MOST SIGNIFICANT CHANGE

OVERVIEW

The Most Significant Change (MSC) technique is a participatory, qualitative method: a dialogical, story-based monitoring and evaluation technique that involves the collection and selection of significant change stories which have occurred in the field. 'Significant change stories' are in most cases elicited directly from programme participants. These stories are then passed upwards in the organisational hierarchy for panels of stakeholders to assess their significance, discuss how they relate to wider implications of changes, and review the available evidence that support them. This process helps reduce the number of stories to the ones identified as being the most significant by the majority of stakeholders.

MSC is designed to run throughout the programme and, as an evaluation technique, its primary aim is 'to facilitate program improvement by focusing the direction of work toward explicitly valued directions and away from less-valued directions' (Mathison, 2005). It may also be useful to inform decision makers about performance through success stories, promote the recognition of different values among stakeholders, and identify unintended outcomes. In MSC, the stories themselves reveal the causal patterns (even if implicitly) and storytellers interpret those causal links through the construction and interpretation of stories. Thus MSC, has the potential to facilitate a dynamic dialogue between designated stakeholders and enable participants to reflect upon the question of what the programme really wants to achieve and how best to achieve it.

Stern et al (2012) stress that participatory methods – including MSC – can support causal inference by focusing on the 'agency' of the stakeholders. Such a perspective is consistent with Ellerman's (2009) claim that development is only possible through self-directed actions. As MSC (and other participatory approaches) moves away from seeing beneficiaries as passive recipients it shifts the focus of evaluation to beneficiary and stakeholder perspectives to demonstrate various contributors to change. This raises questions regarding voice and power, which more traditional (quasi) experimental evaluations sometimes struggle to address. Thus, MSC provides 'a greater voice to those at the bottom of the organisational hierarchy' (Davies and Dart 2005: 71) and MSC's focus on stories and narratives may allow the disruption of dominant discourses by giving voice those on the margins (Dinh et al., 2019).

However, there are specific biases associated with MSC (Lennie, 2011). For instance:

- The voices of those good at telling stories may dominate over others' who are less articulate
- Story-selection processes are inevitably subjective and will mediate the views of those included in the selection panels
- Majority votes in the selection process may silence minority voices and unpopular views.

For these reasons, MSC may be best used prior to or to complement more rigorous approaches, such as Contribution Analysis or Process Tracing when tackling causal inference.

KEY ELEMENTS OF METHODOLOGY

The evaluators collect significant stories of change and engage in dialogical interpretation of those stories. This process requires defining the sample and reporting period and establishing the 'domains of change'. Although the method can be applied to identify negative impact, it is most typically used to explore positive, exemplary cases rather than negative (or average) ones (Davies and Dart, 2005). The collection of stories are then reviewed by stakeholders who are guided by facilitators to select the most significant ones. Selection criteria is determined by the stakeholders: it can happen through informal discussions or by using a formal rating process. The selected cases and the selection process (i.e. the reason for selection) are recorded by facilitators. Such reflectivity may also feed into the interpretation of underlying values and preconceptions of different stakeholders.

A detailed guide is provided by Davies and Dart (2005) discussing the steps to implementing MSC. The manual includes 10 steps, out of which steps four, five and six are deemed fundamental whilst the others are discretionary:

1. How to start and raise interest

Evaluators should be clear about the purpose of using MSC within the organisation, and use past programme examples to demonstrate how the method can be effective. It is to be noted that MSC is easy to implement and – for most practitioners involved – it does not require deep theoretical knowledge.

It might be useful to identify people excited by MSC, who could act as catalysts in the process. These 'champions' can play a key role in designing and implementing MSC across the organisation.

2. Establishing 'domains of change'

Domains of change are fuzzy categories that are to be defined to guide, which significant change stories are to be looked for. They should be broad and non-prescriptive, allowing participants to interpret what constitutes a change within the given domain (e.g. 'changes in the quality of people's lives', 'changes in the nature of people's participation in development activities').

