Critical Design Ethnography Workshops

November 22 & 24, 2022

Highlights and Evaluation Results

Why a critical design ethnography workshop?

RECOVER Urban Wellbeing uses critical design ethnography.* It is an in-depth approach to research and engagement. It involves going to people where they are at, learning about how they live, including what's important to them, their stressors, and motivations. Critical design ethnography helps to better understand problems from the perspectives of people experiencing them, and generates solution ideas that can be tested with them. Critical design ethnography helps to inform RECOVER's prototypes.

Critical design ethnography can surface insights that might be missed in other research. These insights might challenge what one thinks they know about a given situation, and they can lead to creative and more effective actions.

This research and design approach can help inform better decision making across the City - from how we plan, what we build, to how we move. Cities like Helsinki, Long Beach (CA), and Durham (NC) have hired ethnographers to better understand complex problems and opportunities for action.

you can view RECOVER's ethnographic research here

Workshop Goals

- To familiarize relevant City of Edmonton & social service staff with the critical design ethnography approach

- To assess who and where this research approach may fit as a methodology within City of Edmonton & social services

RECOVER is honoured to acknowledge that we learn, grow, and gather on Treaty 6 territory and Métis Nation of Alberta Region IV, which is the traditional and contemporary home of many Indigenous peoples including the nehiyawak, Niitsitapi, Nakota Sioux, Saulteaux, Dene, Métis, and Inuit among many others. It is a privilege to find ourselves in relationship to this ancient gathering place, and we commit to do all we can to recognize and renew those relations.

What We Did

- Brought together select participants from relevant areas within City of Edmonton and Family and Community Support Services (FCSS) funded social service agencies

- Held a two day hands-on, interactive workshop co-designed and co-led by Dr. Jennifer Long (MacEwan University) and Natalie Napier (InWithForward)

- Learned what critical design ethnography is, the principles involved, how it is done, and its potential value for the City and social service agencies

Participants

26 participants joined the two day workshop at the Commonwealth Recreation Centre. There was an intentionally-selected mix of City of Edmonton staff with Family and Community Support Services (FCSS) funded social service organization staff.

City of Edmonton Staff

- Public Engagement & Research
- Community Resources
- Safe Mobility
- Service Improvement & Performance
- Transit Safety

Social Service Organization Staff

- EndPoverty Edmonton
- Edmonton Social Planning Council
- Islamic Family
- Africa Centre

Transformative Learnings

Participants identified a number of learnings that were transformative - learnings that shifted their thinking somehow. These included:

