

Striving for Wholeness: It is Time for Social Scientists to Make a Loud Noise!

By Sandra Janoff, PhD

Our global systems are fragmented and collapsing in front of us. Here I share my perspective on why systems are broken, my experience working with intractable issues that cross many boundaries and my call to leverage our role as social scientists. I believe we can create a world that works for all, but it takes seeing our differences as resources, faith that we all aspire to wholeness and courage to discover what we do not yet know.

This is a grave moment in time! We are being pounded by a torrent of crises, each colliding with the other, and impacting everyone on the planet: global warming, world-wide pandemics, rising fascism, racial injustice, refugee crises, mental health crisis, economic devastation, global and local inequalities. Our fragmented systems are broken and collapsing in front of us. We are drowning in the flood and turning against each other in rage. Differing views have turned into opposition. Frustration and anxiety have turned into fear and aggression. We do not see our shared suffering. We question if we have what it takes to alter the course. Physicist David Bohm said “reality is a seamless whole”(1996). Biologist Ludwig von Bertalanffy said “everything is connected to everything else”(1952). These theoretical scientists have a message that we social scientists cannot ignore. Clearly, we must see the urgency of our work. We must enable people to experience their interconnectedness and develop combined capacity to navigate these rapids. We must do this before the damage is irreversible. In this chapter I will share my perspective on why systems are broken. I will also share my experience working with intractable issues that cross many boundaries and end with my call to social scientists to leverage our role in achieving a world that works for all.

Brokenness in Systems at Every Level

Why then are most systems breaking down? We are in dreadful uncertainty and lack the economic, environmental or leadership conditions we need to adapt. Many communities are bitterly polarized around politics that strangle their most pressing concerns. Many corporate environments are demoralizing and draining creative energy. Leaders tend to strategize with

those closest to them in the hierarchy. Those who are not in the dialogue have no influence in improving things.

Imagine getting diverse people to grapple with controversial economic and social issues. It would mean planning with a full spectrum of perspectives, including those impacted by the outcomes. This is a big step for many leaders who fear they will lose control and chaos will ensue. It takes faith that, at our core, our common humanity matters more than our differences. We are at a point in time when we must take a leap of faith into unknown territory. We no longer have a choice.

Where is our hope?

Counter to the nightmare reality I have just described, is another reality that is spectacular. We are slowly moving out of denial! There is a reawakening. Our need for connection has become clearer as the pandemic forced us to stay apart. Acts of oppression, aggression and political extremism in many western countries are exposing our racism, sexism, homophobia, transphobia, Islamophobia, antisemitism and xenophobia. These *isms* are so real there is no more room for denial of their existence at the heart of our societies. But, they are *not* the heart of us. While it is not uncommon in times of fear and distrust to look for scapegoats, we are beginning to see that we can do better. We are starting to cross boundaries of race, culture, gender, age and economic status to confront social justice, health and climate. The path forward is working *with* our differences and paying attention to *how* we structure the forums in which we take on these intractable problems. Transformation means doing something different -- including diverse perspectives and creating conditions for learning, discovery and action. I ask us, as social scientists, if transformation does not take place in our forums, how can we expect it to take place in society?

What does Transformation Look Like?

I remember vividly the first day of a graduate clinical psychology class. The professor said, “Well, since you are studying to be psychologists, you want to help individuals change. I assume

you have a theory of change.” That semester he taught us *his* theory of change, but that question never left my mind. Social scientists are in the *business of change* and our assumptions about what works is our starting point. In this clinical psych class I learned the difference between behavior change and structure change. I now embrace a structural theory of change. I emphasize this for three reasons. First, the world is moving too fast to assume we can change big systems one individual at a time. Second, I believe the increasing diversity in our communities and workplaces is our asset. Creating structures to leverage that asset is our hope for transformation. Third, we are more distrusting of leaders, systems and each other than ever before. My lens enables distrust to take a back seat to discovering common ground. Trust finds its way forward.

My Lens for Systems Change - Differentiation / Integration Theory (D/I)

D/I Theory has a long history in biology, mathematics and developmental psychology, but a short history in organization and community work. It says: Systems develop through ongoing differentiation and integration (Agazarian, 1997). Differentiation means learning more about different perspectives. Integration means taking in the differences as resources. As I will discuss below, I apply this abstract theory by bringing people with diverse views together, providing opportunities to differentiate based on function or experience and supporting dialogue as they build capacity to solve complex problems. That is *real* integration. But - there’s an irony that makes this work tricky. As human beings, we tend to seek similarities and reject differences. Similarities provide emotional security. Differences are threatening. One way people tend to deal with differences is to stereotype, attack and create *one up/one down* power relationships. Think how often you see this in individuals, groups, organizations, communities, and societies around the planet. Our challenge as social scientists is to enable systems to overcome the impulse to deny, ignore or blur differences and default to silos, fragmenting and scapegoating.

