



# Most Significant Change Evaluation for Neighbourhood Houses: A pilot study at Morwell Neighbourhood House

A Consultation Report  
Dr Sue Whyte

Centre of Research for Resilient Communities  
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Federation University Australia

[s.whyte@federation.edu.au](mailto:s.whyte@federation.edu.au)

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# Most Significant Change Evaluation for Neighbourhood Houses: A pilot study at Morwell Neighbourhood House

## Introduction

You can't define it  
you could tick this box  
and tick that box  
you could tick a lot of boxes  
but it would be confusing  
to anyone trying to analyse it  
It's humanity basically  
you can't define humans, really

This is a consultation report for Morwell Neighbourhood House (MNH) on a small pilot study to assess the appropriateness of using the Most Significant Change (MSC) method of evaluation in a Neighbourhood House setting. As the quote above indicates it is often difficult for Neighbourhood Houses to show proof of the value and impact of the work they do for individuals and communities. In part this is because so much of their work is about relationship building and social connectedness, two elements that do not lend themselves easily to survey type evaluations. In a survey people may say the main reason they value a Neighbourhood House is because of social connection but what is that really telling us, what impact does it have in someone's life? It was for this reason that MNH decided to pilot a MSC evaluation. Four men involved with activities and programs at the House were asked to participate.

## What is MSC

The aim of MSC evaluation is to capture outcomes that do not fit easily into numbers based evaluations or to capture outcomes that are uncertain, multi-layered and complex. The MSC method is useful when the focus needs to be on changes within the lives of people and trying to understand how a program helps to facilitate those changes (Willetts & Crawford 2007:368). The MSC evaluation method is based on the collection of stories from a range of people involved in a program about significant changes they have experienced as a result of their participation. Stories typically/ideally identify who did what, when and why the change was important (Davies and Dart 2005). The stories are analysed to understand what they reveal about outcomes and change, why the outcome or change is significant, what has been the role of the program in achieving that outcome or change and what can be learned from the stories to improve the development and outcomes of the program. Once each story is analysed, multiple stories are compared and discussions held as to which story represents or illustrates the most significant outcome or

change. Much of the learning and evaluation occurs through this group discussion and selection process as to why a story is significant and why one story is the most significant. MSC is intended to be part of an ongoing cycle of evaluation, learning, and program development.

### **Collection and analysis of MSC stories at MNH**

Four men involved with activities and programs at the House were asked to participate. The stories were collected by an academic who was working with the House on a project about community wellbeing. The men were given a template that listed the questions and provided room to write answers but were also given the option of being interviewed; two were interviewed and two wrote their stories. The stories were edited and condensed to one or two pages in length and reformatted into a poem like format. At this point a meeting was held with the academic, the co-ordinator of MNH and the office administrator to analyse each of the stories and to choose one story that represented the most significant or important change both for the individual and in terms of MNH's objectives and aims. Each story was read and discussed to try and identify what the change was, why it was important and what was the role of the House in that change. A further discussion was then held with the aim of selecting the story that represented the most significant change and what that could tell us about the aims, objectives and ethos of the House.

### ***Analysis of individual MSC stories: what was important to people***

The important elements from each story that were highlighted during the discussion included:

- People went from feelings of social isolation to feeling socially connected

It's a connectiveness really  
It's being part of a network  
and people thrive on that  
If you haven't got a connection  
you're the loneliest person on earth  
I feel part of a community now  
I didn't before  
I was virtually a hermit

- People felt a renewed sense of purpose or new direction in their lives through participation in House activities or through learning new skills or being in leadership roles

It (MNH) has  
re-validated and  
re-invigorated  
myself  
as a human being  
who can be  
useful and kind

contributing  
worthwhile  
and involved

- Participation in and with MNH was seen as life-changing and positive

A mate told me  
MNH was looking for a (worker)  
Only 2 hours a week  
but when you're unemployed  
that's okay  
A few years later  
manager of the House  
got me volunteering  
Now I volunteer 15-25 hours a week

I find myself  
more confident  
I feel  
like I'm somebody again  
It's like I have a second life

- There was an increase in people's self-esteem through being more socially connected, having a sense of belonging to the community of the House, having a renewed sense of purpose through their participation in House activities and through learning new skills or being in leadership roles

(Doing computers and literacy)  
has given me  
an opportunity to look at other things  
It's opened up my eyes to other situations  
You look at things differently  
You're not closed off in what you're looking at  
(learning to read means)  
I make sense of my world  
more than I ever could  
I would ask my brother or somebody  
if I got a letter to read it  
and tell me what it was  
These days no  
It might take me a couple of times  
but I get there  
and understand it  
A lot more control  
over your own destiny

- MNH helped people learn new skills and to step outside their comfort zone but in their own time, tailored and responsive to their needs and aspirations

The best thing  
 about Neighbourhood Houses  
 much more comfortable  
 to be working in places like this  
 At one stage we were at TAFE  
 we were out the back  
 we weren't allowed to go inside  
 they didn't like us being there  
 Here  
 It's much more open  
 No-one saying no you're not going to do that  
 A person like me doesn't learn in a classroom  
 I learn in other ways  
 Here  
 is much more suitable for me

- People felt accepted for who they were and treated with respect; the House was seen as welcoming and inclusive

It's hard to describe  
 I'm one of these people  
 that is a square peg in a round hole  
 I don't fit in anywhere  
 They don't care  
 what I present myself as here  
 You're not judged  
 if you say something out of place

Neighbourhood Houses  
 are totally different to most places  
 Anyone who walks in here  
 is welcome anytime  
 and that's the difference

### *What do people's stories tell us about the role of MNH?*

After analysing and discussing each individual story the next task was to choose the story that illustrated the most significant change. The questions that guided this discussion were:

- which story is most significant and why
- which values and objectives of MNH do these stories speak to or illustrate
- what can we learn from these stories that can inform those values and objectives.

As the discussion progressed from what was significant in each individual story to what do these stories tell us about the role of MNH it became evident that the stories highlighted underlying

values that guide how MNH operates. Those values included: flexibility, inclusiveness and acceptance, strengths based capacity-building, a person-centred tailored approach, and social connectedness. It was commented that ‘helping people move from social isolation to social connection is a driver behind all that the House does’ but that it does this on each person’s terms and to their timetable. MNH is always working towards engagement and connections but not with a set agenda or suite of programs: ‘not just one way or our way – not by telling but by listening and hearing and then enabling’.

At the centre of how MNH operates is flexibility and identifying the needs and aspirations of each person or group and tailoring a response (activity, program), for example, one on one life skills training. MNH does not want to impose an agenda or timetable of activities but seeks to tailor these to the needs of each person: they seek to have a conversation with each person about what they need and want to achieve. This was perhaps best summed up with the comment: ‘the House’s job is to help you find your answer’. It was observed that not many groups have the ability, flexibility and support to work in this way. MNH has the capacity ‘to throw out the rule book’ and the MSC stories attest to that. It does not impose activities or ways of learning and participating but enables people to come to it in their own way, believing in their capacity. An important principle of MNH is to work to people’s strengths: ‘If you start where they are comfortable, then it can expand, but always at their pace’.

MNH does not see the community as a single entity; therefore there is no single solution or approach. Instead it works with individuals and groups facilitating and enabling them to achieve what they want and is important to them. It was commented that MNH is ‘the independent movie of neighbourhood houses’- prepared to do things differently, to work from a different script, not big budget or mainstream but small and local, reflecting the issues and needs of their community.

