's as if the shift from individual-centered to eco-system-centered awareness is (again) a revelation. And I have to ask, Who is this new for and who is it not?" (Petty & Leach, 2020, p. 33). Similarly, in "Relational Systems Thinking," Melanie Goodchild dialogues with Indigenous elders and Western-academically-trained systems thinkers. Peter Senge, of the latter cohort, describes as misguided the extent to which his formal training in system dynamics modeling emphasized abstract, analytical thinking to diagnose systems, instead of emphasizing systems thinking as discovery of relational and embedded awareness within ourselves, our relationship to each other and the natural world.

Melanie Goodchild (2021) discusses "bringing the soul to systems work" (p. 93) and invites "awareness-based systems change" as "a process of co-inquiry into the deeper structures of the social systems to see, sense, presence, and shift them" (p. 94). Samuel Gikaru Njenga and Liezel Massyn (2024) connect systems thinking with an African worldview, noting shared emphases on interrelatedness and journeying with a question, among other features. They cite the ideas of Ubuntu (a lived philosophy about humanity, care, and community captured in the saying, "I am because we are, and since we are, therefore I am"), and Ukama, a concept of the Shona people of Zimbabwe, regarding "cosmic interrelationality and the interdependencies even among non-human elements"—and seeing these relationships as the basis of reality (p. 5).

2. **Systemic Change is about BIG changes to a WHOLE system that take a LONG time**. [It is also about deep changes, which can be small and sudden.]

A very entrenched view that systemic change is about transforming the "whole" system brings us to focus on the structural and policy level, which some might see as the tip of the iceberg. When evaluating this kind of work, this is often THE biggest sticking point: that to KNOW you have transformed a system is to measure how much you supported structural change, and anything about norms (e.g., empowerment or agency-building work) is considered "small" and not systemic "enough."

Indeed, most guides on systemic change, especially the few focused on evaluation, emphasize large scales and lengthy time horizons, including "Navigating System Change Evaluation" by Davies and Goldie (2023): "Systems do not change on the timescale of two-year funding round, or term in office. In fact, it is more likely to be decades before you see lasting shifts in the way the system operates if you're trying to affect large scale social change" (p. 4).

3. **Systemic Change is about a Process OR an Impact**. [It is BOTH process and impact.]

Our definition of systemic change refers to an orientation to change *and* a type of change that happens to a system or its conditions (i.e., systemic change is both process and impact). Systems can be small and can change suddenly. Systemic change *is not* simply bigger change, change at a larger scale or with a longer time horizon, or an additional set of criteria or key performance indicators that capture a bigger change, scale, or time horizon. Systemic change may take a long time or happen in an instant.

We also note the commonality of an either/or distinction between the process of how change occurs and the outcomes, impacts, or consequences of that process. Change is a verb *or* noun, action *or* result. We and others understand, practice, and define systemic change as involving both, and hold/pursue both at the same time and in connected ways: "The word 'system' in English conveys it as a noun, whereas in Anishinaabemowin (Ojibwe) a system would be a verb, dynamic and imbued with spirit. And that spirit is in relationship with other spirits" (Goodchild, 2021, p. 79).

4. **Systemic Change is THE Solution**. [It is a response fit for some people and circumstances.]

Among enthusiasts, especially funding agencies eager to see and show the value of recent shifts in their ways of work, systemic change can be framed as a panacea: a remedy for all complex problems, the way to a better world. This misconception has an underpinning of problem-solving logic; it is hard to challenge the idea that problems are solvable with the right solutions. Yet, the complexity of systemic change defies problem boundedness and requires learning and action as ongoing, iterative rhythm.

Furthermore, not all systems need to change, and what is considered necessary or desirable change from one perspective may be unnecessary or undesirable for others. Systemic change processes must thus be reflexive, invoking interrogation and justification of when, whether, why, and for whom systemic change is needed. Humility and willingness to change direction are, and must be, prerequisite.

5. **Systemic Change is inherently GOOD.** [It may be good or bad; what goodness (or value) means must be defined.]

Systemic change is not inherently good. Change is always good for some people, in some ways, and bad for others in other ways. After a transformation shifts a system from what it was to a different structure and purpose, the difference may increase or decrease what is valued—dependent on, of course, from whose perspective and within which timeframe.

At the heart of systemic change are claims about goodness and value. Such claims are normative, meaning they are ideas about what should be, could be, and ideally will be. We note with great caution that normative claims reflect values—which must be critically discussed, morally defended, and empirically supported when they do or may impact collective, large-scale systems. Inquiry and interrogation regarding claims and assumptions of the value or goodness of systemic change is a core feature of this book.

## DISTINGUISHING SYSTEMIC CHANGE FROM RELATED APPROACHES AND EXAMPLES

Sometimes, systemic change is an approach, or mere phrasing, used interchangeably or in conjunction with other approaches to change. Table 1.3 summarizes popular approaches that are related to, yet distinct from, systemic change.