There are examples of the domains being developed by top-down or bottom-up processes (i.e. by senior managers or the beneficiaries). Domains can be formed around individuals, organisations, communities or partnerships – depending on the level of interest.

Domains are not essential: it is possible to proceed without them, i.e. in small organisations, when the number of stories is likely to be fewer. It is also possible to identify them after the stories are collected as a way of sorting those into meaningful categories.

3. Defining the reporting period

The frequency of collecting Significant Change (SC) stories can vary. Higher frequency reporting (i.e. fortnightly) allows people to integrate the process more quickly, but it will increase the cost of the process and run the risk of the participants soon running out of SC stories that can be identified. Low frequency reporting (i.e. yearly) requires fewer resources but also means a slower learning process. There is also a risk that participants forget how the process works and what the aims are. There are examples of organisations decreasing the frequency of reporting over time (i.e. a monthly selection eventually evolving into a three-monthly reporting; see for example, Dart, 2000).

4. Collecting stories of change

Data collection should start with a central open question, such as:

'Looking back over the last month, what do you think was the most significant change in the quality of people's lives in this community?'

This captures a specific time period ('last month'), empowers participants ('what do you think'), asks them to be selective and focus on change rather than static events ('most significant change'), defines the 'domain of change' ('quality of people's lives'), and establishes boundaries ('in this community').

SC stories can be captured in different ways:
- Unsolicited stories documented by fieldworkers in the course of their work
- Interviewing
- Group sessions
- Story is written directly by beneficiaries

Key information about the stories should be documented:

- Who collected the story and when the events occurred
- Description of the story itself – what happened
- Significance (to the storyteller) of events described in the story

SC stories should be recorded as they are told. Description of the stories should be a simple narrative description of what happened, to whom and in what circumstances. From reading the stories, it should be clear why the storyteller identifies the story as significant. Stories should be short and comprehensible for all stakeholders.

5. Reviewing the stories within the organisational hierarchy

MSC uses an iterative process to select the most significant of the stories. Storytellers discuss their SCs and identify and submit the most significant ones to a level above. Then the same process is run at mid-levels whereby stories are selected and submitted to the next level. This process is called the 'summary of selection', and it allows the identification of widely valued stories among the ones that are only locally important (see Figure 9).

Figure 9. Flow of stories and feedback in MSC (Davies and Dart, 2005: 29)
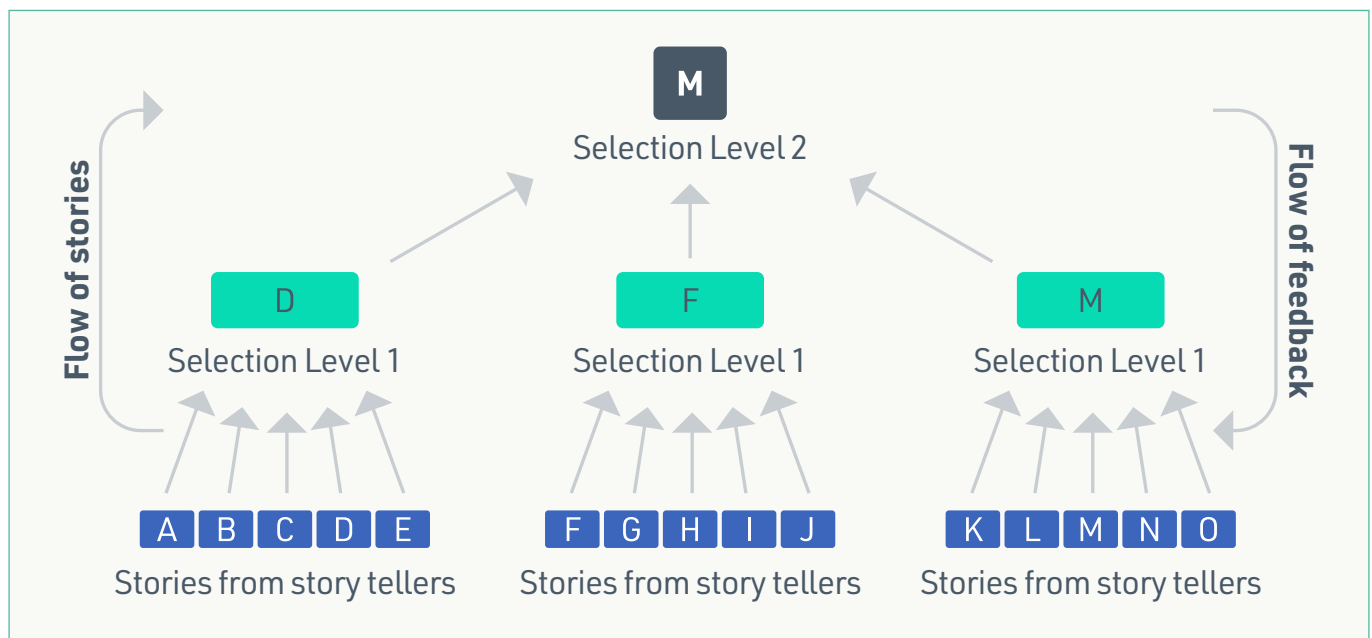
Structuring the process can follow pre-existing organisational hierarchies, or it can be set up for the purposes of MSC.

Depending on evaluation aims and the scale of the project, the different levels may involve beneficiaries, field workers, managers, donors and investors. Setting the criteria of choosing SCs can also vary: decision can be reached using majority or iterative voting, scoring or secret ballot. However, Davies and Dart (2005) suggest that identifying selection criteria should not take place in advance but should emerge through discussions of those involved as a way of opening up the process to new experiences.

6. Providing stakeholders with regular feedback about the review process

As in every learning-oriented system, in MSC, results must be fed back to storytellers. Feeding back the reasoning behind choosing the most significant accounts can aid people during the next reporting period and move focus of attention to relevant ideas and away from marginal ones.

7. Setting in place a process to verify the stories if necessary

Verification of the accounts can be beneficial, as it may identify deliberate fictional stories, real events that are misunderstood or misrepresented, and those where their significance has been exaggerated.

8. Quantification

While MSC is essentially qualitative, quantification of surrounding information might be useful. These may include:

- counting the number of people involved and number events that took place

- retrospectively measuring (usually at the feedback stage) if a significant event occurred in other instances besides the one already recorded

- counting the number of times a specific type of change is noted (see next step)

9. Conducting secondary analysis and meta-monitoring

It may be useful to classify and examine the topics identified in SC stories using thematic coding, analyse positive and negative changes (i.e. growing number of negative incidents may signal negative developments), analyse the difference between selected and non-selected stories, and investigate patterns of selection criteria (e.g. do criteria vary across time? Do different groups use different selection criteria?)

10. Revising the MSC process

MSC should not be used in an unreflective way – rather, implementation should be changed throughout the process. This may involve changing the frequency of reporting and the sampling population during and after the introductory phase. Revising the system is a sign suggesting that of organisational learning and reflection – which is a key underlying feature of the MSC method.

MULTI-METHOD APPROACHES

Given that MSC has different biases to those present in more conventional techniques, it is a particularly useful addition to other evaluation methods (to offset inherent biases) and it is generally a good complementary piece to evaluation of complex participatory programmes with numerous stakeholder groups and multiple organisational layers and especially those producing diverse, emergent outcomes (Dart and Davies, 2003). For example, it might be combined with a more 'technical' and formalised methodology such as Process Tracing or QCA to give a greater emphasis to user voice.

Dart and Davies (2005) highlight the complementary function of MSC in deductive approaches to (1) improve understanding about the logic of an intervention, (2) enhance contextual knowledge about success of the outcome or (3) complement studies whose main focus is on the 'average' experience of people.

Yet, MSC is useful as an inductive approach to generate hypotheses in exploratory studies (e.g. Pimentel et al., 2020) and to identify unintended consequences of an intervention or programme.