Why Differentiation and Integration Can Make a Difference

It is not easy to overcome our initial response to difference. We are wired to be wary. As I said, most leaders strategize with the *usual* people. It is frustrating to have to stop and listen to those who do not see the world as we do. But there is a cost to comfort. One person cannot change a

whole system. Systems are just too big, too diverse, the power in them is too widely distributed and things are moving too fast. When leaders include people with diverse perspectives and bring all experiences to bear, they open opportunities for people to unlock themselves from fixed positions, see themselves as part of the larger whole and discover creative solutions. That is systems-integration – getting the differentiated viewpoints articulated so they can find a shared way forward.

The Future Search Approach

With D/I as our theory for systems change, Marvin Weisbord (see marvinweisbord.com) and I started working together not long after he completed the first edition of his groundbreaking book, *Productive Workplaces* (1987, 2004, 2012). Even then the world was turbulent, which called for thinking beyond traditional ways of change. Marv’s research addressed a way to enable diverse people to create new structures and policies that reflect the fast-changing environment. He formulated “everybody improving whole systems” as his practice-theory for change.

Marv and I developed Future Search (<http://futuresearch.net>) as a methodology to apply “everybody improving whole systems.” We articulated four design principles: 1) Get the whole system in the room, those with authority, resources, expertise, information, and those impacted by the outcomes. 2) Enable participants to understand the whole of the system – internal forces, external forces and the relationship between the two. 3) Focus on the future and common ground by putting the problems and conflicts in the background and what people are ready, willing and able to do in the foreground. 4) Enable participants to take responsibility for themselves and their action. We also built a methodology, as shown in <http://futuresearch.net/about/methodology/>. We used these design principles and our methodology with large diverse groups to create conditions where stakeholders from within and outside the system could differentiate their perspectives, create a shared vision and act together.

Applying Future Search Principles

For decades, Future Searches have been bringing these principles to life in a three day innovative strategic-planning meeting. Marv and I co-wrote the first edition of *Future Search* in 1995 and have updated it based on real experiences of Future Search Network colleagues (Weisbord & Janoff, 1995, 2000, 2010). Participants, diverse in function and demographics, explore their past, get deeply into their present reality, create preferred futures, converge their learning and discover a common ground agenda they translate into action. We believe for a system to change, people have to interact with people who are part of their environment and key to their success. When the same people talk to each other, they perpetuate the kind of condition they are trying to get out from under. D/I theory tells us: you can't integrate unless you have first differentiated! (For illustrations of Future Searches in Action see <http://futuresearch.net/resources/booksandvideos/>.)

By diversity we mean people with different stakes, different roles, different perspectives, different experiences, those within the boundaries of the system and those outside, those who have always had a voice and those who have not, those who have always had access and those who have not, demographic and geographic diversity that reflects the whole of the system... and, when it applies, young people! A note on involving young people: Many planners have challenged the idea of including young people in a three day meeting of adults. It is a lovely surprise when people see the benefit of learning, first-hand, the views of the next generation. In the following paragraphs I share examples of Future Searches that involved young people and the issues they helped reveal.

Future Searches Show How Social and Economic Issues are Inextricably Linked!

When Marv and I met with residents of Santa Cruz County, CA we learned how a serious housing problem had become a community crisis. (“Discovering Community” video at <https://futuresearch.net/resources/booksandvideos/>). When the population of the area increased dramatically, housing needs exploded while housing prices soared. A recession had people unemployed and an earthquake exacerbated the problem. Residents on fixed incomes could no

longer afford to live there. The community was in dire need for affordable housing and years of meetings with housing leadership had not produced a plan that had community support. In our planning we broadened the scope from a housing focus to a community focus, since housing links to every segment. This allowed the planners to include a broad section of their community (and young people) in a Future Search for a shared appreciation of Santa Cruz County and the housing dilemma.

The struggle during the meeting was potent as we could hear in the participants' actual words. "If we already have affordable housing in our neighborhood, we don't want more." "I face a whole group of different people needing housing every day, look at them, living in garages." The dialogue deepened and emerged with this commitment, "We don't have to solve this, we just have to agree these are two needs that have to be addressed as we build this plan." Marv and I call this the integrating statement and when it was voiced, we knew the community had the capacity to move forward. They were ready to confirm their common ground agenda and take action. D/I theory in practice. Not only did they unlock housing plans that been deadlocked, they found they could act together on a wide range of linking concerns like jobs for displaced workers, business expansion, literacy education and equity and inclusion. Why? Those stakeholders had been in the room and present to each other.