| TABLE 1.3 ■ Some Related Approaches to Systemic Change | | |
|---|---|---|
| **Approach** | **Description** | **How Relates to Systemic Change** |
| Collective Impact | • Distinguished by: a common agenda, shared measurement systems, mutually reinforcing activities, continuous communication, and backbone support organizations (Kania & Kramer, 2011).<br><br>• First used and popularized by FSG, an enterprise that reimagines social change, collective impact has grown into a practice.<br><br>• Recent collective impact work has sought to center equity by focusing on systems change, in addition to programs and services (Collective Impact Forum, n.d.) | Some collective impact efforts focus on changing a large-scale system.<br><br>Collective impact approaches do not typically cover the phases of systems change highlighted in this book, but can be complementary. |

| Approach | Description | How Relates to Systemic Change |
|---|---|---|
| Social Innovation | <ul><li>Social innovation can refer to technological innovation with societal impacts or to social relations that produce innovation.</li><li>Could refer to a process or a utilitarian value created from an innovation process (Ayob et al., 2016)</li><li>Originated in sociology and remains popular in some business, leadership, and technology areas.</li></ul> | Social innovation may or may not situate collaboration as a necessary element, although collaboration is integral to systemic change. |
| Systems Innovation | <ul><li>Applies the concept of social innovation to systems, with a focus on collaborative efforts across public, private and civic sectors to alter existing or create new systems that produce public goods (e.g., health, safety, learning) (www.systeminnovation.org/aboutsii) (System Shift, n.d.)</li><li>Used by The Systems Innovation Initiative, a global, cross-sector learning effort ran from 2019–2023 in Copenhagen, Denmark by affiliates of the Rockwool Foundation and international collaborators.</li></ul> | Tends to be used interchangeably with systems change, systemic change, and large-scale transition. |
| Systemic Design | <ul><li>Design that aims to or results in a change to a system; designing systemically refers to a designer's awareness of wider system context and perception of interdependence (Drew et al., 2021).</li><li>May include co-creation, framing, listening to, and understanding the system, envisioning desired future, exploring the possibility space, planning the change process, and navigating the transition (Jones & Van Ael, 2022).</li></ul> | Design plays a part in a systemic change process, Some systemic design overlaps with and complements systemic change. |
| Socio-Ecological Transformation | <ul><li>Phrase used in the sustainability sciences, among other fields, to refer to the interdependence of social and ecological systems and a focus on transforming these systems through shifts in governance, norms, values, livelihood practices, and other means (Carpenter & Folke, 2006; Olsson et al., 2017).</li></ul> | Some systemic change efforts focus on or are influenced by socioecological transformation. |
| Systemic Action Research | <ul><li>A form of participatory action research which aims to create systemic change in local contexts and across wider systems.</li><li>An iterative process of collaboratively engaging in applied research to inform action and address injustices (Burns, 2007; Burns & Apgar, 2024).</li></ul> | Process could be used to guide systemic change; may or may not embed evaluative inquiry. |

## EXAMPLES OF SYSTEMIC CHANGE

There are numerous examples of systemic change underway across global, national, and local levels. Here are several examples with hyperlinks to explore more:

- **Global Alliance for Food Sovereignty in Africa (AFSA):** "a broad alliance of different civil society actors that are part of the struggle for food sovereignty and agroecology in Africa." (https://afsafrica.org/about-us/)

- **U.S. National Science Foundation (NSF)** (2022) **INCLUDES Initiative**: "a bold initiative that catalyzes collaborative action to shift inequitable systems and maximize the impact of broadening participation in STEM education and careers." (NSF INCLUDES Coordination Hub). Demystifying systems change: How the NSF INCLUDES national network is changing systems to broaden participation in STEM (Research Brief No. 8).

- **India's Health Systems Transformation Platform (HSTP):** "Our mission is to enable systems transformation towards providing equitable access to good quality affordable health services for improved health outcomes. We do this in collaboration with Indian & Global expertise through research for health systems redesign, enhancing stakeholders' capabilities & fostering policy dialogue." (www.hstp.org.in/).

- **Dudley Neighborhood Place-Based Social Lab: United Kingdom:** "A place-based social lab—an experimental form of social and imagination infrastructure in Dudley . . . There are three layers to our networked structure which we carefully tend: There is a team leading the lab, who share the role of Network Guardians. Our team convenes a network of organisations and local people. We work within a wider field or ecosystem of people and initiatives in the UK pioneering emerging futures." (www.colabdudley. net/about/).

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### REFLECT FORWARD

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Before moving on, take some time to engage with the main ideas of this section. These questions are here to spark your thinking and invite conversation.

1. When has a "fixing" approach addressed a problem in your experience, and when has it fallen short? How might reframing problems to complex situations shift how you, your team, or organization approaches social change?

2. Reflecting on the contrasts in Table 1.1 (Fixing vs. Systemic Change), which resonate most with your experience—and why? Which might be most challenging to integrate into your thinking or practice? Why or how so?

3. What biases or assumptions do you hold that lead you to prefer "fixing" solutions or systemic approaches? How might becoming aware of these influence your practice?

4. How comfortable are you working amid uncertainty, ambiguity, and disagreement—and what might help you engage more effectively with these conditions?

5. How does considering multiple rationales for systemic change (scientific, critical, practical) enrich your perspective?

6. How do you understand the shift from evaluation as determining value to developing value? What challenges or opportunities does this create in your work?

7. How do myths about systemic change (such as its newness, scale, or universal applicability) show up in your context—and how could challenging them open new possibilities?

# 2 DEVELOP VALUE TOGETHER

This chapter explains why questions of value are central to systemic change and how evaluative inquiry can facilitate a collaborative process to develop value. Evaluative inquiry is an ongoing process of asking and answering questions about value. We argue for a critical deliberative stance involving discussion of and across multiple values, perspectives, and ways of knowing, as well as careful consideration of inclusion, exclusion, and marginalization. We dispel misconceptions about evaluating systemic change. Readers gain understanding of what a critical deliberative stance involves and why it is needed to develop the value of systemic change initiatives amid complexity.

