

**We've developed** a tool that is useful in trying to answer questions like: Where is this problem coming from? Where is the real driver of this negative situation?

**When you ask** these types of questions, you're moving beyond the symptoms of a problem to wondering about its root cause. If you're working on a complex problem that is embedded in the system, then to answer these types of questions will mean that you must explore the various scales within the systems, in order to find out what's really influencing that problem.

**We call this** tool the *journey tool*, because it begins with examining the experience or the journey of a person or an object most affected by the complex problem that you're focused in upon. To start using this tool, think about one of your complex problems. Try to identify *who* or *what* is most negatively affected by the problem. Or you could think of it like: Whose or what's experience would be different if you were successful in accomplishing the change that you want to see?

**Try to imagine** that person or object's journey through the system that you're

interested in. Who or what would they interact with and how? As you imagine this journey through the system, you will see that not all interactions are problematic. Even some that are challenging are still reasonable or manageable. There will clearly be some points in the journey that are significantly negative; some that could be described as unacceptable or intolerable for the person traveling through the system. This will depend on what's important to that person or object that you're considering.

**Whatever characterizes** these intolerable points along the system journey, we call *key variances*. These are critical elements that significantly influence the experience and well being of individuals. Key variances are different for different populations or categories of things.

**This tool was** actually originally created to help pinpoint problem areas in technical contexts, where objects like cars were being produced. For example, this tool has been used to analyze the journey of a car through an assembly line system that put the finishing touches on the exterior. Then, some key variances were quality, time, cost, etc.

**It will be things** that are much more human when you're concerned with the system journey of an individual. Research into the resilience of vulnerable populations shows that, in order to be able to cope with a life journey, people need their experiences to be comprehensible, manageable, meaningful, and socially connected. You can see that these kinds of criteria would be key variances if you were to be charting the journey of a person, and wanted to know when their experiences became intolerable as they interacted with the systems in their lives.

**Now back to** the journey tool. Think about what are some key variances for the people whose lives you want to improve. Where are the problematic interactions for them in the system? When does their experience fall outside of the realm of being tolerable? Unfortunately, these problematic interactions are often with individuals or organizations that exist in the system to eliminate, or to try to address whatever problem the person is experiencing.

**These negative spikes** along the journey are almost always the result of the particular constraints that these individuals in these organizations are influenced by. Those

constraints are usually the result of other influences, again coming from an even broader scale in the system.

**Please take a look** at this visual. In this example, we were imagining the journey of a troubled boy into the system, resulting in him becoming a young offender. Our questions were: What is happening to take this boy needing support down a path that ends with him in trouble with the law? Where is this problem coming from?

**In this example**, certain system interactions become intolerable for this boy. There are times when he just doesn't understand, when things become meaningless, or when he feels completely alone. The organizations he interacts with are experiencing their own constraints, and those have their own restraints from even broader scales.

**Once you've identified** the problem interactions for the individuals that you'd like to help, begin to ask what is causing that negative experience. What pressures are coming to bear on the situation at different scales? Where does the pressure originate? What's influencing the individuals and organizations? See how high you can track

the problem up into the scales that are part of the systems that you're exploring.

**Remember the** Giddens framework, and think of moving through micro, meso, and macro scales. Consider structures of domination, legitimation, and signification. How do some, or all, of these move across scales to negatively impact the lives of the people, places, or objects, whose situation you would like to improve?

**This is just** one more tool that you can use to help make the system visible. You can gain system sight, and if not immediately, find all the answers that you need, at the very least, you will have ideas about new questions that you need to start exploring.

**This will deepen** your understanding of the problem area so that you can analyze complex problems to find opportunities for intervention. You'll be able to anticipate obstacles to change, and develop different strategies best suited to problems at different scales.