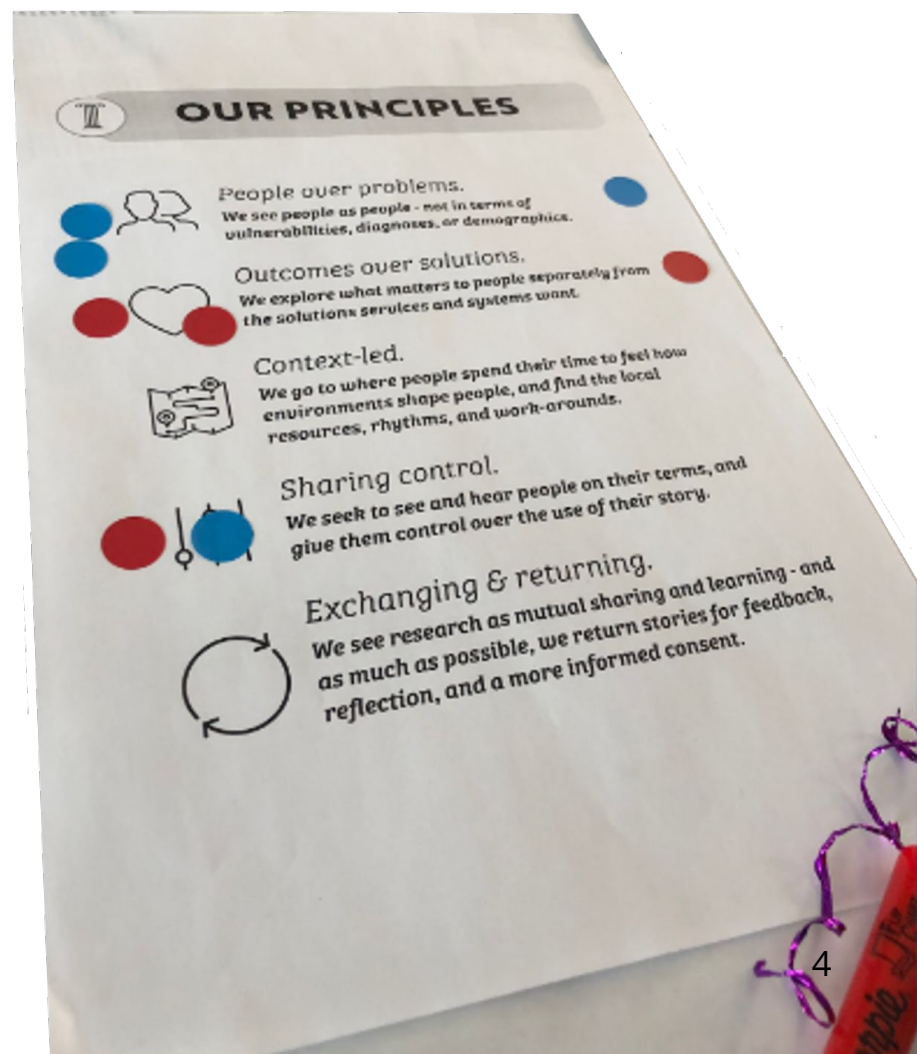## Thinking through research principles

Participants appreciated the importance of these principles in grounding research, and how they might be brought into other parts of work that they do.

The principles are:

- People over problems
- Outcomes over solutions
- Context-led
- Sharing control
- Exchanging and returning

Participants reflected on which principles are most important and most challenging to adhere to.

The principles shared were from InWithForward's work.

OUR PRINCIPLES

People over problems.
We see people as people - not in terms of vulnerabilities, diagnoses, or demographics.

Outcomes over solutions.
We explore what matters to people separately from the solutions services and systems want.

Context-led.
We go to where people spend their time to feel how environments shape people, and find the local resources, rhythms, and work-arounds.

Sharing control.
We seek to see and hear people on their terms, and give them control over the use of their story.

Exchanging & returning.
We see research as mutual sharing and learning - and as much as possible, we return stories for feedback, reflection, and a more informed consent.
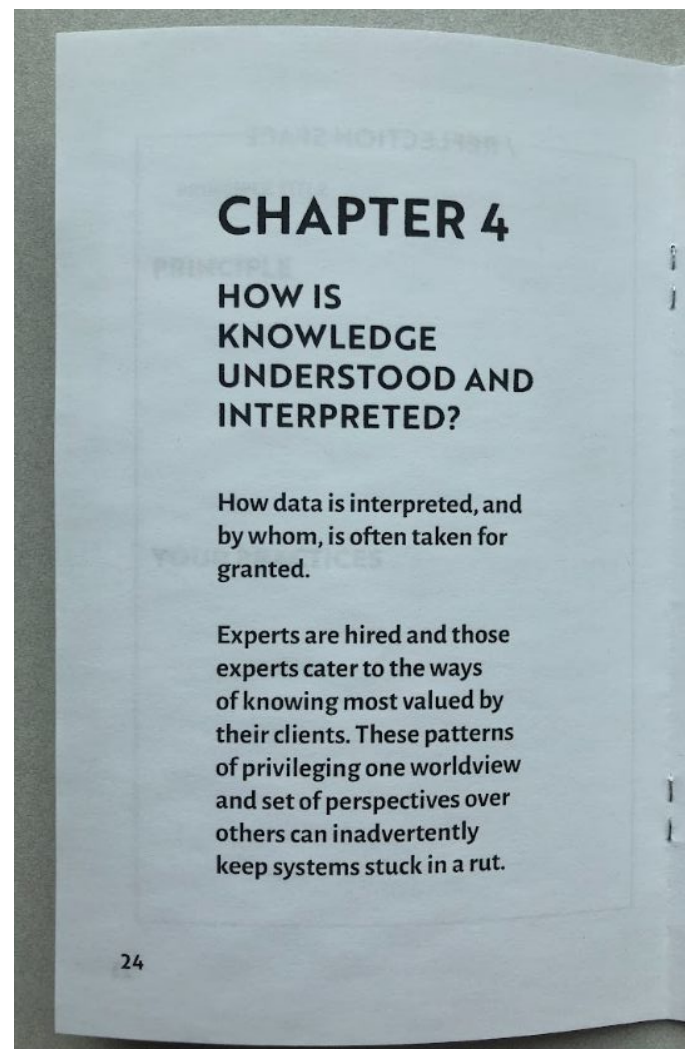
Different ways of knowing leads to different (& better) ways of doing

Rather than seeing an empirical world 'out there' (one that has single verifiable truths that we measure with different research tools), this workshop invited participants to understand knowledge about the world as something we create as a part of the research itself.