## WHAT "GOOD" MEANS: AN OPEN QUESTION

We engage in systemic change to understand the world around us and make it better. Value is central to systemic change. Value is about why something matters, its worth, and its significance within a context. Evaluation means understanding and assessing value.

Yet, among the many known systemic approaches to evaluation, nearly all sidestep *how* to assess value. Many practitioners conceptualize, model, describe, and/or explain systems with few or no suggestions on appraising the value of a system or changes to a system.

While it may be tempting to ask whether a system has changed, it is a question that makes no inherent sense. Systems are always changing. Whether it has changed for the better depends on what changes are considered better (and worse). This can be likened to a road trip adventure, as illustrated in Figure 2.1, without an inherent end destination.

### FIGURE 2.1

What a "good" systemic change means is an open question, often asked but rarely answered. The United Nations Development Program has a Measurement and Evaluation Sandbox to share novel ideas and practices. One blogpost asks, "What is 'good' systems change and how do we measure it?" The author, Søren Vester Haldrup (2023b), discusses the importance of this question, while showing the trickiness of answering it. The trickiness lies in the need to inclusively deliberate what good and bad mean in the context of a systemic change process and the difficulty of measuring and gathering data that truly captures what matters.

We take this further to contend that defining "good" systemic change raises a different kind of question and depth of trickiness than defining a good policy or program. As explored in Chapter 1, when an intervention is considered a fix to a social problem, evaluating becomes a matter of determining value in relation to whether the intervention fixed the problem. With systemic change, we need to know how good our efforts are to adjust amid complex and shifting circumstances. This requires a shift in what value means and how we approach defining and measuring it.

This chapter explains why questions of value are central to systemic change and how evaluative inquiry can facilitate a collaborative process to develop value. Evaluative inquiry is an ongoing process of asking and answering questions about value. We argue for a critical deliberative stance involving discussion of and across multiple values, perspectives, and ways of knowing, as well as careful consideration of inclusion, exclusion, and marginalization. We dispel misconceptions about evaluating systemic change.

## SHIFT FROM DETERMINING TO DEVELOPING VALUE

Here we contrast a typical approach to evaluating value that supports "fixing" social problems with evaluative inquiry, as centered in this book. Whereas determining value serves a point-in-time judgment about an intervention (Scriven, 2012), developing value serves open-ended, collaborative inquiry. Both are supported by criteria that define what value means and evidence to assess whether and how well criteria are met. The difference lies in deeper assumptions about the nature of value and who and what evaluating value serves.

Our discussion of this contrast draws on the work of Thomas Schwandt, a philosopher of evaluation with whom Emily coauthored a book. In that book, they proposed and argued for expanding "value" beyond something determined by experts to assess interventions (Scriven, 2012) via continuous, collaborative process to amplify the value of change efforts in unfolding circumstances (Schwandt & Gates, 2021; Gates et al., 2024). We also draw on work that positions value as something to be created—not extracted (Mazzucato, 2018)—through deliberative processes that involve individuals and groups clarifying, and sometimes shifting, personal values to co-shape shared value (Milstein, 2008; Kenter et al., 2019).

Four features anchor our vision of evaluative inquiry to develop value together: (1) from value as predefined to we-defined, (2) from fixed and singular to open and

| TABLE 2.1 ■ Value in Fixing Versus Systemic Change | | |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Shift** | **Fixing** | **Systemic Change** |
| From value as predefined to we-defined. | Value predefined by people and organizations with power in relation to an intervention's goals and design. | Value defined pluralistically by a diverse "we," including those involved and affected, future generations, nonhuman species, and the environment. |
| From fixed and singular to open and multidimensional value. | Value as fixed, singular and stable, set within the scale and timeframe of an intervention. | Value as multidimensional, relative to multiple scales and timeframes, and in flux. |
| From retrospective to prospective value. | Value as retrospective about whether an intervention worked based on evidence and criteria. | Value as prospective about whether and how a change process could be better informed by evidence, criteria, and imagination. |
| From technical to moral-political process. | Value determination as a technical process that informs instrumental uses and generates knowledge. | Value development as a moral-political process involving deliberation about the "rightness" of efforts, which generates legitimacy. |

multidimensional value; (3) from retrospective to prospective; and (4) from technical to moral-political process. In Table 2.1, we contrast these with assumptions about value traditionally made when evaluating interventions as "fixes" to social problems.

## From Value as Predefined to We-Defined

In a "fixed" approach to social change, interventions target specific social problems and needs. The value of an intervention is predefined, typically by people and organizations with power in relation to an intervention's goals and design. A good intervention accomplishes its goals, achieves intended outcomes, and ameliorates or contributes to amelioration of the targeted problem or need.

In systemic change, value development is a collaborative process among people (and often nonhuman species and places) bringing inherently diverse views regarding what value currently means and should mean. Developing value begins with an open stance around what value means and intention to include multiple perspectives, human and nonhuman, with critical awareness and transparency regarding choices about who or what to privilege and exclude (Schwandt, 2018).

Phrases that capture this diversity include Hannah Arendt's (2018) "plural we" and Arturo Escobar's (2018) "pluriverse." Arendt (2018) asserts, "We are every one unique, not variations of a kind" (p. 220). Plurality is fundamental to what it means to be human. Escobar (2018) further recognizes the layers of relationship between

humans and non-human species and ecologies: "The pluriverse, a world where many worlds fit, as the Zapatista aptly put it . . . includes difference in the biological realm (biodiversity), epistemic difference, cultural difference, and ontological difference" (p. xvi).

