



Integrating Experts by Experience in Collective Impact Initiatives

Initial Conceptualization and Methodologies

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Summary

The term Experts by Experience refers to people who have gained lived experience of problems which Collective Impact and other social change initiatives attempt to solve. Experts by Experience hold valuable first-hand knowledge, hence their indispensable contribution to the development of solutions for social problems and services for communities in need.

In this paper we outline a theoretical and methodological roadmap for promoting equal participation of Experts by Experience in Collective Impact initiatives alongside professionals from social, public, and business organizations. Faced with this unique challenge and identified the need for initial conceptualizations of methodology and theory. The current paper draws on theory of Collective Impact and insights of those who work with Experts by Experience in different settings. By applying these two strands of knowledge we discuss the meaning and the implications of engaging Experts by Experience in Collective Impact initiatives. We offer a basic rationale followed by a discussion of the importance of full and equal partnership. We describe the added value and the challenges and present a set of initial principles for action and possible methodologies.

Sheatufim is an Israeli backbone non-profit organization focused on promoting system change at the national level. Using the framework and model of Collective Impact Sheatufim brings together social, public, and business organizations to solve complex social problems. Currently, we are leading three Collective Impact initiatives: “Drawing The Lines” to prevent intimate partner violence in Israel; “TOP15” to improve STEM education; and a cross-sector initiative to improve the Quality of Life and Loneliness among the Aging Population (The initiative is currently going through a branding process, and its official name is TBD).

This paper is part of Sheatufim's effort to develop knowledge and practices that will enable full and authentic engagement of Experts by Experience in Collective Impact initiatives.

Context & Rationale

Collective Impact is a framework that aims at promoting system change by creating a network of cross-sector collaborations based on equity, collaboration, and coordinated action. Collective Impact initiatives develop solutions for complex problems by creating an inclusive and multi-layered perspective of the problem at hand, and by mobilizing human, social and financial resources to implement coordinated solutions at scale.

Experts by Experience, also referred to as 'Context Experts', are people with lived experience of the problems the initiative is dealing with. They have valuable first-hand knowledge and are uniquely positioned to help plan and develop solutions and services.

In recent years disadvantaged social groups have demanded that "nothing about us without us" should become the baseline approach in cases where there's an attempt to solve social problems relevant to their communities. As this demand has been gaining momentum, it has become widely accepted that any social change process must involve those with lived experience of the issue at hand. Furthermore, experiential knowledge has proved essential for the development of social interventions and is used to better understand and to ask different kinds of questions in critical approaches within disciplinary fields such as social work, mental health, education, and criminology².

Integrating Experts by Experience in Collective Impact Initiatives: Contributions and Challenges

As collaborators in Collective Impact initiatives, Experts by Experience are uniquely positioned in terms of the knowledge they bring to the partnership. Their first-hand knowledge enables the partners to broaden the prism through which they view the issue at hand. Their presence encourages the partners to reflect on their own position within socio-economic hierarchies. It prevents stereotypical thinking about those affected by the problem, while stimulating a process through which the discourse can change.

Effective participation of Experts by Experience in Collective Impact initiatives can only be ensured through equal and authentic engagement, which requires an intentional process of co-created solutions³. Based on mutual respect and manifested recognition of the added value of all parties, full and authentic engagement benefits the process itself, the relevance of the outcomes and their implementation⁴.

In addition to changing the partners' perspective and helping create a relevant and holistic outcome, when Experts by Experience become equal and full

partners, they are more likely to be willing to take responsibility for the proposed solutions. Such an approach might encourage positive momentum for the community and its engagement in the implementation process. Finally, equal and full integration of Experts by Experience in Collective Impact initiatives creates a public commitment to equal opportunities and a democratization of voices within the initiative while reinforcing democratic values within society at large.

Backbone organizations aiming at integrating Experts by Experience in a Collective Impact initiative must consider the barriers to participation. In most cases Experts by Experience join Collective Impact Initiatives as individuals rather than as representatives of organizations or defined entities. Further, the knowledge they hold is not officially accredited. Backbone organizations should work to integrate Experts by Experience in the Initiative as individuals who are members of a community sector, or as representatives of an unorganized group. The initiative should actively seek to legitimize the knowledge they

bring to the table and grant it an equal standing that acknowledges the social importance of those who hold knowledge that was acquired via life experience.