Participants appreciated the validation of the variety of ways of knowing that were welcomed in this research approach. They also appreciated the ideas shared on how to situate themselves as researchers, and how to approach people in community both in and outside of work situations.

As an example, some participants identified these approaches as in contrast to some of their experiences with race-based research: whereas collecting raced-based data can feel oppressive, othering, and extractive, the approaches from this workshop offer a way to research race-based experiences in more liberatory ways.

CHAPTER 4

HOW IS KNOWLEDGE UNDERSTOOD AND INTERPRETED?

How data is interpreted, and by whom, is often taken for granted.

Experts are hired and those experts cater to the ways of knowing most valued by their clients. These patterns of privileging one worldview and set of perspectives over others can inadvertently keep systems stuck in a rut.

24

Shifting the research frame and process*

Participants learned about the triple-diamond process of research and design. This approach brings together diverse ways of understanding and benefits from the thinking of multiple disciplines — as we work through cycles of divergence (going wide to learn and question) and convergence (going deep and honing in on details).

Diverge — Create choices

Converge — Make choices
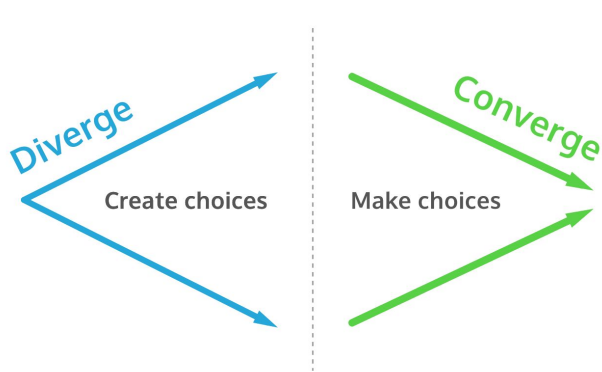
Participants appreciated the need to spend time understanding what is going on for people before defining research problems and questions. The importance of prioritizing community involvement at beginning stages of research and projects felt resonant.

Moving forward, many participants identified that they want to work differently with stories shared in research, be creative and participatory in how insights are gleaned from what is shared, and allow people from community power over their own stories.

* While participants appreciated this research process, they also acknowledged some challenges in adopting it in our current contexts.

Relevance of Critical Design Ethnography to current City of Edmonton work

City staff saw relevance to their work at the City of Edmonton, including clear opportunity areas related to incorporating lived-experience into research and decision making. An example of this shared was to use insights from ethnographic research approaches to help frame and focus research questions that would be otherwise investigated using quantitative research methods.