Plurally defining value in systemic change offers a way to restore change processes to the public realm, a way to enact what it means to live together as a democracy by engaging in collaborative social practices (Schwandt, 2018). Those with the most resources and power do not get to decide the direction, scope, and nature of change for all of us. They have no legitimacy to define what counts as success or progress. Engaging in questions of value together is a way to take back the spirit and practice of the public realm (Arendt, 2018). Escobar (2018, p. 7) calls this "a transition toward plural ways of making the world."

Seeing value as something by and for plurality aligns with well-established democratic orientations to evaluation, as envisioned by Jennifer Greene (2005), "Evaluation conducted for the public good, that is, aims to enlighten the relevant policy conversation and especially to include therein diverse voices, perspectives, and experiences (p. 8). It also aligns with value-based evaluations for transformative change which centers what matters to the people place directly involved and affected (Aronsson & Hassanain, 2019).

This suggests a relational mode in which, according to Thomas Schwandt (2019b), "politics returns to the people, to the sphere of everyday practices, interactions and understandings to viewing democracy not as composed of all the features of formal politics but as a way of life—as John Dewey put it" (p. 10).

Acknowledging plurality and committing to engage with difference is easier said than done. Power dynamics are unavoidable, as are value conflicts. "We need to address the question of 'value from whom, created by whom, for whom,' with an understanding of the issues power and equity underlying the investment, or our investment might fail or even do harm. We need to take great care when defining what is valuable to whom" (King, 2021, p. 5). Balancing the idea of a plural process that explicitly names whose and what values inform criteria (Gates et al., 2024) with critique around potential exclusion and harm is central to what we call "a critical deliberative stance."

## From Fixed and Singular to Open and Multidimensional Value

In a "fixing" orientation to social change, value often gets appraised through quantitative indicators and financial calculations. It is common to isolate specific outcomes and then assess changes before and after an intervention or between a control and treatment group. Whether differences in the outcome are statistically significant, in turn, practically indicates the value of the intervention. In economic analyses, cost benefit analyses and returns on investment consolidate into financial gains or losses. Value gets equated with dollars.

We restore "value" to normative terminology, rather than designate "some actions or outcomes as good, right, or desirable and others as bad, wrong, or undesirable" (Schwandt, 2019b, p. 1). As a normative term, value is inherently open and multidimensional. To engage in and evaluate systemic change, we must let go of any idea of value as an inherent, fixed attribute that can be discovered or assessed. There is no such thing as a better world, a just system, or a resilient community in an incontestable, objective sense that remains stable over time. Rather, a change process necessarily involves figuring out what value means and should mean. This is a continuous process.

Never static, value is always, by nature, in flux. And yet, pursuits of systemic change require us, individually and collectively, to make judgments about what we envision "better system" to mean. Shaped by a plural we, value is and should be comprised of multiple dimensions. As Davies and Goldie (2023) in "Navigating System Change Evaluation" say, ". . . system change efforts usually demand a richer, potentially more complex definition of success, which may include some tension and contradiction" (p. 6).

**Multidimensional value** is distinguished by the consideration of multiple dimensions that may or may not be complementary (e.g., social, health, economic, and environmental dimensions); also called blended value. Milstein (2008) contends that a sustained questioning orientation to what value means allows multiplicity to (co)exist. In the context of public health, "standards for judgment tend to examine how simultaneous values like health, dignity, security, equity, satisfaction, justice, prosperity, and freedom are upheld in both means and ends" (p. 2).

We can practice the idea of multidimensional value by intentionally selecting criteria to define multiple dimensions that matter. Rather than top-down conceptualizations, set by funders, criteria should be agreed upon through/during open discussions driven by those directly involved in and affected by change efforts fit for their contexts. See Chapter 5 regarding why we translate value into criteria, options for criteria well aligned with systemic change, and other considerations (e.g., justifying these, given potential alternatives).

## From Retrospective to Prospective Value

In a "fixing" orientation, value is largely bound to an intervention evaluated using empirical evidence. This inadvertently directs the value question backward, to examine whether, how, and for whom an intervention worked to accomplish specific goals and outcomes. Data that serve as evidence are gathered and analyzed to gain insights regarding what happened.

In contrast, systemic change exists within and in relation to a problematic situation or system of interest. The meaning of value gets shaped by, and is used to inform, change efforts related to the situation or system. As such, the relationship of value and evaluative inquiry shift from focus on a discrete intervention to address a prespecified problem or need, as covered in Chapter 1. Instead, what gets defined as problematic,

by whom, and with what consequences are *part of* the systemic change process. This temporally opens what value means to reflect on present and future contexts.

Value can assume a present nature, such that it exists in a way that can be described and appraised. Systemic change also involves envisioning into the future what is desirable and possible, making value aspirational—something that does not yet exist but can be used as a moral compass to inspire and direct us (Schwandt, 2019b; Milstein, 2008).

The quest to create value now and into the future is fundamentally human. Being alive and sustaining conditions conducive to life is a form of navigation. Distinct from physical navigation, "the ability to direct movement over land, water, and air," social navigation refers to our "ability to direct the course of social change toward a negotiated set of valued conditions" (Milstein, 2008, p. 9).

When the goal is aspirational, the process of defining value can be forward looking and transformative (Kenter et al., 2019). This involves questions of what value will mean and should mean, given an unfolding future (Nieminen & Hyytinen, 2015). It may mean uplifting values or dimensions of value currently undervalued by society or by a group of people, at a particular place and time. The systemic devaluing of ecological resources (e.g., water, air, soil), sometimes called ecosystem services, in decision making, for example, must be redressed and transformed through valuation processes (Kenter et al., 2016).

Pragmatically juxtaposing and integrating our understandings of what is happening with our normative ideals about what should be, we ask: Is this the right thing to do? What makes this "right"? Based on what, on whose assumptions and worldviews? What alternatives merit consideration? What do critics say? Who or what may be affected by our choices? And, most importantly, what should we do?

Additional value-laden questions that become worthwhile when looking forward include:

- "Identifying what adaptations to implementation occur and should occur, a task more difficult than assessing fidelity to or deviation from a design or plan" (Hallsworth, 2011, p. 7).

- "Projecting or capturing how variations in implementation may affect changes in outcomes and whether these changes are desirable" (Hallsworth, 2011, p. 6).

- "Recognizing and accounting for changes in peoples' values and the ways they assign value to particular initiatives or outcomes" (Shiell et al., 2008, p. 1283).

- "Identifying and anticipating unintended consequences, spin-off or side effects, and other changes beyond those initially envisaged, especially when those occur in other places and times, and weighing these in one's appraisal of value" (Shiell et al., 2008, p. 1283).

## From a Technical to a Moral-Political Process

The last contrast we make when juxtaposing a fixed approach with systemic change is between evaluation as largely a technical appraisal to a moral-political process. Evaluation, a way to determine an intervention's value, rests on a modernist, scientific orientation to change that uplifts the "optimistic belief in the possibility of improving society via data gathering and rational decision making" (Schwandt, 2019b, p. 3). Tempting, yet false, familiarity reassurance comes from looking to experts and research to direct social problem solving and trusting the assumption that "good" interventions "fix" social problems. As argued in Chapter 1, this logic can only, at best, serve incremental change.

Systemic change focus is a shift from seeing value as something experts determine and tell us to something we develop together. Developing value occurs in a particular place and time; it is inherently contextually situated. Greene (2005) points out the implications: "the very meaning and quality of a given program is embedded in and constituted by its context. Shift from asking decontextualized questions like "How good is this educational program?" to contextualized questions like "How good is this program for these children in this school in this community at this time?" (p. 13).

This positioning of evaluating as a process to develop value within a context aligns with the idea of "problematizing the problem definition" (Archibald, 2020, p. 10). "Who gets to define the boundaries of what counts as problematic, or in need of change, and what success criteria mean" are interrelated issues (p. 10). This means that value (success, improvement) must be defined and developed within a particular system and context (Rohanna & Christie, 2023, p. 2). The role of evaluators shifts from independent and external to involved and integral (Barnett & Eager, 2021).

Developing value is thus a continuous journey. We engage in evaluative inquiry so we can continuously influence the systems that shape our lives in ways that bring value and minimize risk and harm. We influence change in systems because this is what it means to be humans who want to thrive together and sustain conditions conducive to life. Making the world better is not about accomplishing our goals, fixing problems, filling gaps, or satiating needs. After all, there will always be "new" goals, problems, gaps, and needs. It is about working together, socially and ecologically, to explore and shape conditions toward shared visions, while refreshing our vision and processes as circumstances change and anticipating unfolding futures. It is about being accountable to one another while learning and adapting in infinite iterative cycles.

As an open-ended, ongoing, flexible process, evaluative inquiry can leave us unsettled. This is part of the point, in our view. There is heightened ambiguity and contingency to any claim that we are doing good work or taking right actions. This does not mean we should not reach conclusions (however tentative and situationally bound) or that our conclusions are less rigorous than those made by external experts using specialized methods. Rather, it means we should keep the big picture in mind.

As value development unfolds in context, among a plural, it is fundamentally pragmatic and ethical, evaluation can become "a moral-practical means to deliberate and act in relation to substantive issues in everyday life" (Schwandt 2019b, p. 10).

Legitimacy lies in one's potential to be transparent, justify one's stance, and mitigate potential negative consequences as individuals and within a collaborative community (Gates et al., 2023).

**Ethical legitimacy** is the idea that some claim or action is justifiable because its potential consequences have been considered and deemed acceptable by those making the claim or action—and also by those potentially affected, for better or worse. Legitimacy cannot be generated or claimed by those involved; legitimacy must come from those affected. In Chapter 3, we explore ways to build legitimacy for systemic change efforts.

## A CRITICAL DELIBERATIVE STANCE TO DEVELOP VALUE

We call our stance critical and deliberative to highlight the interplay between critique and dialogue. A **critical deliberative stance**, applied to evaluative inquiry, involves investigating questions about the value of a change initiative or process within a specific situation, with openness to continual reflection and responsibility for what may be missed, excluded, or harmed, and potential and likely consequences.

By **critical**, we mean attentive to issues of inclusion, exclusion, and marginalization, and to ethical considerations of mitigating harm and doing good. Critical does not mean negative; it means finding limits, partiality to provide the basis for improved understanding and/or practice (Ulrich & Reynolds, 2010, p. 269). By deliberative, we mean attentive to diverse types and forms of evidence and interactive exchanges about what value/success mean and what should be done, based on evidence and learning.

