

Building the Science of Social Fields: Toward an MRI Equivalent for the Collective Brain

Over the past two decades, neuroscience has taken mindfulness from the fringes to the mainstream and, in doing so, has contributed to individual wellness worldwide. Yet, while we now understand the individual brain, the ‘collective brain’—the quality of awareness that shapes our social systems—remains largely invisible. Drawing on the same methodological rigour and scientific validation that mainstreamed mindfulness, we see an opportunity to do the same for the *social field*. The social field considers not just what is observable and tangible in a social system, but also the less visible dimensions and dynamics that shape it.

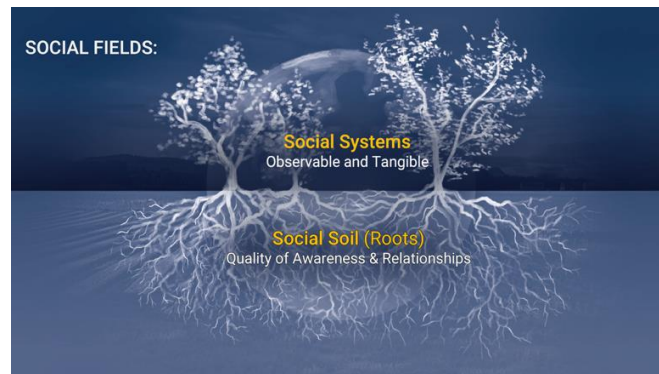


Figure 1: Social Fields = Social Systems + Social Soil (Source: Scharmer and Kaufer, 2025)

Just as healthy soil determines a harvest, the ‘social soil’ of awareness shapes outcomes in health, education, governance, and community life (Fig. 1). In short: form follows consciousness. But field consciousness remains at the fringes of science and public attention—much like mindfulness did twenty years ago. After more than two decades of global action research, we have learned that leaders and changemakers, when using the right kinds of methods and tools, have the capacity to shift social fields from one quality of relationship (and awareness) to another. These social field shifts are essential in every example of profound change we have studied or participated in. As Nobel laureate Ilya Prigogine put it, “When a system is far from equilibrium, small islands of coherence in a sea of chaos have the capacity to lift the entire system to a higher order.”

In an era of systemic and socio-environmental breakdowns and disruptions, the capacity to shift the deeper structures of social fields from polarized and fragmented to coherent and healing is more important than ever. The words *health* and *healing* trace back to the Old English *hæġ* and *hælan*, meaning “wholeness” and “to make whole”—so at their root, to be healthy or to heal is to be restored to a state of integral wholeness. In that sense, investigating the dynamics of deep social structures—*social soil*—with methods that allow them to be made visible, measurable, and researchable focuses on a critical leverage point on which all deep change efforts in larger social systems hinge. This is why we propose to build the **MRI equivalent for the collective brain**.

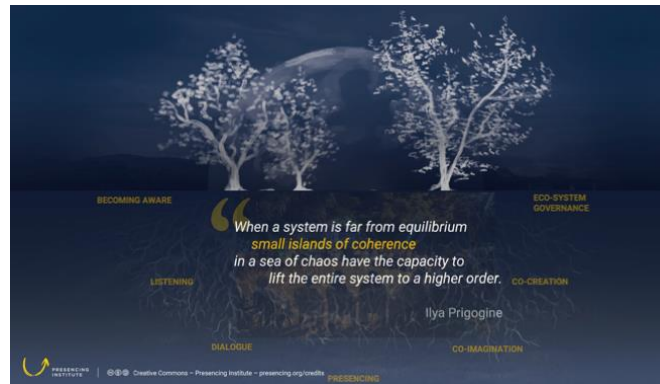


Figure 2: Shifting Social Fields by Creating Islands of Coherence

The Vision: A Global Research Ecosystem

Our vision is to co-activate a **global research ecosystem for social field science and practice**, with three interrelated initiatives at its core:

1. The Social Field MRI Project

A multi-method research platform integrating:

- **Third-person data:** wearables, hyperscanning, biosensing, neuro- and biofeedback.
- **First- and second-person methods:** qualitative and participatory research.
- **Fourth-person methods:** collective deep sensing practices (e.g., Social Presencing Theater, Visual Presencing).

Together, these methods—supported by AI for scalability—will make visible the invisible dimensions that shape systemic outcomes and generate new **metrics and methods** for shifting social fields toward greater health, generativity and flourishing.