Additionally, many tools, principles, and mindful approaches of critical design ethnography showed promise to City staff even outside of ethnographic research. These included conversation prompts, story cards, how stories are gathered, how insights are gleaned from those stories, ensuring people have power over their own stories, experiential activities, segmentation activities, flipping the script on council motions, participant recruitment, ways of asking questions, and what we value in the research process.
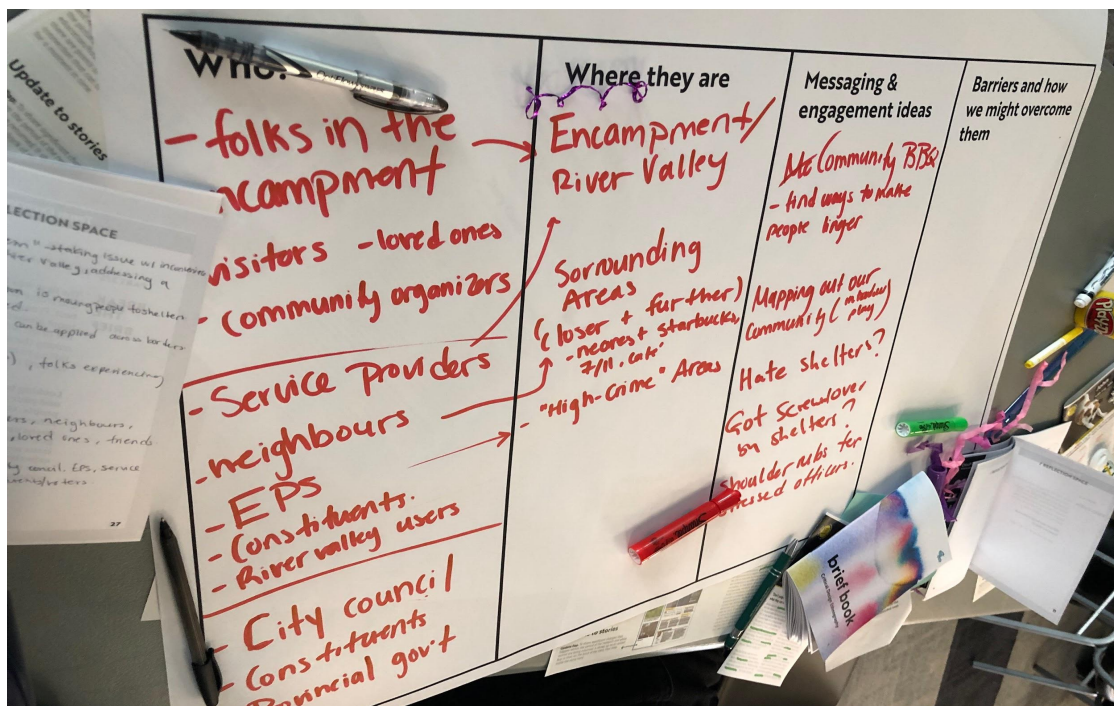
Relevance to current social service agency work

Social service agencies have many deep relationships with community members and often already appreciate the range of stories and situations that people face. The critical design ethnography methodology and tools can help to dig deeper and generate more insights relevant to the work of social service agencies.