Our choice to label this a critical deliberative stance is to elevate critique and deliberation as the central features for quality evaluative inquiry. This marks a thoughtful shift from an emphasis within conventional evaluation practice on experts leading a methodological process centered on evidence. Continuous learning, open dialogue and deliberation, and careful selection and justification of standpoints provide practitioners with a foundation to navigate any circumstance. Expertise, methodology, and evidence still play a role but do not drive the process.

Critical deliberative foundations are central to many recent calls and commitments to systems approaches, ethics, and equity and justice in evaluation:

- "Valuing and using the perspectives and knowledge of people most affected by the root causes of inequity and by the proposed solutions" (Farrow & Morrisson, 2019, p. 6).

- "Being aware of the risks as much as the considerable opportunities . . . because systems are interconnected, the wrong things can go drastically

wrong, but the right things can go right just as drastically" (Ramalingam, 2013, p. 264).

- Practicing ethical reflexivity to be explicit about the value assumptions that inform our work, consider tensions between multiple values, be prepared to justify these assumptions, and take responsibility for political and ethical implications (Gewirtz & Cribb, 2006; Brown, 2020; Schmidt-Abbey, Reynolds, & Ison, 2020).

- Careful consideration of how evidence and knowledge are created and made available and accessible to facilitate debate among those who commissioned the evaluation and immediate audiences or users (Barnett & Eager, 2017, p. 306).

- Using evidence to engage a "range of very different interests, support inclusion, raise the voice of the marginalized, and 'speak truth to power'" (Barnett & Eager, 2017, p. 307).

Harm does not manifest simply as a matter of what one does; consider what one does not do (Shanker & Maikuri, 2020). For example, neglect of Māori, Indigenous peoples of New Zealand, knowledge in a government initiative to influence ecosystem service use may be considered unintentional, yet colonial relationships and dynamics are being continued in the present with direct and indirect implications for the future. Redressing harms requires interrogating boundaries to ensure that initiatives honor and center Indigenous worldviews, priorities, and visions (Hepi et al., 2021).

Incorporating justice and equity into the process of developing value offers an ethic beyond deliberation. This opens space for what Dazzo (2023) calls the "restorative

## FIGURE 2.2

functions of inquiry . . . inquiry as a space for healing." This may mean acknowledging tragic "wrongdoing in daily life (e.g., stolen land, genocide)," as well as harms that have occurred "through extractive research and evaluation practices (e.g., stolen ideas, appropriated customs)" (p. 4). Going further includes questioning how inquiry can liberate and emancipate.

For a comical illustration of this idea, see Figure 2.2, a scene in which an individual asks who would like things to be better. Every "body" directly and indirectly involved—from trees and flowers to a deer, turtle, worms, and other nonhuman species—enthusiastically responds, "Me!"

## EVALUATION APPROACHES ALIGNED WITH A CRITICAL DELIBERATIVE STANCE

We locate a critical, deliberative orientation to evaluating systemic change within the landscape of evaluation approaches. In Table 2.2, we acknowledge works we draw from and clarify the niche where we position evaluative inquiry and a critical deliberative stance.

**Evaluation approaches** are prescriptive ideas about why, how, by whom, and to(ward) what end(s) evaluations ought to be conducted. Approaches differ from methods and techniques, which are processes used to answer research questions that specify data collection and analysis (e.g., interviewing and surveys). While some use the term evaluation theory or model to refer to approaches, we use approaches to convey an orientation based on some normative ideas about what is "right" to do and practical ideas about "how" to do it.

### Systems- and Complexity-informed Approaches

Systems- and complexity-informed evaluation uses ideas (e.g., theories, concepts, ways of thinking) and/or practices (e.g., methods, approaches) adapted for use in the evaluation field from the systems and complexity fields (Gates et al., 2021). The numerous, relatively recent evaluation approaches that we draw from and align with include: adaptive evaluation (Eoyang & Oakden, 2019); developmental, principles-focused, and Blue Marble evaluation (Patton, 2011, 2018, 2019); and evaluation for transformational change in alignment with the Sustainable Development Goals (United Nations, 2022; van den Berg et al., 2019; Buckton et al., 2024).

In a systematic review of systems-informed evaluation approaches, Buckton and colleagues (2024, p. 2) identify ten shared principles clustered in three areas: complexity principles, power principles, and purpose princries. A critical deliberative stance is well aligned with these principles. For example, recognizing the uniqueness and contextuality of what gets evaluated (complexity principle 2); promoting justice in power relations, rights, and use of knowledge (power principle 6); and surfacing, questioning, and upholding values (purpose principle 10).