Future Searches Reinforce that Who is in the Room Matters!

IKEA is the world's largest home-furnishings company and has always had a commitment to sustainability (Weisbord & Janoff, 2010). When Marv and I met the top leaders in 2008, they had not been able to put sustainability into a strategic context. "We had been thinking about the environmental question, but didn't have a common language across the whole organization. We lacked a holistic view," said Torbjorn Loof, then head of IKEA's design, production and distribution arm. IKEA wanted to integrate sustainability internally in their business processes, and more, externally in their impact with customers and suppliers around the world. To take this step, they brought together their internal leaders, co-workers from all functions, their customers, suppliers and other external partners, such World Wildlife Fund and UNICEF. In three days together they struggled with the obvious tension between profitability and sustainability.

One reason leaders rarely bring these views into one room is they assume the environmentalists will put sustainability over profit and big business will put profit over the environment. That perception was real in 2008 and may still be real today. But, in this meeting, they discovered shared values. An environmental voice stood out at one point, “We *need* you to be profitable, and we can figure out how we can do both.” Their breakthroughs came in a shared commitment to a long-range “cradle-to-cradle” concept of materials, design and production. Every function and process throughout the company went on to implement their own sustainability goals in line with the common ground agenda. People and Planet Positive, IKEA’s name for its sustainability strategy, continues to transform their business, all of the industries in the IKEA value chain and life at home for people around the world.

Gathering this diversity on a complex economic, technical and environmental issue, such as supply chain sustainability, took vision and courage. Bringing in customers, suppliers and external stakeholders was unconventional, but had huge payoff. While this takes many leaders out of their comfort zone, the question a leader must ask is, “Can I really afford the privilege of comfort, and risk staying stuck or failing?”

How to Make A Tangible Difference on Global Climate Change

We must now talk about climate change, our planet’s most pressing problem. I believe every whole system’s change initiative must bring our climate crisis into the conversation, whatever the focus. If any system does not think climate change is relevant, they have missed the point. Here is an example of how climate surfaced because of who was present. The Archbishop of the Church of Sweden initiated a movement to create a more welcoming Europe for people on the move. Those gathered in the Future Search included grassroots practitioners, policy makers and refugees from fifteen European countries. The focus was on identifying the most serious issues for refugees and possible steps ahead. “It was three days of hard work and intense conversations, mapping our common history, identifying our most pressing concerns and seeking ways to move forward together” said one participant. At the same time, there was no escaping the impact of climate on these refugees. In most of their home countries, droughts and floods have impacted

natural resources causing food and employment scarcity, destabilized economies, violence and persecution. Immigrants are victims of climate change as much as the terrorist regimes they are fleeing. There is no magic solution to climate change, but denial no longer an option, therefore, whatever the scale, from awareness to mitigation to policy change, we must keep the issue alive (<https://www.aworldofneighbours.com/pre-summit-keeping-our-humanity/>).

In another meeting, titled *Youth 2030!* a diverse group of adults and 60 young people from across Sweden gathered to meet the opportunities and challenges of a “new Sweden.” This phrase refers to Sweden having admitted more refugees per capita than any other country in Europe. The Future Search focus was on building a future for young people, some of whom are first and second generation Swedes. While their concerns highlighted the particular needs of youth - education, mental health, safety, meeting places - one young man made it clear there was no future for him or his peers if the adults didn’t address climate straight on. “Many young people think about this. It affects our sense of security and hope.” He was a student at Globala Gymnasiet, a high school for students with an interest in global issues, so he brought a broad perspective. His contribution informed the action planning. The sponsoring organization, Fryshuset, and their partners built sustainability into their agendas. An extraordinary outcome, recently announced and due in large part to the meeting, is the unique collaboration of Fryshuset and Greenpeace called Climate Changemakerspaces. It promotes youth engagement in environmental, climate and justice related issues and centers around tools, platforms and networks for youth. With physical and digital venues in six countries around the world, this spectacular project will undoubtedly turn young people’s anxieties, passions and energy for a crisis-free world into concrete actions that will make a difference (<https://fryshuset.se/nyhet/fryshuset-and-greenpeace-in-collaboration-to-support-youths-engagement-in-climate/>)

It is too late to get ahead of many climate issues. Extreme weather, food insecurity and migration are here now. But the problems we have created will be around forever if we do not step up our efforts. Including stakeholders with a sustainability perspective in every community and organization planning meeting will show how serious we are about climate. Challenging

ourselves to look this crisis in the face, at every level, is the way out of the mess. We must leverage our role as social scientists.

