

Fay and Problem (re)Framing

By Sarah Schulman · June 6, 2015

Tags: problem framing // ethnography // disability // Starter Projects

Summary

Our projects start by naming a perceived problem, and then spending time with people to re-frame that problem in terms of the actual pain experienced. Read Fay's story and find out how we shifted the Burnaby Starter Project from being about social isolation to being about experience poverty. See our four favorite rules of thumb for redefining problems from the perspective of every day people, like Fay.

Cast of Characters



Fay is in her 60s and has lived on her own for over a decade. She is a proud 'mama' to her dog, Robbie, and likes to volunteer for the Salvation Army.

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Initial problem

If Fay were a dog, she'd be some sort of long-haired lapdog. Plucked out of the lonely cages of the SPCA. Something small enough to be held and patted, but big enough to stand its own ground.

We met Fay after knocking on her door. The same door with the tattered, hand-written warning sign: "Do not knock, dog barks." The day before, we'd hung a flyer for a new in-home help service on the door knob.



A flyer for an in-home help service, designed as a recruitment tool.

"Through the closed door, Fay shouted, "Will you people really give me ice-cream on a bad day?"

"Yes," we replied. "If we can learn a bit about what what is a bad versus good day." We wanted to hear about residents' day-to-day realities, and find out whether social isolation and disconnection was their problem. Or more of a problem for the funders & organizational backers of our Burnaby Starter Project.

A few days later, we got the call. 7:08pm. "Do you have chocolate ice-cream?" Fay asked.

We brought down a scoop, and started talking about what was on her walls and surfaces. Her cabinets were filled with pictures - Fay with her dogs, Fay with friends, Fay with her favorite staff. We learned that Fay's weeks were filled with social interactions: doctors, dog walkers, her 90-year old mum, a friend, paid staff, neighbors. Whilst Fay talked about being "lonely" some of the time, she saw loneliness as a situational byproduct. Health challenges had kept her from going outside lately and walking her dog. One things cleared up, Fay planned on getting back on the bus, going to parks, and hitting the mall. She'd be less lonely.



Fay and her dog walker.

If social isolation wasn't the core pain Fay was experiencing, what was it?

Spending two days shadowing Fay helped us feel another kind of isolation. "My best year was in 1986," Fay exclaimed. "That was Expo 86 and there were pavilions. I got to meet people from all over the world."

Twenty-eight years ago, Fay was exposed to surprise and novelty. She had different conversations each day. She learned about other places, other cultures. These days, the only novelty Fay experiences is a new diagnosis. She has the same conversations each day: about her dog, the weather, her physical health. She stays put in exactly the same place, with the same culture.

"My best year was 1986. I got to meet people from all over the world."

Fay's story mirrored Gary's story which mirrored Mark's story. They were residents of the same housing complex, and 'clients' of the adult disability service system. Each had good relationships with paid staff. Each had regular contact with family and, often, neighbors. None had opportunities to try new things, go new places or to find new sources of purpose & meaning.



Reframed problem

So, we re-framed our initial problem statement. “Too many adults with a cognitive disability, living on their own in the Burnaby/Tri-Cities area, lack a source of novelty, learning and personal growth.”

Such a re-frame led us to some very different ideas about solutions. If the core challenge for this group of individuals wasn't simply about getting them connected, but getting them connected to novel learning experiences, we'd need to focus on creating a supply of new things - not simply brokering to existing things.

For us, problem re-framing isn't simply about better storytelling. It's about better idea generation. And, hopefully, more effective solution making. It's also about re-distributing a bit of power and control. From funders and organizations, who typically get the authority to name what's wrong. To every day folks, who are supposedly experiencing the pain of what's not working. Most of the time, there is very real pain. It's just from a different source, or being felt by a different user group.

Four rules of thumb

So, here's our four rules of thumb for problem framing. We draw lots of inspiration from Eugene Bardach's book *The Eightfold Path to Policy Analysis*.

★ Read more about Eugene Bardach's work here: https://goodgovernanceighealth.files.wordpress.com/2011/12/00081-a_practical_guide_for_policy_analysis.pdf

1) Name deficits and excesses

We often start problem statements with the phrases, “Too many...” or “Too few...”

For example, “There are too few adults with a cognitive disability who have a source of novelty and learning.” Or, “There are too many young people who are unemployed.”

This is what differentiates a social problem from a personal problem: there is a group of people experiencing the same lousy thing. This is also why people are always the subject of our problem statements. We would say, “There are too many young people who are unemployed” rather than, “There are too few jobs.”

2) Identify Pain, for Whom

Once we've got a statement, we like to interrogate it and ask the hairy 'so what' questions. So what if there are too many young people who are unemployed? Who experiences the pain of that problem, and what kind of pain?

Is it parents of young people who are unemployed who experience the pain to their pocket books and psyche? Is it the young people themselves, and their self-esteem & identity? Is it employers who are experiencing the pain of missing out on a good resource?

We try and name potential pain points as a starting point for ethnographic field work.



3) Bound in Place

To give our ethnographic field work some rootedness, we start local: in one social housing complex or neighborhood or geographically distinct area. Our goal isn't to do statistically representative work or to make generalizable claims about a problem. Our goal is to go deep and understand a handful of people's lived experiences. All so we can generate ideas of what could be different that we then test with larger numbers of people.

4) Do Not Assume Solutions

We avoid problem statements that infer the answer so that we can keep our ethnographic research open and exploratory. Statements like, “There are not enough low-income housing units for homeless people” make the assumption that houses are the solution to homelessness. Instead, what is the pain that folks who are homeless are experiencing? Is it the lack of privacy, or stability, or protection from inclement weather, or... Each of these pain points could lead to quite different and creative solutions.

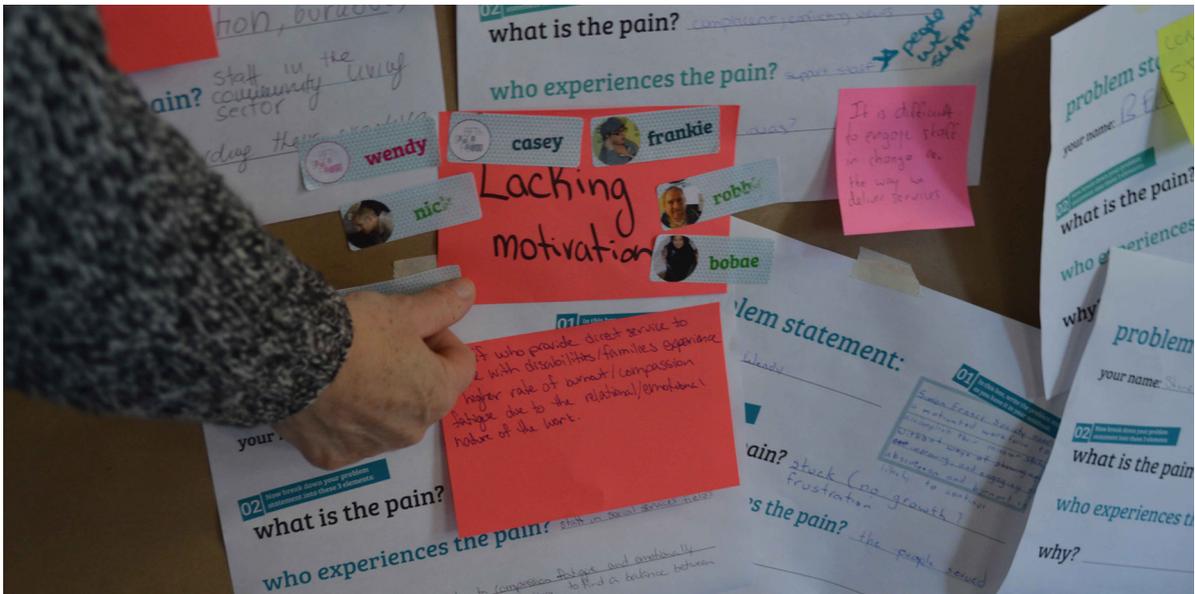


Getting ready to come up with problem statements.



60+ problem statements grouped by who is feeling the pain.





Editing problem statements to fit the rules of thumb.



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Sarah is a sociologist who likes to split her time between living rooms and state houses. She's worked with governments in 6 countries to try and change how policy is made and evaluated. From 2010-2012, she co-ran InWithFor and worked with The Australian Centre for Social Innovation to launch 3 new social solutions, including the award-winning Family by Family. She's got a Doctorate in Social Policy from Oxford University, and a Masters in Education from Stanford University. This is Sarah's fourth start-up org. Get in touch at sarah@inwithforward.com!