RESOURCES REQUIRED

Evaluator skills and experience

To build the capacity of the program evaluation team in MSC, Dart and Davies recommend two options:

- 1-3 day in-house trainings led by and external consultant or an internal evaluator
- Practice and improvement: given that MSC is a reflective process that has an inbuilt improvement cycle, implementing MSC through trial and error may be feasible when training is not an option (i.e. through revisions and feedback loops etc.)

Resource implications

MSC is not a quick option. The analysis takes a significant amount of time and requires advanced project infrastructure. Maintaining engagement of the different groups involved can be challenging, so too many cycles of review are not recommended.

Running MSC evaluation requires the ability to identify priorities and good facilitation skills are also necessary. Hence, appointing 'champions' who have the necessary theoretical and practical skills along with hands-on knowledge about the organisational structure is beneficial in the process of raising organisational interest and identifying how MSC can be implemented in the given environment (see step 1 to implementing MSC).

CASE STUDY

Dahmen-Adkins and Peterson (2019) describe an application of the most significant changes reported on at the end of a European gender equality change project. The four-year long project involved 20 change agents who worked towards implementing action plans to tackle gender inequality in seven research institutions. MSC stories were collected from beneficiaries, change agents and other stakeholders via questionnaire/interview guide and asked them to reflect upon their experiences of the most significant change emerged during the project. Stories reflected on both personal and institutional changes. On individual level, changes were categorised into three types: changes occurring either in the realms of knowledge/awareness, behaviour or daily lives. The types of institutional changes were categorised as referring to either cultural, policy or structures/management changes.

The authors argue that the MSC technique allowed evaluators to 'systematize the changes that contributed to closing the gender gap' (Dahmen-Adkins and Peterson, 2019: 157). It effectively complemented more traditional evaluation tools by gathering evidence and generating knowledge around unique dimensions of change involved in the project, such as

- Tangible and intangible changes
- changes in behaviour and attitude
- expected and unexpected changes
- changes in collective and organisational character.

This case study provides an example of the complementary usefulness of MSC. MSC can prelude other –more rigorous – methods as an inductive approach to explore underlying mechanisms contributing to change as well as – in this example – can provide participatory/emancipatory viewpoints to projects in their final stages to elaborate upon the unique and otherwise unobserved experiences of beneficiaries and stakeholders and elaborate on the ways micro-, meso- and macro level changes are perceived by beneficiaries and different stakeholders.

Reference

Dahmen-Adkins, J., & Peterson, H. (2019). Most Significant Change: Closing the Gender Gap in Research. In Paoloni, P., Paoloni, M. and Arduini, S. (Eds) *2nd International Conference on Gender Research*. Academic Conferences and publishing limited. 151-158. Available to download at: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/332180557_Most_Significant_Change_Closing_the_Gender_Gap_in_Research

RESOURCES

Web resources

A website providing a brief overview, and pointing towards translations, training opportunities and software re MSC:

Davies, R. *Most Significant Change (MSC) – Monitoring and Evaluation NEWS*. [online] Available at: https://mande.co.uk/special-issues/most-significant-change-msc/ [Accessed 24 Aug. 2021].

This site collates and makes available papers of any kind written on the subject of the Most Significant Change technique:

Davies, R. *Most Significant Change technique. Group Library* [online] Available at: https://www.zotero.org/groups/266453/most_significant_change_technique/ [Accessed 24 Aug. 2021].

Key reading

A detailed description of the methodology and its application:

Davies, R., & Dart, J. (2005). *The 'most significant change'(MSC) technique. A guide to its use.* PDF available at: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/275409002_The_'Most_Significant_Change'_MSC_Technique_A_Guide_to_Its_Use

And a more recent one:

Lennie, J. (2011). *The Most Significant Change technique. A manual for M&E staff and others at Equal Access*. Washington, DC: USAID.

Further references

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Riley, T., & Hawe, P. (2005). Researching practice: The methodological case for narrative inquiry. *Health education research*, 20(2), 226-236.

Stern, E., Stame, N., Mayne, J., Forss, K., Davies, R., & Befani, B. (2012). *Broadening the range of designs and methods for impact evaluations.*