Social Scientists Must Be Courageous!

Leaders are asking for guidance. Who are they asking? They are asking us -- consultants, applied social scientists, scholar practitioners, facilitators, hosts, advisors, thought partners, system's specialists, process experts -- whatever we call ourselves. The requests are: *Help us solve these wicked problems! We need systems that are responsive! Help us find solutions to get us out of the mess we are in! We want to create a safer, healthier future!* Our leverage is in the trust we build as we support leaders to have the courage to do something new. They have the authority to get the right people together. We have the art and science of systems change. When we hold the integrity of our beliefs and support their courage with our own, we are doing the world a great service.

What Social Scientists Must Do

We know it is not easy and pushback is inevitable, but this is not the time to compromise. When we are with clients who want to gather top leaders to make strategic decisions, guide them toward including more stakeholders! When we are with clients who want to shorten the time, but expect creative solutions, be honest about the sacrifice! Creativity requires three things: time, space and permission. When you compress the time, people share what they already know. New ideas come from slowing down and listening. The environment matters too, so pay attention to creating a conducive working space. Then, give others, and yourself, permission to be on a journey of discovery, rather than aim for predictable outcomes. These, to me, are conditions to which we must commit if we want breakthroughs. Mostly, we must bring different voices into the planning, including those on the "they won't come" list. If we don't push these boundaries, systems will stay broken. Let us not forget – bringing large groups of people together to build community is a worthy step. But gathering *only* decision makers or *only* those impacted by the decisions bypasses our urgent need to change the structures and policies creating the problems in the first place.

My Big Ask!

Discovering common ground has been a mantra for Marv and me since the 1990's. It is now a common phrase. Putting it to practice is what I, and my Future Search Network colleagues around the world, do every time we do this work. We never take for granted a diverse group of people will discover a shared future, but we do believe, under the right conditions, the probability is high. And, if there is no common ground, that too will be clearer. After thousands of experiences, previously fragmented communities of people have discovered solutions to tough problems. Trust me, once you hear a participant say, "Well, we are all here and if we do not solve this, no one else who will," you will never short change a planning process again.

So, what do I mean by social scientists standing together? Each of us can influence transformative change by embedding the principle of "everybody improving whole systems." We can stand for bringing together people with differences that make a difference. We can respect that learning takes time when we are crossing boundaries that had kept us apart. We can live in the uncertainty of not knowing what we will discover, until we discover it. This will enrich everyone's understanding of these crises, expand our possibilities for action and offer hope. It will always be a struggle, because, remember, we humans do not like to deal with differences. But, as social scientists we value tough conversations that can lead to new ways of thinking, Our role is to reassure leaders that differences are our resources and a journey of discovery will lead to unpredictable, constructive outcomes. Creating conditions that enable people move toward wholeness, step into the unknown, struggle and find ways out of darkness is a privilege!

That is the message about which we should make a loud noise. Then maybe, just maybe, together, we can bring these crises down to a manageable level and build a world where we, and those who follow, can breathe the air, drink the water, live in safety, grow up healthy and experience tolerance, fairness and compassion.

Sandra Janoff, PhD
sjanoff@futuresearch.net
www.futuresearch.net
+1 610 909 0640

- Agazarian, Y. M. (1997). *Systems-Centered Theory for Groups*. New York: The Guilford Press,
- Bohm, David. (1996). *On Dialogue*. Ed. Lee Nichol. New York: Routledge.
- Janoff, Sandra. (2016) My Future Search Journey. *OD Practitioner*, 48 (1), (pp 48-50).
- Von Bertalanffy, L. (1952). *General Systems Theory*. New York: Wiley.
- Weisbord, M., & Janoff, S. (2007). Future Search: Common ground under complex conditions. In P. Holman, T. Devane, & S. Cady (Eds.), *The change handbook: The definitive resource on today's best methods for engaging whole systems* (pp. 316–330). San Francisco: Berrett-Kohler.
- Weisbord, M.R. (2012) *Productive Workplaces: Dignity, Meaning and Community in the 21st Century* (3rd ed.) San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Weisbord, M.R. & Janoff, S. (2010). *Future Search: Getting the Whole System in the Room for Vision, Commitment and Action* (3rd Ed.). (Oakland, CA: Berrett-Koehler.
- Weisbord, Marvin R. & Sandra Janoff, (2007). *Don't Just Do Something, Stand There! Ten Principles for Leading Meetings That Matter*. San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler.
- Weisbord, Marvin R. & Sandra Janoff, (2015). *Lead More, Control Less: Eight Advanced Leadership Skills that Overturn Convention!* San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler.