



RECOVER.



Measuring Wellbeing Brief

Sep 15, 2021



What and how do we measure what matters?

Far from just a boring, technical exercise, measurement is a deeply ethical exercise reflecting what we value. When politicians point to the stock market as an indicator of economic health, they are conflating the stock market with the economy, and valuing the investor class over ordinary citizens' experience of the economy. When a city points to the number of civic events they run as an indicator of citizen engagement, they are conflating attendance with voice and choice, and valuing who shows up over who might be excluded.

All measurement involves tradeoffs. The question is: from whose worldview and perspective are we measuring? What logics and ideas are baked into our queries and expected responses? Worldview and perspective especially shape contested concepts like individual and community wellbeing. What it means to live well is shaped by our cultural, spiritual, linguistic and philosophical frames.

INTRODUCTION

“Wellbeing has a holographic quality: different meanings are being projected by different agents and what is apparently meant by the use of the term depends on where you stand. Effectively, wellbeing acts like a cultural mirage: it looks like a solid construct, but when we approach it, it fragments and disappears ... Is it individual or collective, permanent or temporary, general or specific, reducible to components, or an irreducible holistic totality, a neutral state or a positive state, a process or an end?”

Despite the conceptual plurality, there's a real uniformity to how Western governments, across the globe, are measuring wellbeing. Writing about the new politics of wellbeing, journalist and author Jules Evan asks:

“Are technocrats imposing their own definition of the good life onto the ‘man and woman’ in the street?”

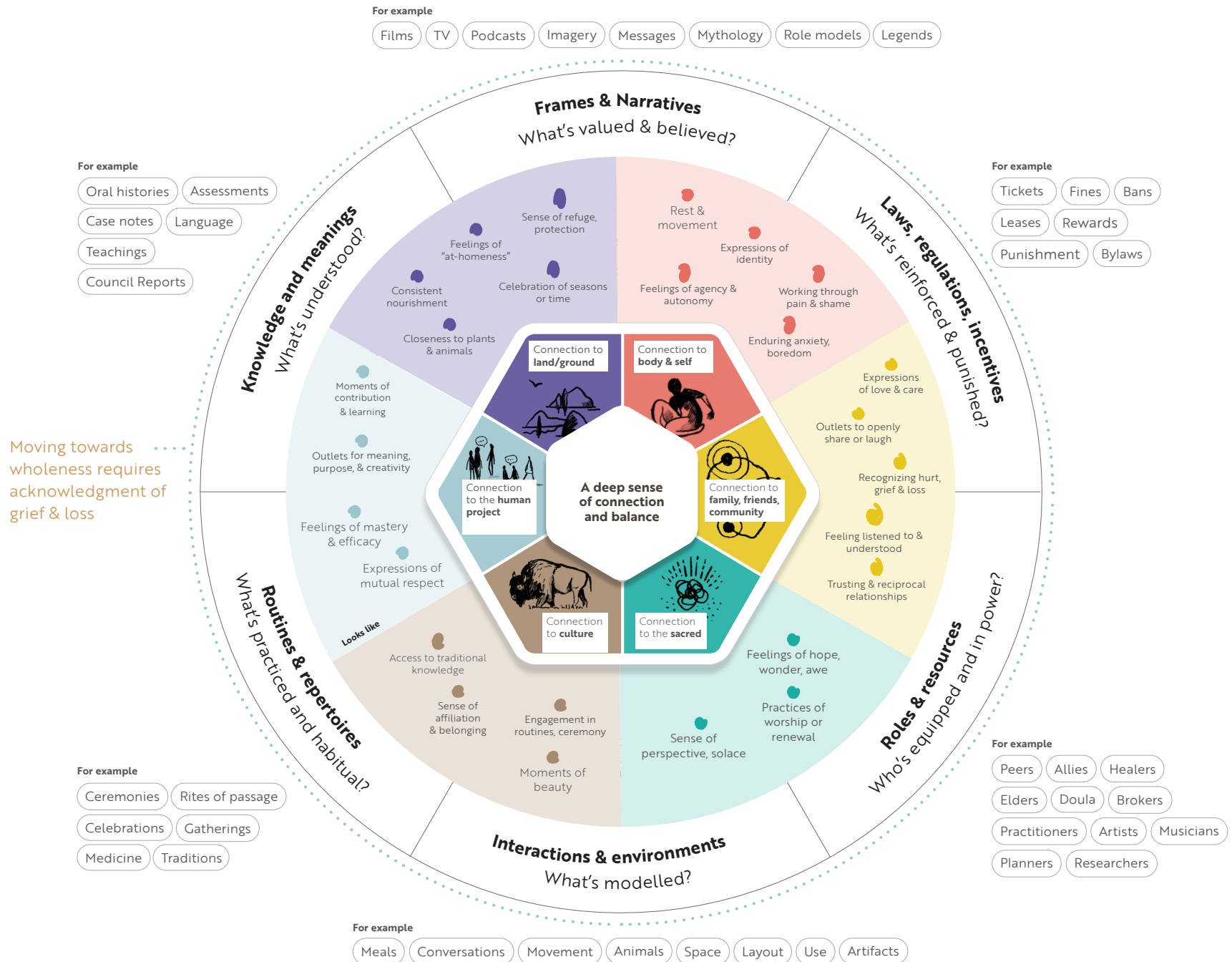
After all, a person can have a job, own a house, vote, and volunteer and also be lonely, anxious, and disconnected from self and family. What one has is not a sufficient proxy for what one is able to do with what they have or how they feel about what they have, can do, and can be. “The essential locus of wellbeing lies within individual subjectivity (Mathews and Izquierdo, 2010).” And yet objective measures – like unemployment rates, income levels, neighbourhood crime rates, and proximity to recreation facilities – remain dominant in policy circles, telling us more about the social and economic environment than whether people feel well within that environment.

