

5 Words That Shape Social Change (And How They Limit Us)



By **Jara Dean-Coffey** and **John Kania**

Language shapes our brains which are connected to our bodies, hearts and souls. The words we select and use create the containers for what we believe and understand to be possible. And our words often reflect our implicit worldviews. Words can either bring us together or divide us; they can either constrain the range of solutions at our disposal or open up new pathways and possibilities.

Many relationships begin with words setting the stage for how we come to know and be with each other. In the absence of care, we are likely creating unnecessary tensions, ending up at cross purposes at worst, and at best, our energies are not focusing where there is agreement, alignment and understanding. We also lose the opportunity to do something lasting and transformative together that we would not have been able to achieve otherwise. In a nutshell, the words we choose are critical.

Let's conduct a thought exercise to come to grips with how language may be limiting our ability to create social change. We chose five well worn words that hold great currency in the social change and social justice worlds: **"impact," "indicators," "lived experience," "transformation" and "scale."**

Three questions surfaced as we considered the sector's use of these words:

1. Do we have shared definitions of and experiences with the ideas and words used frequently?
2. Do we give thought and heart to how our word choices are received and perceived by others, and the implications?
3. Are the words we use to describe our efforts and intents sufficiently evolving in ways that reflect the sector's developing understanding of how social change happens?

As words have origins, so too do humans. Before we share our perspective on these five words, we think it's important that you have a sense of our origins so that you might better glean how our backgrounds inform our beliefs.

I am **Jara Dean-Coffey**, the descendent of free, stolen and enslaved people who can trace my heritage back to the 1600s. I awake most mornings on the unceded territory of the Coast Miwok otherwise known as San Rafael, CA usually at dawn, a moment when all is possible. I find myself wanting to explore and reveal the context (time, place, persons and intentions) of some of our most strongly held beliefs, understandings and practices. And if they no longer serve us, invite different ways, some old and some new. I am most comfortable over the edges of what is conventionally conceived as possible.

I am **John Kania**, grandson of Polish immigrants, on my father's side, and with ancestry on my mother's side from the Deep South of the U.S. I reside in Norwich, VT on the lands of the Abenaki. I've been a lifelong learner with a fascination about how change happens. And I've spent the last 25 years focused on the theory and practice of social change. Someone once said, "How much you can accomplish in this world depends on how much you can see." When it comes to social change, I live by the rule that even after 25 years of doing this work, there is still so much I don't yet see.

We met in 2017 when John invited Jara to share some of her early thinking around "how we know what we know" as part of a learning session he was designing as an executive in residence for the venture philanthropy NewProfit. When John launched Collective Change Lab the following year, Jara was invited to serve on the board and accepted. As our conversations deepened, informed by the world around us as well as how we move in that world and what we wish for it, it occurred to us that others might find our reflections and ruminations on how words are used in the social sector to be relevant and meaningful for their work as well.

Five Words and Social Change

For each word, we begin by sharing the origin of the word in American English, acknowledging that the English language itself has limitations in describing all the ways and manners through which humans experience life. We then follow by sharing our respective experiences related to the sector's past and present understanding and use of these words. We conclude by suggesting possible evolutions on meaning and language for the future in the hopes that the words the sector centers in its work can be of even greater service of equity, justice, liberation and one day freedom for us all.

A final word before the words: while these five words may create challenges in understanding what people truly mean, and may in some instances insufficiently describe the nature of how social change happens, we are not advocating for refraining from their use. Our aim is: 1) to encourage greater care and intention in how and in what way these words are used and 2) to reflect on what worldviews inform their use and what might be missing or lost when these words take center stage. This is the spirit with which we enter into this conversation.



Impact

/ˈɪmpækt/· verb

c. 1600, "press closely into something," from Latin *impactus*, past participle of *impingere* "to push into, drive into, strike against," from assimilated form of *in-* "into, in, on, upon" (from PIE root **en* "in") + *pangere* "to fix, fasten" (from PIE root **pag-* "to fasten"). Original sense is preserved in impacted teeth. Sense of "strike forcefully against something" first recorded 1916. Figurative sense of "have a forceful effect on" is from 1935. Related: *Impacting*. also from c. 1600

/ˈɪmpækt/· noun

1738, "collision, act of striking against, striking of one thing against another," from *impact* (v.). Figurative sense of "forceful impression" is from 1817 (Coleridge). also from 1738

We begin with the word **impact** because it has become the defining way in which the mainstream social sector considers and talks about progress. The phrase has particularly come into vogue over the last two decades with the rise of strategic philanthropy and its emphasis on achieving results. A common refrain is, "Yes, you are doing great work - but are you having an impact?"