**TABLE 2.2 ■ Evaluation Approaches That Inform a Critical Deliberative Stance**

| Approach Cluster | Specific Approaches and Theorists | Where We Align | Where We Go Further |
|---|---|---|---|
| Systems- and complexity-informed | ● Developmental, principles-focused, and Blue Marble evaluation (Patton, 2011, 2018, 2019)<br>● Adaptive evaluation (Eoyang & Oakden, 2016)<br>● Valuing using critical systems heuristics (Gates, 2018)<br>● Transformation-focused evaluation (Buckton et al., 2024) | ● Evaluation in service of systems change and transformation through ongoing learning, adaptation, and innovation<br>● Evaluator's role as a critical friend with ongoing engagement in the change process<br>● Considering inclusion, exclusion, and marginalization<br>● The need to build ethical legitimacy | ● Questions of value<br>● Facilitating processes for reflection, critique, and discussions of these questions |
| Social justice, culturally responsive, and equity committed | ● Social justice approaches (Thomas & Madison, 2010; Thomas & Campbell, 2020)<br>● Equitable Evaluation Framework (Dean-Coffey & Coné, 2023) | ● Locating root causes of injustices in systems<br>● Challenging deficit framings<br>● Multicultural validity<br>● Emphasis on critical interrogation and thoughtful practice throughout a study | ● Shifting focus from policies and programs to systemic change<br>● Centering value development as central, including criteria |
| Deliberative democratic and collaborative | ● Evaluative inquiry for learning in organizations (Preskill & Torres, 1999)<br>● Deliberative democratic (House & Howe, 1999; 2000)<br>● Democratic, values-engaged, educative (Greene, 2005, 2006, 2013; Hall et al., 2012)<br>● Collaborative evaluation (Chouinard & Cousins, 2021) | ● Evaluative inquiry as a continual learning process that happens at multiple levels (e.g., individuals, teams, organizations)<br>● Evaluation as democratic deliberation<br>● Evaluation as redressing inequities and facilitating debate as a process and toward the public good<br>● Ethics as rooted in collaborative relationships | ● Embedding evaluative inquiry as an ongoing practice within systemic change<br>● Bringing democratic process and ethical reflexivity into systemic change |

While we draw on the systems and complexity sciences and the above principles throughout this book, we are unique in centering a critical, deliberative stance influenced by critical systems thinking. This area provides a set of concepts, questions, and a process to critique the boundaries that frame a system of interest (Jackson, 2019; Ulrich, 2000; Schwandt & Gates, 2016).

As there are no given or "right" boundaries, boundaries critique involves ethical reflection, deliberation, and justification regarding what to include and exclude within a given inquiry. In critical systems thinking, one strand focuses on multi-methodology (Jackson, 2019) and another on critical systems heuristics as a framework for reflective practice whereby practitioners work "constructively with tensions between opposing perspectives as they arise in many situations of professional intervention" (Ulrich & Reynolds, 2010, p. 243).

### Social Justice, Culturally Responsive, and Equity Committed Approaches

Our rationale is also informed by evaluation models centered on social justice, cultural responsiveness, and equity (Thomas & Madison, 2010; Thomas & Campbell, 2020), including work on racial equity (M. Hall, 2020) and decolonization and Indigenous sovereignty (Hopson et al., 2011; Wehipeihana & McKegg, 2018). Culturally responsive evaluation has a long history within the evaluation field, though this approach and others with aligned commitments have only recently gained mainstream attention within the evaluation community.

Funders, consulting groups, and others have published guides on equity in applied research and evaluation in the past ten years. Common issues for consideration include participation from community and beneficiary groups (Chicago Beyond, 2018), use of questions and methods to identify racial/ethnic and other disparities and underlying causes (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2014; Farrow & Morrison, 2019; Public Policy Associates, Inc., 2015), and ensuring accessibility and usability of findings to advance equity and justice (Chicago Beyond, 2018; EvalIndigenous, 2021). Efforts to integrate feminist developmental evaluation seeks to expose gender-based discrimination and inequalities and support change and innovation at structural and systemic levels (Haylock & Miller, 2016).

### Deliberative Democratic and Collaborative Approaches

By deliberative democratic, we mean evaluation processes guided by principles of inclusion, dialogue, and deliberation (House & Howe, 1999) to varying degrees, from passive or partial to active and complete. This involves clarifying values for inclusion, putting these values into dialogue, and facilitating deliberation to arrive at the most defensible selection of criteria—or a synthesized or revised set of criteria (Howe & Ashcroft, 2005).

Democratically oriented evaluations are "anchored in a profound acceptance of the intertwinement of values with facts in evaluative knowledge claims and the

concomitant understanding that all evaluation is interested evaluation, serving some interests but not others (Greene, 2006, p. 136). As such, inclusive, deliberative processes are positioned as a "step toward redressing past and continuing inequities" (Greene et al., 2004, p. 100) and as necessary to broaden, deepen, and enlighten public debates and decision making in service to the public good (Greene, 2005).

Collaborative approaches jointly involve evaluators and others in decision-making processes throughout an evaluation process (Chouinard & Cousins, 2021). We draw on ideas about the "ethic of engagement" within these approaches, with ethics embedded in the collaborative process rather than a separate consideration and determination made by evaluators. These include seven interconnected dimensions referred to as "the Seven Rs of collaborative practice": reflexivity, relationality, responsibility, recognition, representation, reciprocity, and rights (Chouinard & Cousins, 2021).

## FIVE MYTHS ABOUT EVALUATING SYSTEMIC CHANGE

Our argument and the contents of this chapter contend with some big ideas circulating in the evaluation field and systems change spaces at the time we wrote this book.

1. **It's All Learning, So We Can't (or Shouldn't) Evaluate**. [Evaluating and learning work together].

At an international conference of leaders in system change and innovation, a well-recognized grassroots organizer and thought leader said: the problem is with the word evaluation. We do not need to evaluate; judgment will not get us where we want and need to go. For that, we need learning. So, let's do away with evaluation and get better at learning.

Our response: to learn, we need to assess the value of what we have been doing based on the information we have and what we take it to mean. To learn to inform action, we have got to have a vision based on norms, values, ethos, shared ideals, etc., of what we think should be and how we can shape shared value. While conventional evaluation as widely practiced does need to change, the rationale and demand for this book make clear that the fundamentals of evaluating—assessing and developing value—are necessary for systemic change.