We might call this the **presumed objectivity** problem: conflating objective measures with subjective experiences, and thereby imposing a rather top-down concept of wellbeing. Objective measures often expose another problem: that of **representation**. Objective measures tend to leave out the truly marginalized and hard to reach: the folks without fixed addresses, who don't submit taxes, who are no longer included in unemployment counts, and who are on the fringes of formal institutions.

Recover's Soulful City Wellbeing Framework tries to respond to these dual challenges. Drawing on lived experiences of some of Edmonton's most marginalized residents, alongside Indigenous, Western and Eastern worldviews, the framework roots wellbeing in six types of connection – to self, land, culture, family & community, the sacred, and the human project.

Rather than impose a universal definition, the framework enables individuals to define what each type of connection looks and feels like to them, all the while facilitating interpersonal and intercultural comparisons.

Recover Edmonton's Soulful City Wellbeing Framework



Decolonizing Data

Rejecting universalism — the idea that there is one truth rooted in White, Western ways of knowing — is one cornerstone of this moment of racial reckoning. We find ourselves face-to-face with the injustices perpetrated by racism and colonialism. Dismantling systemic injustices means recognizing dominant ideas and opening up to alternative logics. These ideas show up in the data we collect, the metrics we use, the methods we employ, and the language of precision and certainty we extol. Words like legitimate, valid, rational, and generalizable reflect eurocentric thought, and stand in contrast to Indigenous ways of knowing steeped in holism, the interconnection between the sacred and secular, and the spirit of the unknown.



Dominant ideas	Shows up in metrics & data...	Alternative idea	Shows up in metrics & data...
<p>Universalism The idea that there is one reality and one truth.</p>	Objective wellbeing measures	<p>Constructivism The idea that reality is constructed and determined by personal experience.</p>	Subjective wellbeing measures
<p>Scientific rationality The idea that we can establish eternal truths via a replicable method of inquiry.</p>	Quantitative, empirical methods	<p>Cultural wisdom The idea that insight comes from intuition, ceremony, and reciprocal relationships.</p>	Qualitative, multi-epistemic approaches
<p>The cognitive The idea that our relationship with the world is mediated by how we think and talk.</p>	Survey and interview data	<p>The visceral The idea that our relationship with the world is mediated by how we sense: the somatic, the aesthetic, the divine.</p>	Observational and phenomenological data
<p>Binaries The idea that there is good and bad, healthy and unhealthy, risk and safety, male and female, etc.</p>	Use of discrete categories	<p>Tensions The idea that experiences are on a continuum, rather than either/or.</p>	Use of fluid and flexible tags
<p>Progress as accumulation The idea that progress rests on amassing social and economic wealth.</p>	GDP; economic growth metrics	<p>Progress as relatedness The idea that progress rests on the interdependency between the spiritual and material.</p>	Social network analysis; Beauty and meaning metrics; Ecological metrics

Alternative Datas

If objective and material measures enshrine a singular worldview and aren't a sufficient proxy for a concept as multi-perspective as wellbeing, what else might we measure? What types of information can offer insight into whether people are experiencing a good life, connected to that which matters to them? And, knowing this information, how can cities foster the conditions for good living for all of their residents, especially those facing exclusion and marginalization?



Types of information	Measurement approaches
<p>Emotions and senses</p> <p>We can capture self-reported feelings and sensations across time and places. For example, how often do people report feeling connected, heard, respected, understood? How often do people report feeling lost, anxious, alone? Does this change over time or across places?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Subjective and Eudaimonic Scales • Experience and day reconstruction sampling. Could include 'Feeling buttons' installed in public places (an adapted version of the 'smiley' customer feedback devices)
<p>Capabilities and functionings</p> <p>Drawing on Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum's work, we can look at whether people have the capability to live the type of life they value, alongside their functioning, or how they actually live their life. For example, Nussbaum identifies emotions as a core capability for a good or well life: we should be able to love those who love and care for us, to grieve at their absence, and to experience longing. So we might measure: are spaces, rituals, and resources for grief and loss equally available? Do people report being able to grieve?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Subjective and Eudaimonic Scales • Resource mapping and utilization of supports (objective measures)
<p>Activities and interactions</p> <p>We can capture what fills people's time: where they go, who and what they engage with, and how they perceive the value of this time. What kinds of activities and interactions engender a sense of connection versus alienation? .</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Experience and day reconstruction sampling • Participatory action research including retrospective interviews