The movement towards impact has generally been viewed - by philanthropists and non-profit leaders alike - as an important evolution from the sector's previous emphasis on measuring outputs. "Focusing on outputs made community-based leaders feel like they were counting widgets rather than liberating and healing their communities," remarked Dr Tien Ung, Director of Learning at Futures without Violence.

However, the impact paradigm increasingly feels no longer fit for purpose to describe and gauge the social change we need - and perhaps never was the right paradigm to begin with. It connotes "doing unto and onto others," instead of working alongside others in solidarity - not surprising, perhaps, considering the etymology of the word is "to push," "drive into," or "strike one thing against another," in order to leave a "forceful impression."

Remembering the word's etymology helps to explain why having an impact has vastly different interpretations depending on your positionality. For well-meaning people in positions of power and privilege, the notion of impact might seem desirable. However, for people who are on the receiving end of impact strategies - people of color, immigrants or non-cisgender individuals, for example - might feel the word smacks of presumption and non-consent, and may even find it offensive, triggering, or violent.

There are signs that the social sector's understanding of the word impact is already evolving: many foundation and nonprofit leaders recognize that no single organization can create impact and speak pragmatically about contribution versus attribution. This nuance - while an important step in the right direction - does not, in our view, go far enough to connote the mutuality and connectivity that are fundamental qualities in catalyzing social change.

We believe this crucible moment invites us to consider other orientations of social change that are more relational and rooted in how human beings and nature thrive: as a part of all else and not separate from. What if the stated intent of our work included being in and supporting right relationship between people, organizations, and the natural systems that sustain life on earth? The notion of right relationship has its roots in indigenous cultures and is also a core concept in eastern and western spiritual traditions.

Definitions of right relationship vary but typically include 1) cultivating an awareness of our interdependence with all beings and the planet, 2) staying in the flow as things change, and 3) recognizing that how we show up in our relationships strongly influences outcomes.

Evolving from a results-driven emphasis on impact to a more process-driven emphasis on right relationship requires intentional energy and new ways of thinking. Strategy and evaluation must become more attuned to a lateral, multi-directional, and reciprocal way of being. And we must develop new leadership capacities that enable being in right relationship with our teams, partners, funders, grantees, and the communities we serve.

Indicator

/ˈɪndɪkeɪtə/ · noun

1660s, "that which indicates or points out," from Late Latin *indicator*, agent noun from *indicare* "to point out, show" (see [indication](#)). As a finger muscle, from 1690s. As a steam-cylinder's pressure gauge, 1839. As a device on a motor vehicle to signal intention to change direction, 1932.

Indication

/ˌɪndɪˈkeɪʃn/ · noun

early 15c., "a sign, that which indicates," from Latin *indicationem* (nominative *indiciatio*) "an indicating; valuation," noun of action from past participle stem of *indicare* "point out, show," from *in-* "into, in, on, upon" (from PIE root **en* "in") + *dicare* "proclaim" (from PIE root **deik-* "to show," also "pronounce solemnly," and see [diction](#)).

In the social sector, **indicators** are connected to one's ability to prove impact. It is not unusual for a set of indicators to be predetermined when launching a new program or partnership, and their attainment is widely seen as the only meaningful yardstick of success. Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) are referenced in the for profit sector and "refer to a set of quantifiable measurements used to gauge a company's overall long-term performance.


KPIs specifically help determine a company's strategic, financial, and operational achievements, especially compared to those of other businesses within the same sector. The term "compare" reinforces the competition and domination desired within a capitalist economy and market. This differs from the social sector, in which organizations are part of ecosystems that, in most instances, share aims around the health and wellbeing of living species and the planet.

In strategic planning and evaluation, indicators refer to specific, observable, and measurable changes. Strategic planning took hold in the 1950s as corporate leaders sought ways to maximize efficiency in order to have a competitive advantage in the marketplace. Evaluation's historical roots are also in the 1960s with federally funded longitudinal and large-scale efforts often focusing on individual-level changes with a preference for numerical expressions.