Also, because of their situatedness in community, social service agencies are well-suited to work with the day-to-day cultural needs and practices of their communities, in terms of defining research problems & questions, and designing overall research.
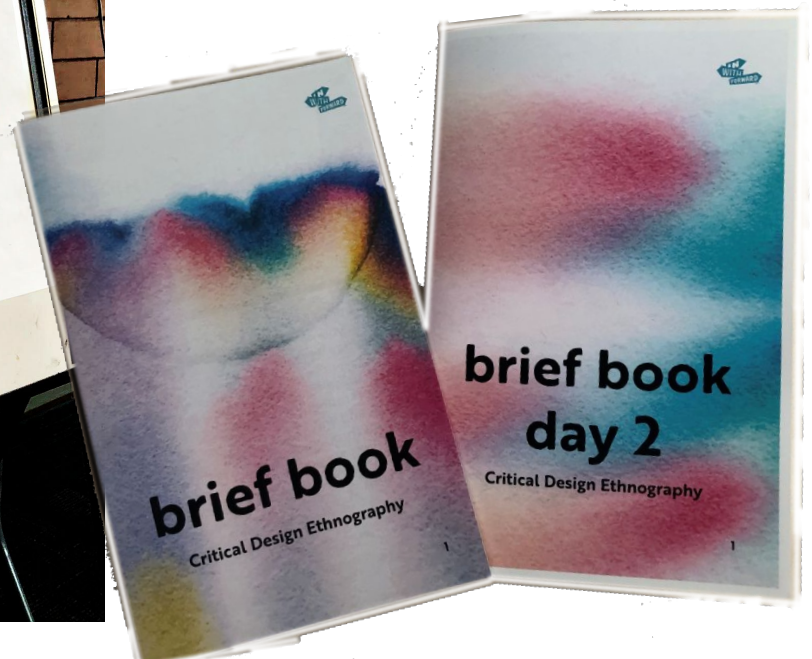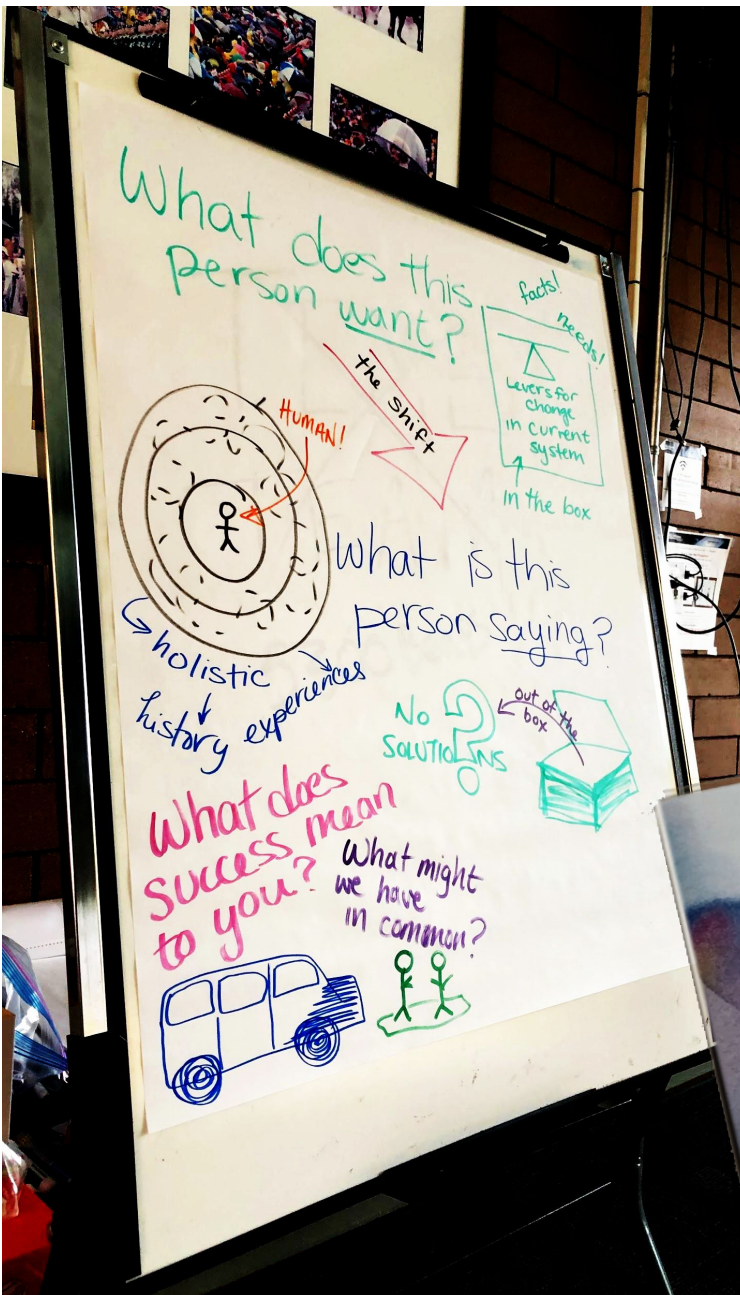
Challenges to doing Critical Design Ethnography at the City of Edmonton

There are always challenges. Participants identified some in adopting critical design ethnography approaches into City work:

1. **It challenges some established ways of doing & thinking**
   a. Corporate structures tend to prefer quantitative data because it is more clear, allowing for easier decision-making. Insights that surface through critical design ethnography may also be quite outside of City norms and require a different approach to risk management and data ownership.

   b. The critical design ethnography approach requires an appreciation for different worldviews. It is a challenge to know how to best introduce new concepts using approachable language while still honouring the different approach.

