The questions of the ages

Stories, numbers and insights on aging across Canada

IN WITH FORWARD

The questions of the ages

> Why do people have to be this lonely? What's the point of it all? Millions of people in this world, all of them yearning, looking to others to satisfy them, yet isolating themselves. Why? Was the earth put here just to nourish human loneliness?

- Haruki Murakami

> If one's different, one's bound to be lonely.

- Aldous Huxley

The questions of the ages

Five chapters

Introduction

Context and background, plus ways to navigate this narrative.

1 — Getting around · Setting the scene · So what? · What this is · Sources of data · Who we are — 🕐 10 minutes
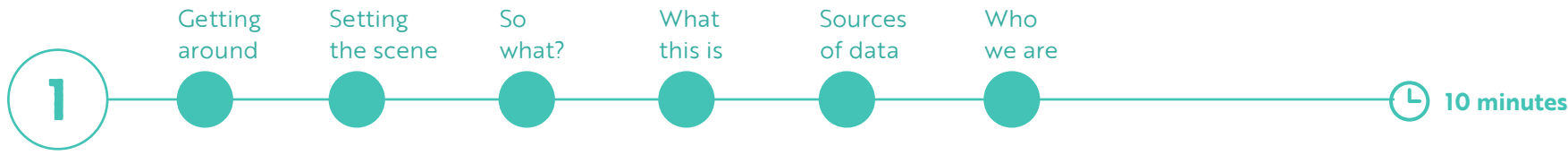
Starting with people

Grounding ourselves in the every day realities of people age 50 and up.

2 — Introduction · The weighted · The integrators · The passers · The liberators · The producers · The transcendents · Aggregate data — 🕐 15 minutes
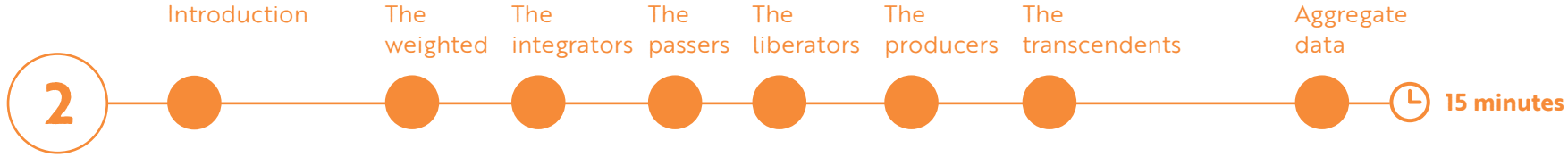
Collecting stories

A mixed methods approach to recruitment, engagement and data synthesis.

3 A — Introduction · Value propositions — 🕐 5 minutes

B — Practices · Features · Tools — 🕐 5 minutes

C — From profiles · Creating the spreadsheet — 🕐 5 minutes
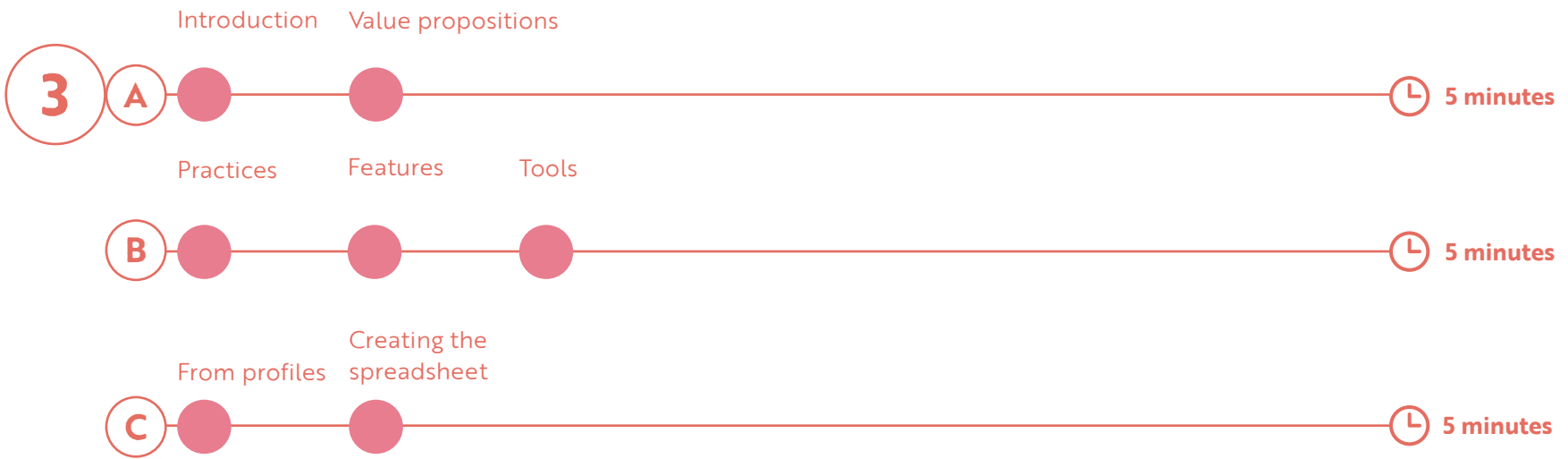
Patterns