The etymology of the word refers to something visible, pointing, showing which does not acknowledge the other ways we might know, via sound, taste, smell and touch. Ableist perspectives are so deeply embedded. As humans, feel and taste are ways in which we first come into relationship with our world – the image of a baby putting whatever it can into its mouth comes immediately to mind. In the 1830s, a time of rising imperialism and colonialism globally and the violence that comes with exercising control over others, the definition became associated with machinery and with numbers almost exclusively.

The term *indication* is rarely used. Jara was introduced to this secondary definition in 2017 by Dr. Maria Rosario Jackson as part of a research project that led to the Equitable Evaluation Framework. Dr. Jackson used the phrase indications of progress, which instantly expanded what one might consider as data to define, describe, document, determine and demonstrate that a change has occurred. In this world of complexity, embracing different ways of knowing is paramount.

Words, with their array of meanings, can be a profound vehicle of expression. They convey ideas and images and can contribute to our understanding of complicated and complex scenarios and realities. Numbers more than words suggest a sense of certainty. They allude to a clarity and certainty that in some cases reinforces the delusion and illusion of control. Both words and numbers hide a host of decision points and choices. Rarely do we know the beliefs, inspirations and motivations that ground and guide the humans and the services, policies, and technologies that they program. To expect either letters or numbers to fully and accurately represent or capture our realities and our curiosities is beyond their capacity and diminishes ours.



What else might we understand if we expand our ways of knowing and our definitions of validity? How might we be more honest about the insights and information we consider when setting strategy and deciding where to focus our efforts, let alone what effect we might have on it? What changes might be apparent if we evolve what we consider as evidence so that we might recognize what is happening for whom, in what ways, to what extent, and how that is being experienced? What indication(s), moving beyond numbers and letters, would let you know that something had changed or that progress had been made?



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Lived Experience

/ˌlɪvd ɪkˈspɪəriəns/

1. Personal knowledge about the world gained through direct, first-hand involvement in everyday events rather than through representations constructed by other people. It may also refer to knowledge of people gained from direct face-to-face interaction rather than through a technological medium.

2. In phenomenology, our situated, immediate, activities and encounters in everyday experience, prereflexively taken for granted as reality rather than as something perceived or represented: see also natural attitude.

Lived experience acknowledges the experiences, expertise and counsel of humans, often community members, that are to be considered in research, evaluation, and policy. It tends to be utilized more so and advocated for by those who recognize the historical and present day exclusion of some by others.

This term is on our list for two reasons. First, it is only situationally considered as opposed to being an integral component of the co-creation of knowledge and how we define validity. We consider lived experience most often when efforts are focused on communities that are marginalized, and when our financial and time resources are sufficient. When we do not engage, our findings usually convey a certainty and comprehensiveness that belies the absence of critical perspectives. This is true for strategy, evaluation, research, finance, communication and more.

Secondly, it is often used as a synonym for people with a particular socio-demographic profile (e.g. people living in poverty, differently abled, gender expansive, BIPOC, etc.). This second point came alive when Jara was co-facilitating a Making the Case Collaboratory for the Equitable Evaluation Initiative in 2020. The group was discussing validity and voice, and on more than one occasion someone noted that “we rarely use the term voice in reference to billionaires.” Nor do we use it referring to those who are white middle class cis gender hetero normative. The term voice can unintentionally perpetuate othering, situating one group as the norm despite the changing demographics of our society.

Remember: many of our definitions around validity, rigor and objectivity are from scientific research from another century. They reflect particular worldviews, and are suited for simple problems or complicated problems at best. They entered the mainstream social sector unexamined, becoming the default for efforts whose purposes are fundamentally different. We live in complexity.

Validity should be multifaceted and balance different types of evidence through different perspectives. Being explicit about whose perspectives are (or are not) considered valid should be common practice. Including perspectives of those who have historically been excluded due to marginalization should be commonplace.

The term lived experience should be part of an expanded and explicit definition of validity. One that recognizes it as an expression of expertise informed by proximity to and experience with an issue/community considered consistently not situationally. An expertise as important, and in some cases, more so than conventional expressions of expertise that elevate formal scholarship as that which is most valid. Let's be transparent about our choices (and they are choices). This is more than we do now and it has not served us.