An exemplar of centering value within an ongoing learning and change journey comes from Niho Taniwha, an indigenous-led process (Te Raki et al., 2021; The Lab Team, 2021) for codeveloping a framework of value. Niho Taniwha combines Maōri values, principles, and tikanga (i.e., interpersonal behavior and relational norms) with ideas of what evidence matters. Together, these become "wayfinding tools for identifying signposts and other indicators for where we are in our journey. It helps us to think about what to look for, what markers to use to orientate our next steps and what signs

matter when thinking about a journey of systems change" (Te Raki et al., 2021, p. 22). The value dimension of evaluating goes beyond learning to provide a normative direction anchored in and reflective of what matters, materially and culturally.

2.   **Evaluating Requires Totally New Thinking, Tools, and Skills**. [Yes, some, but we can also repurpose social science methods.]

This misconception mostly comes from *within* the evaluation field, including senior thought leaders. At times, we have even said this ourselves. It comes from frustration with evaluation's linearity and reductionist tendencies that limit understandings of change into discrete projects or programs with formative and summative assessments. It also comes from our fascination with the systems and complexity sciences and excitement about these theories and methods that have such promising uses in evaluation.

Many of the systems and complexity sciences focus on knowledge generation and practical action. We contend that evaluation and evaluators, even those trained conventionally in the social sciences, have much to offer. We also contend that how we understand the world and change, and how we evaluate value, can and must expand and allow for and reflect more nuance. It is a mix of the old or familiar with the new and innovative. Aspects of conventional evaluation can and should be expanded, adapted, and tailored for systemic change, rather than ignored or tossed out.

3.   **Evaluation MUST Zoom Out to Bigger Scales and Longer Time Frames**. [Evaluation can also focus in on short time frames and deep inner changes at micro scales.]

Change to large-scale systems of society such as education, healthcare, food systems, and others often take a long time to realize. Importantly, though, systemic change may also apply to small-scale systems such as the grading system used by one school or classroom teacher, an insurance rebate system for patients with certain pre-existing conditions, or an approach to land regeneration focused on animal and crop rotations.

Scale and time frames are questions to explore, with boundaries set within a particular evaluative process. What we see as more important than bigger, longer challenges is the necessity of deliberation around questions of value before, during, and after evaluation. As an example, evaluating for systemic change may mean an additional set of key performance indicators to follow sustainability over a longer period or larger change units. And, even before that decision could be reached, interrogation would have been needed around why those indicators are proposed, what and whose values they reflect, and the tradeoffs, benefits, and limitations involved in setting them.

4. **Usefulness Matters More than Rigor**. [Evaluation should be both useful and rigorous.]

Influenced by the sense of urgency consistent in discussions of systemic change and transformation, the usefulness of inquiry is sometimes pitted against rigor. Usefulness, here, speaks to data being pragmatically interpreted and applied to deepen understanding or guide action. Rigor typically has to do with the quality of the inquiry process, especially the designs, methods, and procedures used to gather and analyze data.

With no desire to deepen philosophical differences, we acknowledge rigor and post-positivist ideals of validity and reliability—and make distinct epistemic assumptions from pragmatic ideals of knowledge good enough for action. Rather than frame these as polar, we leverage the concept of inclusive rigor, which brings together the intentional and creative use of multiple methods with meaningful and inclusive participation to achieve utility and impact. This concept shifts rigor from a focus on methodology to the entire evaluative process, which should be developed with others in ways that are responsive and useful to the circumstances (Apgar et al., 2022).

5. **If Evaluative Inquiry is Collaborative, Evaluators Are Not Needed**. [Evaluators are often necessary and helpful to facilitate the process.]

This last myth raises the question of whether we should do away with professional evaluators altogether. Most people currently working in professional evaluation were not trained in the systems sciences and may think and work in ways that constrain or even impede systemic change processes. If evaluation should be a collective, ongoing effort, why designate some people as evaluators or assign specific evaluative responsibilities to some roles?

It is challenging to keep evaluation as a priority and piece together all the moving parts to take evaluative stock of progress and next steps. This takes time, brainpower, and resources that tend to be scarce, given the intensity of any pursuit of systemic change. Designating internal or external evaluators ensures a continual and focused evaluation effort.

Another reason is practical and political. Evaluators often serve as facilitators and intermediaries between people in different roles, teams, and organizations. This allows evaluators to build repertoire, trust, and communication dynamics that are necessary for authentic perspective sharing.

## REFLECT FORWARD

Before moving on, take some time to engage with the main ideas of this section. These questions are here to spark your thinking and invite conversation.

1. How do you define "value" in your work, who typically defines it, and how has that understanding evolved over time or in response to shifting circumstances?

2.  What tensions or conflicts emerge when value is plural, dynamic, or contested—and how do you navigate these in practice?

3.  How might adopting a forward-looking, developmental approach to value change your evaluation or decision-making processes?

4.  What does it mean to treat evaluation as a moral and political process, not just a technical one—and how does that influence your work?

5.  How inclusive, transparent, and justified are the criteria guiding what "success" means in the evaluations you commission, conduct, and/or use?

6.  What would practicing a "critical deliberative stance" look like in your everyday work, especially when facing value disagreements?

7.  Which myths about evaluation stood out to you, and how might questioning these myths lead to more meaningful and effective evaluation practices?