Five themes to help us understand loneliness and isolation in aging.

4 — **Trend 1:** Health is not singular · **Trend 2:** Immigrant, men of visible minority · **Trend 3:** Satisficing versus satisfaction · **Trend 4:** Low sense of control · **Trend 5:** Declining desire to look ahead — 🕐 15 minutes

Lenses

Understanding culture as a lever for good aging.

5 — Provocations · Reflections · Pluralistic lens · What next? — 🕐 10 minutes

The questions of the ages

Introduction

Is isolation and loneliness an inherent part of the human condition — interwoven into our mortal fabric — or a modern dis-ease to diagnose and treat?

Isolation and loneliness are as deadly as smoking, the public health studies suggest. Isolation and loneliness can be liberating, some spiritual traditions and iconic literature counsels.

Who sets the frame? When is isolation and loneliness unhealthy, even dangerous? When is isolation and loneliness normal, even developmental?
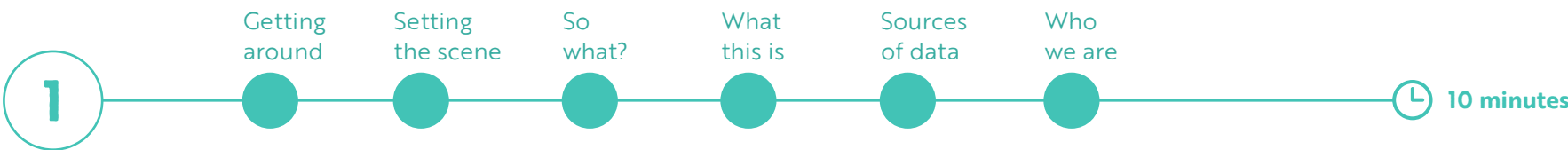
1 — Getting around — Setting the scene — So what? — What this is — Sources of data — Who we are — 🕐 10 minutes

The questions of the ages

Getting around | Setting the scene | So what? | What this is | Sources of data | Who we are
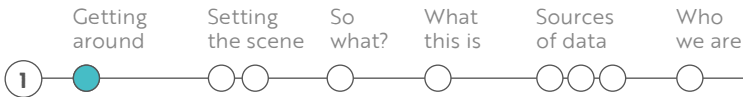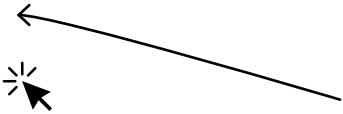
Getting around

There are three ways to navigate through

This is how to navigate through a section. Just click on the circle and it will take you to that heading. It also helps you know how far along you are.
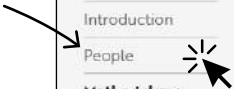
1. Use the left-hand menu bar to move between chapters.

2. Use the top-right buttons to navigate sections of each chapter.

3. Wish to read cover-to-cover? Use the next icon to peruse in order.

Each chapter begins with an overview of what it contains, like the example below.

Halfway through a section and want to go to another chapter? You can click here. It will always take you to the overview page and you can go from there.

Seniors Aggregation

Introduction

People

Methodology
1. Meeting
2. Engaging
3. Analyzing

Patterns

Lenses

Case Study

1 — Welcome 2 — Who did we meet **3 — Methodology** 4 — Patterns 5 — Lenses

How did we engage?

Once we've met an older person, then what? How do we open up rich conversations about big topics and gain a picture of some of the structures and cultures in which they are embedded? Exploring questions of experience, meaning, and context calls for a blended methodology steeped in anti-oppressive research practices.

Practices   Features   Tools

3 B   5 minutes

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Want to explore a different chapter? You can use these on the overview pages.

Want to jump ahead, find something in particular? Click on the orange dots to go to that page in the section.

# The questions of the ages

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Each one of us has lived through some devastation, some loneliness, some weather superstorm or spiritual superstorm, when we look at each other we must say, I understand. I understand how you feel because I have been there myself. We must support each other and empathize with each other because each of us is more alike than we are unlike.

- Maya Angelou

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All great and precious things are lonely.

- John Steinbeck
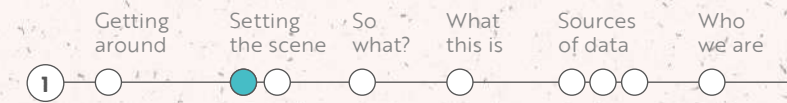
Setting the scene

We, in the West, are largely living within a frame of isolation and loneliness as dis-ease. Problematizing isolation and loneliness has yielded a flurry of policies and services like Ministers and Departments of Loneliness, social programs, befriending schemes, and senior centres. The public narrative, supported by population-wide surveys, is that isolation and loneliness are on the rise, especially amongst older adults: a painful byproduct of longer life expectancy coupled with modern economic and family systems.

Yet these policies, services, programs, schemes and centres often struggle to effectively engage the isolated and lonely. After all, how do you locate and attract those who are left out and excluded, those who have purposely withdrawn and distanced themselves, alongside those who are content with the way things are?
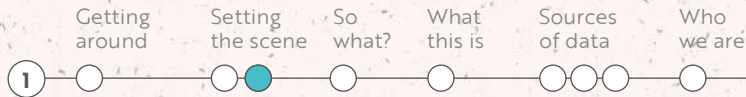
The questions of the ages

That has been our starting point. Over the past three years, we've listened to 113 people over the age of fifty share their stories, spending time where they are at — in homes and shelters, bingo halls and malls, hairdressers and pharmacies — all to understand the gap between their everyday experiences and their versions of good living, good aging, and in some cases, good dying.

While we often think about isolation and loneliness as sources of separation and solitariness, the experience of isolation and loneliness may, in fact, be a point of connection, especially in this physically-distant, mask-donning pandemic era. How we make meaning from this not uncommon experience, and how it squares with our conceptions of good living, good aging, and good dying can shed light on what problems our modern welfare state may need to solve, and how we go about solving them.
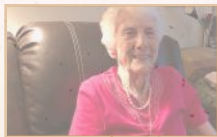
The questions of the ages

Getting around
Setting the scene
So what?
What this is
Sources of data
Who we are

1

So what?

How we make meaning from an experience like isolation and loneliness speaks to the culture(s) we are immersed in, which set expectations, promulgate beliefs, promote behaviors, and determine roles and boundaries. And yet, so often, the culture around aging isn't made explicit, or contestable. It is just the air we breathe and the water in which we swim. As we've been learning through long-term work with the City of Edmonton, responding to loneliness and isolation brings us to the realm of culture and spirtuality. Investing in culture change -- not only policy and service reform -- may be what's necessary if we are to make progress on something as existential and spiritually situated as living and dying well.

The questions of the ages

What this is

This document is part scrapbook, part trend report, part essay, and part case study.

As a scrapbook...

...it showcases some of the methods and tactics we use to meet people over age fifty in the settings they are already in, and highlights the disciplines we use to make sense of what we encounter.

As a trend report...

...it introduces you to 113 people's stories, offering aggregated portraits of aging across Canada.

As an essay...

...it shares how we have used cultural theory to interrogate concepts like isolation and wellness, and poses provocative questions to those who frame policy problems, allocate resources and deliver services.

Finally, as a case study...

...it provides an in-progress example of how one team at the City of Edmonton has started to embrace culture as a key lever for social change.
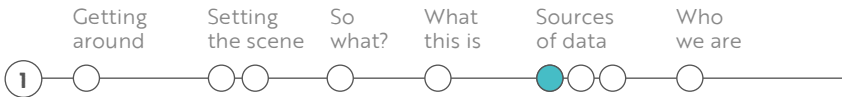
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Introduction

People

Methodology

Patterns

Lenses

Case Study

Getting around   Setting the scene   So what?   What this is   Sources of data   Who we are

1

Our sources of data

Since 2017, our team has spent time in communities across three Canadian provinces: Alberta, British Columbia, and Ontario. Partnering with cities, federal government departments, foundations, and non-profits, we've set out to document lived experiences of marginalization, as defined by dominant policy discourse.