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2. Kirkhart, K. E. (2013). *Perspectives on repositioning culture in evaluation and assessment*. Presented at the CREA Inaugural Conference, April 21-23, Chicago, IL.

Transformation

/ˌtrænsfərˈmeɪʃn/ • noun

c. 1400, from Old French transformation and directly from Church Latin transformationem (nominative transformatio) "change of shape," noun of action from past-participle stem of transformare "change in shape, metamorphose" (see [transform](#)). also from c. 1400

Transform

/trɑːnsˈfɔːm/ • verb

mid-14c., "change the form of" (transitive), from Old French transformer (14c.), from Latin transformare "change in shape, metamorphose," from trans "across, beyond" (see [trans-](#)) + formare "to form" (see [form](#) (v.)). Intransitive sense "undergo a change of form" is from 1590s. Related: Transformed; transforming.

At a recent convening John facilitated, Colombian storyteller Juliana Bohorquez elucidated three dimensions of **transformation**:

- 1) The difference between transformation and change is that, with transformation, you can't go back (such as when a caterpillar transforms into a butterfly)
- 2) Every transformation requires some death and
- 3) Even if you want to transform, there is no guarantee you will.

Transformation is one of the most important concepts in human development. The etymology explains why. As a noun, transformation means "change of shape." As a verb, it means "to change the form of." Other words that can replace "shape" are "consciousness" or "spiritual attunement." Consider that our developmental path as humans is to change our shape in multiple ways over the course of our lifetime. For example, spiritual growth happens in evolving stages of growth in consciousness - each stage is a transformation.

Interestingly, the word transformation is used seven times more frequently than a century ago. As the world experiences a worsening polycrisis, the urgency to transform ourselves and the systems that sustain life on earth is palpable. Perhaps this is the reason transformation is getting more attention.

Capitalism knows a quick buck opportunity when it sees one and has taken advantage of the burgeoning interest in transformation. Which tech company does not promise that their wares will transform the world? But so too is the case with social change organizations. The social sector is replete with promises of newly launched initiatives that will transform, new programs that will transform, and innovative policies that will transform. We would contend that transformation is a process, not a product - and it's generally a non-linear, lengthy, messy process over which we have little control. In fact, it is impossible for one person to transform another. The best we can do is to help nurture the conditions that can support the possibility of another's transformation.

In introducing caution about using the word transformation, we are not suggesting that funders, non-profits, government and business leaders surrender their aspirations to transform the world. The reality is that everywhere we look, there is a dire need for transformation. The modern world is out of right relationship in so many ways we're on a collision course with broad system breakdown unless we transform.

We are suggesting that all of us who seek to support a just, flourishing world come to terms with what real transformation means. For instance, engaging in transformation work means accepting that - while greater potential may lie on the other side of transformation - the process still ushers in the death of something that exists today: an organization or a common practice, perhaps, or a way of wielding power or even a worldview.

It also means that if you wish to support the transformation of someone or something, your own transformation must become part of the process. Finally, if you are signing up for transformation, it means you must be willing to live in total uncertainty about whether or not, or when, the transformation you seek will occur. Can you be OK with that?

Scale

/skeɪl/• verb (1)

"to climb (a wall) by or as by a ladder; attack with scaling ladders," late 14c., scalen, from Latin scala "ladder, flight of stairs," from *scansla, from stem of scandere "to climb" (see scan (v.)).

Middle English scale, "ladder used in sieges," is attested c. 1400, from the Latin noun. The verb in general and figurative use (of mountains, heights of pleasure, etc.) is from 16c.

Via scale (n.3) "standard of measure or estimation" comes the meaning "measure or regulate by a scale" (1798), the sense of "draw, project, or make according to scale" (by 1885), and scale down "cut or decrease proportionally in every part" (by 1887). Related: Scaled; scaling. also from late 14c.

/skeɪl/• verb (2)

"remove the scales of (a fish, etc.)," c. 1400, scalen, from scale (n.1). Intransitive sense "to separate and come off in scales or thin layers" is from 1520s. Related: Scaled; scaling. also from c. 1400

If the most common question non-profit leaders get from funders is, "Are you creating impact?," the second question is often, "So how do you achieve **scale**?" It's an exciting question, but let's explore what is truly meant by scale here. In our opinion, questions about scale are generally well-intentioned inquiries but they kick up a lot of dust, only some of which settles well.