While attempts to create full and authentic participation take place, members of the Experts by Experience group/s may find it challenging to unlearn stereotypical perceptions towards those holding official positions. To overcome this challenge, facilitators need to identify any blind spot that participants may have and promote open and honest discussions about power-relations and power-balance and their impact on the process.

Initiatives may face challenges that stem from differences in register. Experts by Experience acquire their knowledge through their lived experience. The register used to discuss personal

experience is different from the register used by partners who express professional or academic points of view. These differences can reinforce hierarchical positioning of ways of knowing, where knowledge acquired through experience is perceived as less objective and more anecdotal than the knowledge held by other partners. Whether intentional or not, this process will have detrimental consequences in terms of the potential contribution of the Experts by Experience to the initiative. To promote equal partnership the backbone organization needs to create an inclusive work environment where it is clear that the knowledge held by Experts by Experience should be dealt with and shared through out-of-the-box methodologies and with the help of supportive facilitators.

Guidelines and Suggestions for Implementation

Creating an inclusive work environment

The backbone organization should aim at creating an inclusive work environment where all participants feel respected and accepted. While it is true for all Collective Impact processes, when we face processes that aim to equally integrate Experts by Experience it becomes essential that those who facilitate the process are experts in the field of trust-building methodologies. Facilitators should have expertise in creating systems of mutual support, in addition to being capable of enhancing partners' capacity to bring about change.

Committing to the process and its challenges

The backbone organization should make sure that all partners are theoretically, practically, and morally committed to the process and its challenges. It should be clear that authentic engagement in Collective Impact initiatives requires the use of appropriate methodologies and work principles.

Equal partners, equal knowledge

Discussions should be held with the intention of promoting the inclusion of all perspectives and the creation of interpersonal relationships and mutual

trust. The partners should avoid reducing the role of Experts by Experience to mere informants. Instead, they should be seen as equal partners in terms of the knowledge they hold and their ability to contribute to the initiative.

Methodologies for mutual learning

As the perception of a partnership that is based on equality and mutual learning becomes a main axis for the initiative, the methodologies used in the process should facilitate the transformation of underlying and tacit knowledge into accessible and actionable knowledge.

Methodologies for meaningful participation

A reconfiguration of discussion methodologies is needed to prompt meaningful participation of the Experts by Experience. Using a broad range of methodologies that encourage different modes of expression will help to unlock the knowledge held by the Experts by Experience and will make it accessible. Backbone organizations should use performative, artistic and action-based methodologies, as well as complementary practices from the therapeutic field⁵.

As a backbone organization, Sheatufim works to promote the engagement of Experts by Experience in ongoing and future Collective Impact initiatives. We are in the process of applying the recommendations delineated in this paper. We use social R&D to learn and adapt our methodologies and practices and to develop both theory and action following organizational experience.

We welcome your thoughts and comments and look forward to having you join us.

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Notes

- ¹ The original paper in Hebrew is [available here](#)
- ² For discussions of system change projects involving Experts by Experience see: Experts by Experience program For people recovering from mental health and/or substance abuse challenges (Mileen Ry), Experts by Experience participation in self-help and peer support in mental health services in the UK (Noorani, 2013).
- ³ Attygalle, L. (2017).
- ⁴ Ibid
- ⁵ Broadening the range of methodologies could be achieved by using methodologies such as: (a) Learning from Success in order to build on unarticulated knowledge based on individual experience and transform it into actionable knowledge; (b) The Practice Wisdom methodology to assist in collecting different forms of knowledge from various sources and to combine them to create knowledge that is practical and accessible; (c) [Merging of Knowledge methodology](#) where different types of knowledge resulting from action, academic research, and life experiences are built first in an independent way through meetings with peer groups, then merged to enrich one another, resulting in new insights regarding the issue on which the initiative focuses.

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