Types of information	Measurement approaches
<p>Relationships</p> <p>We can capture who people engage with, and the nature of these relationships: whether they are instrumental or reciprocal, their sources of support? How connected do people feel to those who are around them, and how fulfilled are they by their relationships?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Social network mapping via surveys or interviews
<p>Meanings</p> <p>We can capture how people make sense of the events and moments of their life through their various forms of expression and communication like stories, social media, art, and speech.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Auto-ethnography & micro- story collection (using digital platforms like SenseMaker) • Phenomenological interviews • Social media sentiment analysis
<p>Meta-Narratives</p> <p>We can capture the messages people receive and propagate about social norms, expectations, and values. What perceptions do people hold about people who are different to them? What ideas do people see represented about success and happiness? What do people see as appropriate expressions of grief and loss? Does this change over time? .</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Attitudinal surveys • Discourse analysis

Alternative Methods

To measure is to make visible. Making visible emotions, capabilities & functionings, interactions & activities, relationships, meanings, and meta-narratives requires research methods and instruments that can get inside of people's heads to tap into their perceptions, values, and beliefs -- linking what they do with how they feel. Here's a hodgepodge of methods used by researchers from a range of disciplines including social psychology, cultural and media studies, anthropology, cybernetics & complexity theory.



Method	Description	Examples	Limitations
Subjective and Eudaemonic scales	Survey data which allows people to express preferences and reflect on their lives across multiple domains (e.g self-determination, autonomy, positive relationships, purpose, meaning)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ryff • Seligman • Warwick and Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scale 	Existing validated scales developed by White scholars and mainly come from eurocentric frameworks.
Attitudinal and surveys	Survey data which enables people to describe shifts in issue recognition, beliefs, saliency of messages, intentions and reported actions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Organizational Research Services 	Relies on written questions; survey must be developed and validated.
Experience sampling	Self-report data on feelings or experiences of connection (e.g a moment of awe with nature) collected at many points in time to create real-time picture	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Csikszentmihalyi 	Can be resource intensive to collect and analyze; requires consistent inputting.
Day reconstruction sampling	Self-report data on interactions and experiences from the day before	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Kahneman 	Can be resource intensive to collect and analyze.
Sentiment analysis	Symbol and language analysis of Facebook and other social media platforms for words, phrases, concepts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Schwartz 	Representation bias: skewed towards younger, affluent users; excludes people not on social media

Method	Description	Examples	Limitations
Participatory action research and ethnography	<p>Teams of residents who observe and interview fellow residents; documenting shifts in perceptions, relationships, connection points</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Averill • Reason and Bradbury 	<p>Requires infrastructure: training and supporting community members to take on research roles.</p>
Auto-ethnography and story collection	<p>A diverse set of individuals given an open platform (website, app) to write, voice record, film their points of connection and disconnection at one point, or over time.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Snowden 	<p>Requires heavy synthesis and collective interpretation. A big part of the value of this method lies in the group sense-making process.</p>
Well-being panels	<p>Groups of individuals and families whose points of connection are tracked overtime alongside life events (e.g unemployment, births, deaths)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Nielsen Families 	<p>Requires longer-term staffing and resourcing.</p>

A Thought Experiment

Applying these alternative data and methods to Recover's Soulful City Framework, we can explore how each of the six types of connection might be made visible and tracked, over time.

Taking one of the six types of connection as an example -- self and body -- we can start to compile ways we can attune to individual and population level experiences, and gain a picture of how Edmontonians relate to their bodies and self-beliefs.



	Some ways connection to self and body might be measured...
Emotions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Emotions over time • Positive emotional regulation • Negative emotional regulation • Presentness / Applied mindfulness
Capabilities and Functionings	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Access to health and mental health care • Access to body-based healing • Relationship with health & healing practitioners • Bodily integrity; protection from violence and assault • Sexual satisfaction
Interactions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Amount of time spent on interests • Amount and quality of sleep • Relationship with food and sustenance • Energy and movement levels • Self-care rituals and routines
Relationships	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Self-compassion • Self-confidence and self-efficacy • Trust of self
Meanings	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Language and metaphors used to describe body: wholeness & integration versus fragmentation & dissociation
Metanarratives	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Norms and perceptions of homeless 'bodies' and displaced bodies • Salience of self-care across race, class, gender, sexuality, etc.

An opportunity and challenge

Regardless of the type of data collected, or the methods used, attributing changes in wellbeing to any one initiative like Recover is hard. So many variables are at play, and isolating the effects in real world environments requires lots of data and resources. The value in developing a measurement framework for Recover isn't so much to evaluate Recover and make claims about the effectiveness of any one prototype, but to frame measurement as a tool for cultural change.

Only by developing and bringing to life a set of measures, grounded in different ethical and epistemological frameworks, can the city and its many constituents and stakeholders begin to grapple with what collective change might look and feel like. In this way, a measurement framework helps foster a different knowledge base and meanings, one of the key levers for social transformation.