   c. Doing anything differently requires change management support. The growing use of critical design ethnography would require supports.
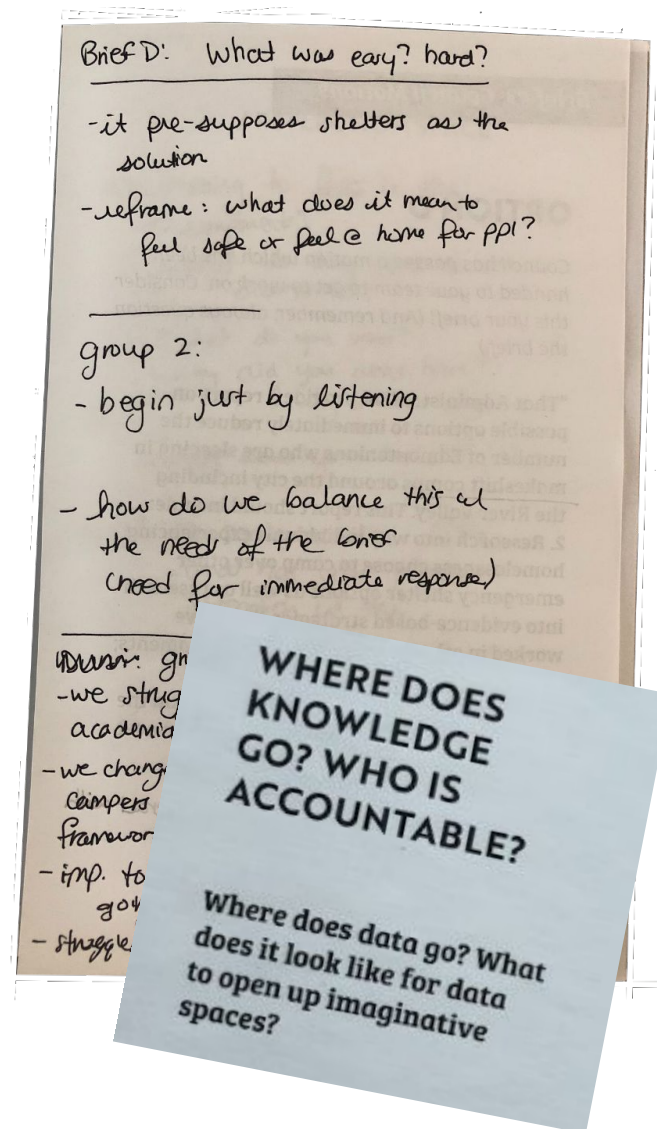
2. **Current practices around research**
    a. Staff and leadership need to be able to hear and meaningfully respond to people's stories. This is hard to do. Staff and leadership are not currently supported to meaningfully integrate qualitative research into recommendations and decision-making.
    b. City Council currently predominantly work with and ask for quantitative research. Support is needed to help them work with qualitative research.
3. **Expertise & Resources**
    a. Resources are required to train staff so that the City has available researchers internally; if not, the City must have the ability to hire qualified consultants.
    b. Resources are also required to act on insights gained through this research and design approach.
4. **Time**
    a. Staff need time to make space for learning vs producing solutions. Project timelines are usually very tight. It requires more time to design, undertake, and share research back.
    b. Staff need time to become adept with this methodology.

Challenges to doing critical design ethnography in social service agency contexts

This approach to research and design invites a different way of working than how agencies are currently structured, resourced, and skilled. It also operates in a different paradigm towards knowledge and expertise than what current structures enable. Here are some specific challenges participants identified:

1. Resources & timelines

Internal research capacity needs strengthening within social service organizations: there are currently few staff positions devoted to research and little support from funders for research positions.

Those organizations specializing in research don't have enough resources to support other organizations to do research.
Grants to do research with timelines that include time to develop the research question with community are needed.

2. Understanding & skill sets

Social service agencies have 'access' to people with meaningful stories, but learning to decipher critical and useful information from those stories is invaluable in mobilizing those relationships towards generating actionable insights.

3. Funders often frame problems and solutions

When funders frame problems and solutions, they undermine community exploration of research questions, findings, and follow up. It limits the ability to understand and address issues in the community.

Social service agencies need time for research - including participatory research problem & question development - to be built into granting processes to be able to have meaningful participation from their community members into the research.

The current timeline of grants and how grants are framed are not conducive to community-engaged research.

Social service agencies need the City and other funders to take the lead in showing that there are different ways of getting better results not only from research but from funding.

Recommendations - What's next for the City of Edmonton?

Based on the experience and feedback, these are good next steps related to City of Edmonton staff and leadership:

1. Provide change management support. Help increase capacities of City staff and leadership in seeking out and working with qualitative research, including critical design ethnography.

2. Hold a follow-up workshop for those City staff who could benefit from further training and understanding - so that they know how to bring critical design ethnography into their work, either via their own research or via hiring qualified contractors.

3. Enable RECOVER to act as a liaison with other City areas to support identification of opportunities to use critical design ethnography to improve research.

4. Enable RECOVER to work with granting programs to create opportunities for social service agencies to do research to inform focus of grants and related programming.

5. It will take time for the impacts of the workshop learnings to percolate. Longer term spaces to support integration of this learning could be helpful.

Recommendations -
What's next for social services agencies?

Working differently with funders

Social service agencies expressed how helpful it would be for funders to take the lead in demonstrating that *there are different ways of getting better results, not only from research but from funds.*

Timelines of grants could allow time for research into how community members would frame the problem and research question, and other elements of participatory research. Granting terms could be framed in more exploratory and less prescriptive ways, to allow more innovative approaches to come from community engaged research.