2. Social Field Research Ecosystem Activation

The second component is our social field research activation centered around an annual Summer School where emerging scholars and research practitioners connect with senior researchers and thought leaders from around the world. Modeled after the Mind & Life Summer Research Institutes, the Social Field Research Summer School functions as the living heartbeat of the new field—where collaboration and mentorship are seeded, new methodologies incubated, and the emergence of social field science is accelerated by being made visible to itself. Initiatives within the summer school, such as grants for doctoral students and/or early-stage research projects, further amplify the initiative.

The [Journal of Awareness-based Systems Change](#) (DOAJ and Scopus listed journal with over 240 000 downloads in the first four years), serves as a support infrastructure, both attracting aligned researchers and disseminating the high quality research emerging from the research ecosystem.

3. Applications in Practice: Field Assessment Tool

Applications in core areas of societal transformations form another core component of our initiative. One early application is a Social Field Assessment Tool, helping large and distributed ecosystems see, sense, and assess their deeper structures of awareness and wellbeing.

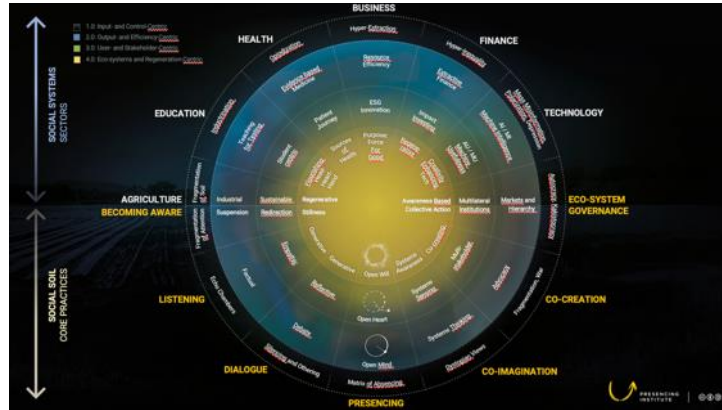


Figure 3: The Wheel of Deep Change As Base for a System Assessment Tool (Source: Scharmer and Kaufer, 2025)

It is our experience that to truly change a social system you need to transform consciousness; and to transform consciousness you need places and tools that make a system *see and sense itself*. In other words, the lack of deep systems change today is, among others, a function of lacking science-based infrastructures that help these systems (like health) to see and sense themselves. Building a robust tool to support systems in their transformation efforts is an early-stage intention of the research program, an idea which has already strong resonance with potential partners in health and business.

Assets

This initiative builds on the Preencing Institute’s significant foundations already in place:

- **Scholarly Infrastructure:** Journal of Awareness-based Systems Change (240,000+ downloads).
- **Methodological Innovations:** Pioneering practices such as Social Preencing Theater and Visual Preencing, applied across cultures and sectors.
- **Democratized Social Technologies:** Portfolio of open-access tools and methods of awareness-based systems change.
- **Global Practice Network:** Leaders and practitioners advancing consciousness-based change initiatives worldwide.
- **Portfolio of Initiatives:** Proven systems-change projects worldwide in health, education, climate, and governance.
- **Institutional Partnerships:** MIT, Charité Hospital Berlin, LMU Munich, and others.
- **Learning Platforms:** MITx u.lab and u-school, reaching global audiences at scale.

Timeline

- **Phase I (2025–26): Planning & Partnering**
Establish infrastructures, refine methodologies, secure partnerships, and convene the first design workshop.
- **Phase II (2026–2031): Launch & Deep Activation**
Launch the Social Field MRI Project and Annual Summer School. Expand into a global ecosystem with cross-institutional research, emerging scholar support, practitioner integration, publication platforms, and experimental labs. Produce a steady stream of evidence, train the next generation of researchers, and mainstream social field methodologies across health, education, governance, climate, and business

Investment and Invitation

We seek an initial **12 month planning grant (\$250,000)** to align partners, pilot methods, and co-design the research infrastructure.

The follow-on is a **five-year initiative (2026–2031, \$750,000 annually)** that will establish the **science of social fields** as a recognized, evidence-based field—bringing proven methods and tools for awareness-based systems change from marginal to mainstream.

While much consciousness research has focused on the individual, the social field remains under-researched and under-supported. Bridging this gap—moving from individual mindfulness to collective transformation—is both urgent and possible. With a focused collaboration over the next five years, we can create the scientific and practical foundations for this field, making visible and actionable the deeper structures of collective awareness needed to navigate civilizational collapse and renewal.

Reference

Scharmer, C. Otto, & Kaufer, Katrin. (2025). *Presencing: 7 Practices for Transforming Self, Society, and Business*. Berrett-Koehler Publishers

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