MNH’s flexible approach, its commitment to listening not telling, being inclusive and welcoming enables people to find and create social connections, a sense of belonging and acceptance, increased self-esteem, and a new sense of purpose (as illustrated in the stories). The individual stories confirmed the power and importance of such an approach; the outcomes can be unexpected and life changing for people:

Someone asked me this question:  
‘Has it been what you thought it would be?’  
My answer is this:  
It’s better than I hoped it could be

## Reflections on MSC evaluation in a Neighbourhood House context

This pilot study had two aims: to use MSC evaluation to evaluate the activities and programs of MNH; and to assess the appropriateness and feasibility of using MSC as an evaluation tool for Neighbourhood Houses. What a Neighbourhood House needs from an evaluation includes: finding out whether programs and activities meet the needs of participants; identifying ways to improve programs and activities; identifying why people attend Neighbourhood Houses and what they want from Neighbourhood Houses; and demonstrating the value and contribution of Neighbourhood Houses for individuals and communities. The MSC evaluation method can do all of these things; the strengths of MSC are that it can capture things that do not fit easily into other forms of evaluation – personal change, social connectedness, a sense of community, things that are often at the heart of what Neighbourhood Houses do. In terms of both aims the pilot evaluation provided a way for MNH to demonstrate its impact and value for people who participate in its activities and that the benefits people experience are a result of the approach that MNH takes and the underlying values of that approach.

However, the time and resources that are needed for a more extensive MSC evaluation may not be feasible for a Neighbourhood House. But that is not necessarily the end of the story, there may be a way to retain the benefits of MSC but modify it to suit an under-resourced and understaffed community sector organisation. A less intensive (in terms of time and resources) and less formalised MSC evaluation that can still capture some of the important things that people value about the house is possible. A modified version of MSC evaluation can be a stand-alone evaluation or it can be used to supplement other evaluations and record keeping that Neighbourhood Houses undertake. One of the big advantages of MSC evaluation is that it is not just assessing whether you have done a good job or not it can help to review and improve programs, activities and your approach. MSC is as much a learning tool as it is an assessment tool.

## A potential model for conducting a MSC evaluation at MNH

### *The process*

- Collect stories of significant change
- Prepare the stories for group discussion
- Analyse each story
- Analyse, discuss and choose the most significant of all the stories
- Use what you have learnt to improve what you do

### *Collecting stories of most significant change*

Before collecting stories for a MSC evaluation you need to consider who will collect the stories, when and from which people. For example, if you are collecting stories from participants in a program the person collecting the stories should not be the person who delivered the program, and it would be preferable if stories were not collected by the House co-ordinator because of issues of power imbalance, feeling unable to be critical or wanting to please. Other considerations that will influence who collects the stories include workload, training and time.

Rather than trying to gather stories from all participants MNH may decide to conduct a MSC style evaluation once a year with a particular group, or a selection of people across various groups or programs at MNH. Another alternative would be to collect stories not at one time in the year but over the year, one story at a time. If this option was chosen it may be useful to analyse and discuss each story at the time it is collected (notes to be kept) and then once a year review all of the stories and have a discussion about which is the most significant and why.

If it is decided that participants in a particular program will be the focus of the evaluation, it is useful to inform people about the evaluation early on in the program.

It is important that there is a consistent approach to story collection. The template provided in this report can be used as a starting point. Storytellers can select to be interviewed or to write their own story. The significance of a change is for the person being asked to decide; it may be a big change or a small change but it is significant in some way to the person. Stories of change can be about positive or negative change.

### *Prepare the stories for group discussion*

Having collected the stories the next phase of the evaluation is to present them to others in the team to discuss what is significant about each story and what it tells you about the effectiveness

of MNH programs. However, before that stage it may be necessary to prepare the stories to make them clearer and more coherent. Stories may need some editing – it is recommended that stories be no longer than 2 pages. It is important, that as much as possible, the storyteller’s words are used.

### *Analyse each story*

Depending on how MNH decides to collect MSC stories it may influence how it undertakes the analysis and discussion of the stories. If, for example, it decides to collect stories over a longer time period, it may be useful to have a discussion about each story soon after it is collected. Then when a number of stories have been collected it may be useful to arrange for a multiple story discussion.