The City can support social service agencies to develop more formal and thorough understandings of these types of research to be able to justify and advocate for their use to funders.

Funding of research

What if funded research started not with a research question, but with a research curiosity that gets elaborated on through research in community around the question and problem framing itself?

Developing skill sets

Supporting the skill development of researchers made up of the community members who the social service agencies serve would enrich the research and help staff be better able to advocate for and justify these types of approaches to funders.

What if future skills-building and program opportunities included critical design ethnography methods, workshops or research?

## Strengthening relationships with the rest of sector

What if there was a network of people in the sector who are doing similar work, to share skillsets & research?

It would be wonderful for RECOVER Urban Wellbeing to facilitate more networking opportunities among those doing similar work to share learnings, skillsets & research.

In future critical design ethnography trainings, continuing to intentionally mix City staff with staff from social service agencies would enable everyone to continue to learn from each others' contexts.

Summary of key learnings

- Insights garnered through critical design ethnography are directly relevant to enriching both City of Edmonton as well as social service agency work
- Participants appreciated:
  - The principles grounding this kind of research
  - The different ways of knowing and the reframing of problems towards lived experience rather than institutional understandings
  - How it supports people to maintain power over their own stories
  - How to situate themselves as researchers
  - Participatory research tools
  - How insights are gleaned from the research
- There is a desire to learn more about critical design ethnography and how to use it
- For critical design ethnography to be used successfully, there should be:
  - More time and space for learning vs providing solutions
  - Different funding conditions
  - Change management support
- There is a need for more opportunities to learn about this approach and space to support integration of the learnings
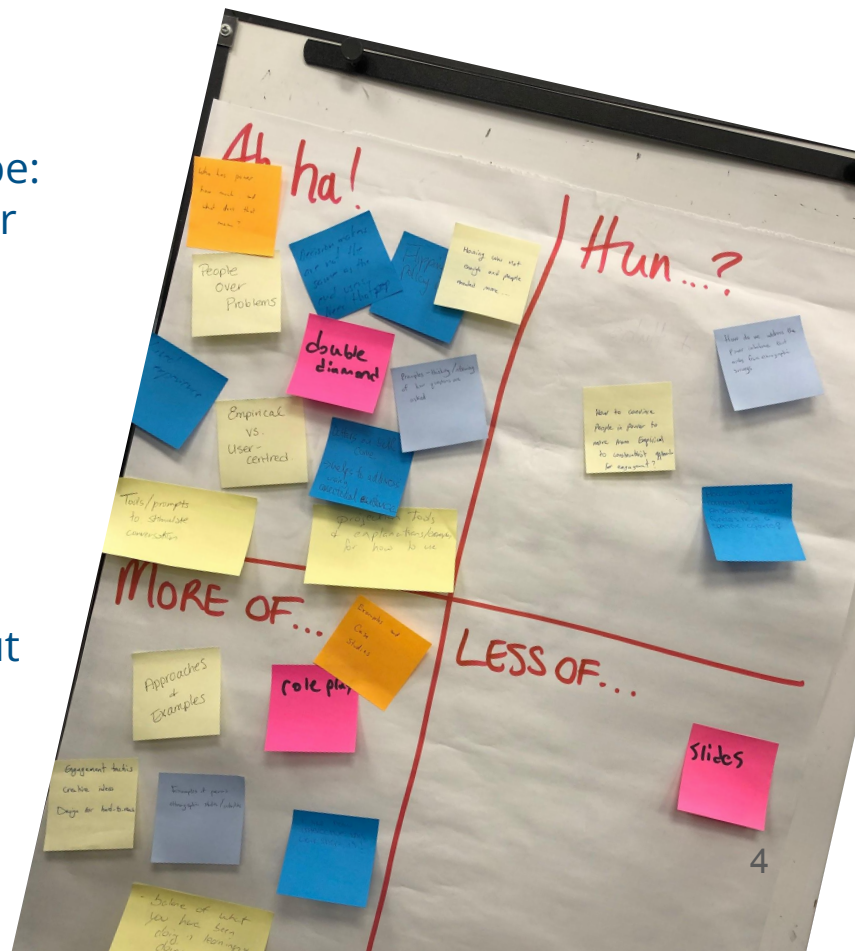
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