Questions about scale in the social sector are typically about growth along the lines of adoption and number of people reached. But, consistent with the etymology of scale (e.g. scale a ladder to climb a wall), this definition of scale seems rather linear, leaving out the myriad ways in which social change happens.

In 2015, the J.W. McConnell Foundation in Canada decided to wade into the murky waters of scale to provide some depth and clarity. They delineated three types of scale as important parts of the social change process:


- Scaling up - changing institutions at the level of policy rules and laws.
- Scaling deep - changing relationships, cultural values and beliefs, hearts and minds.
- Scaling out - replication, dissemination, and increasing the number of people or communities impacted.

This was an excellent contribution and gained currency in some parts of the social sector, such as with evaluators. However, eight years after it was developed, McConnell's frame remains little in use today with the field. In most quarters, the notion of scaling seems to have reverted to the simpler definition of achieving broad adoption and reaching more people: more, everywhere, the faster the better.

And yet, as the notion of scaling has gained almost universal currency in the sector and become for many the ultimate desired outcome, we wonder if the question, "So how do you achieve scale?" is even the right question. There are two cases we will mention here where the scaling question is at best an incomplete inquiry and at worst, a mistaken one. The first is in the arena of attempting to change systems, something more and more funders and non-profits are attempting to do.

Long term change in systems doesn't happen through scale. Consistent with how ecosystems and nature (of which human systems are a part) evolve, systems evolve through resonance. One part of the system achieves a level of harmony and other parts resonate. Think about community revitalization. The intent in community revitalization is generally to support one part of a city to work together towards attaining more vitality. Once one neighborhood achieves a new state of harmony, other contiguous neighborhoods are motivated to change as well, and often do.

Another instance in which the scaling question can lead one down the wrong path is in the nature of small things. Sometimes small things - even very successful small things - should not become big things although they can still be significant. For example, the process of healing circles exists in virtually every culture in the world. The circle process creates intimate experiences typically involving fewer than a dozen people at a time, who share deeply personal and vulnerable stories in ways that create connection and can even lead to personal and group transformation.



To scale a “one size fits all” approach to healing circles would likely fail, because of the variety of cultural contexts around the world. Yet, collectively, the intimacy and healing made possible by circles has positively affected the mental health, consciousness and life trajectories of countless people worldwide. We need a different way of thinking about and talking about scale, and we know of no better interpretation than the beautiful definition of scaling deep articulated by the Systems Sanctuary and Ashoka Canada in a 2023 report that built on the McConnell Foundation’s earlier work: *“Scaling deep delves into alternative ways of knowing and being, embracing heart-centered and spirit-driven wisdom that is intuitive, embodied, and life-affirming. It recognizes the agency of humans but also of the Earth and the non-human and brings forth a holistic understanding of interconnectedness. By honoring the sacredness of all life, it paves the way for systemic change.”*

For many of us working for social change, this conception of scale is a new frontier. And yet, it is at least 10,000 years old. It may seem counterintuitive to think of scale in this manner, given it is so at odds with mainstream culture and values these days. But this orientation to scale is what’s most needed at this moment. Sheer force of will and resources is not always the answer. And so it goes with scale.

Our Invitation

Our words signal to others how we conceptualize reality, power, and control. They reveal what we understand about our efforts to affect our surroundings, our communities and our trajectories. There is a dance between and among all of this.

When using any of these words, we invite you to ask yourself the same questions we asked ourselves in this exploration. If you use any of these words frequently, ask yourself:

1. Do I have a clear definition of this word?
2. Do I give thought and heart to how this word is received and perceived by others, and the implications?
3. How does this word reflect and align with my growing understanding and world view of how social change happens?

The ever present drive towards more, faster, and with urgency denies us our full humanity. It creates false separations in heart, mind, body and soul that diminish us. How might we embrace our senses and expand our ways of knowing so that we can deepen and broaden our understanding while simultaneously acknowledging that not all can be known?

When we use words, let’s do so with more intention and care. Let’s spend less time second guessing, interrogating, and blaming each other, and more time moving towards alignment and agreement. We have the ability and responsibility to make different choices based on what we perceive to be important. This is our saving grace.