When analysing each story the following questions might be useful:

- What is the significant change or what is important to this person about participating at MNH?
- Why is this important for the person – what has it enabled them to do; what has been the impact on their life?
- What themes can you identify, for example social isolation, social connectedness, learning new skills?
- How has participating at MNH contributed to these changes?
- Were there particular aspects of how MNH operates that were important to the outcomes, for example, catering to individual needs, being inclusive?

### *Analyse, discuss and choose the most significant of all the stories*

At this stage of the process all the stories are presented to the MNH team to discuss what is significant about each story and to choose the most significant of all the stories – the story that tells you the most or the most important story about the effectiveness and impact of MNH and its programs. The process of having to choose the most significant story and justify that choice can bring many points and learnings, which may have remained less noticed, to the surface for all of the stories. Choosing the most significant story is not only about the final choice, the dialogue that people have to get to their decision is as important – that’s where the learning really happens. To ensure this learning is captured someone needs to be nominated as the note-taker.

There are various ways the analysis, discussion and selection of the most significant story can be structured, below is a suggested structure:

- Divide the group into smaller groups if needed

- One person reads story 1 aloud to the rest of the group
- After listening to story 1 discuss the key points and main outcomes of the story (scribe to take notes)
- Repeat for story 2 (and so on)
- When all stories have been heard and discussed – each person to think about which story they consider is the most significant and why
- Share your choice and reasons with the group (scribe to take notes)
- Try to reach an agreement on which story is the most significant (scribe to take notes)
- If the group has been divided into smaller groups then each sub-group will share their decision with the whole group
- Then the whole group needs to make a decision as to which is the most significant story and provide its reasons (scribe to take notes)

When analysing and choosing the story that is the most significant the following questions may be useful to guide the process:

- What sorts of changes or outcomes are evident?
- Why are they important?
- What factors contributed to the outcomes?
- What has been the role of MNH programs in achieving that change?
- What can we learn from this experience about how MNH engages with participants, volunteers or other stakeholders?
- What values of MNH do these stories speak to?
- What objectives of MNH do these stories speak to?
- What can we learn from these stories that might improve the programs and activities that MNH provides?

Selecting the most significant story is not easy and there may be resistance to finally deciding on the most significant story. However, it is in this discussion that valuable and deeper learning occurs.

## References and resources

Davies, R & Dart J 2005, 'The 'Most Significant Change' (MSC) Technique: A guide to its use (this guide is available free from: [www.mande.co.uk/docs/MSCGuide.htm](http://www.mande.co.uk/docs/MSCGuide.htm) or [www.clearhorizon.com.au](http://www.clearhorizon.com.au))

Willets, J & Crawford, P 2007, 'The most significant lessons about the Most Significant Change technique' in *Development in Practice*, 17:3, 367-379

### *Useful links*

[www.betterevaluation.org/plan/approach/most\\_significant-change](http://www.betterevaluation.org/plan/approach/most_significant-change)

<http://mande.co.uk/special-issues/most-significant-change-msc/>

[http://www.evaluationtoolbox.net.au/index.php?option=com\\_content&id=61](http://www.evaluationtoolbox.net.au/index.php?option=com_content&id=61)

## Most Significant Change Story Template

We want to find out about your experience at Morwell Neighbourhood House; we want to collect your story about being involved with Morwell Neighbourhood House. The questions below are designed to help frame your story but you can include other comments as well.

You can write your story in any way you like; you can write as little or as much as you like, the boxes below are just a guide. If you prefer I can interview you and record your story.

Did anything in your life change as a result of participating in the (insert program name) at Morwell Neighbourhood House?

YES/NO

[If your answer is NO, you can stop here].

If YES, what changed? (How are things different now?)

When did the change/s happen?

How did the change/s happen?

Who was involved in the change/s?

If there was more than one change, which one was the most important change for you?

Why was this change so important to you?

Is there anything else you would like to tell us about your experience of the (insert program name) at Morwell Neighbourhood House or about your experience of Morwell Neighbourhood House?