That's led us to ground concepts like homelessness, precarious housing, unemployment, addiction, newcomer settlement, isolation, and loneliness in people's everyday realities, interactions, relationships, meanings and aspirations. The data we offer here, drawn from stories and critical theory, comes from thirteen separate projects. While each project explored a distinct set of constructs, they also shared some common lines of inquiry. Across all projects, we probed how people defined a "good" life: their values, stressors, sense of identity, and perceived social supports.

JUNE 2016

Experiences of adults who are long-term unemployed in Peterborough

Partners and Funders

Atkinson Foundation

Key Concepts Explored

Long term unemployment, sense of individual and group identity, desired status and roles, helpful and unhelpful help

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DECEMBER 2017

Experiences of street-involved adults in inner city Edmonton

Partners and Funders

City of Edmonton

Key Concepts Explored

Sense of self and future, perceived supports, desired outcomes, wellbeing

The questions of the ages

Getting around

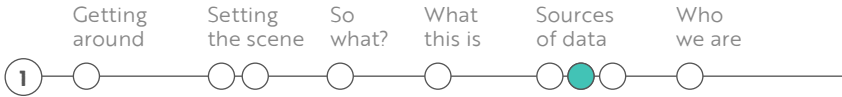Setting the scene

So what?

What this is

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Who we are

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JUNE 2016

Experiences of adults living in a social housing complex in West Toronto

Partners and Funders

Population Health Solutions Lab

Key Concepts Explored

Sense of place, identity, community, isolation, loneliness, aging, desired support

JULY 2018

Experiences of adults on the economic margins in the Downtown Eastside of Vancouver

Partners and Funders

Embers Eastside Works

Key Concepts Explored

Sense of purpose, productivity and security; perceived barriers, desired economic outcomes

OCTOBER 2018

Experiences of Arabic-speaking immigrants in the Greater Toronto Area

Partners and Funders

Immigration, Refugee, and Citizenship Canada

Key Concepts Explored

Sense of place, community, role, purpose, loss, future orientation

OCTOBER 2018

Experiences of older adults across Metro Vancouver

Partners and Funders

City of Vancouver

Key Concepts Explored

Sense of location, dislocation, alienation, isolation, loneliness, aging, helpful and unhelpful help

OCTOBER 2018

Experiences of adults living in rooming houses in East Toronto

Partners and Funders

Atkinson Foundation

Key Concepts Explored

Long term unemployment, sense of individual and group identity, desired status and roles, helpful and unhelpful help

NOVEMBER 2018

Experiences of older refugees and immigrants in Surrey

Partners and Funders

Immigration, Refugee, and Citizenship Canada

Key Concepts Explored

Sense of place, community, role, purpose, loss, future orientation
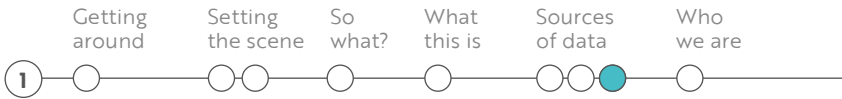
The questions of the ages

Getting around Setting the scene So what? What this is Sources of data Who we are

1

DECEMBER 2018

Experiences of adults living in a social housing complex in Surrey

Partners and Funders

Options Community Services with funding from Conconi Foundation and McConnell Foundation

Key Concepts Explored

Sense of place, identity, community, perceived stigma, ideal versus actual support

FEBRUARY 2019

Experiences of adults in the criminal justice system

Partners and Funders

Ministry of Justice

Key Concepts Explored

Sense of identity, motivation, desired outcomes, institutional barriers and structures

FEBRUARY 2019

Experiences of street-involved adults in two Edmonton neighbourhoods

Partners and Funders

City of Edmonton

Key Concepts Explored

Sense of place, stigma, perceptions of help, desired supports and outcomes

FEBRUARY 2019

Experiences of isolation, loneliness, and aging in the Lower Mainland of BC

Partners and Funders

Allies in Aging, McConnell Foundation, Employment & Social Development Canada

Key Concepts Explored

Sense of location, dislocation, alienation, isolation, loneliness, helpful and unhelpful help

OCTOBER 2019

Experiences of street-involved adults using crisis services

Partners and Funders

REACH Edmonton

Key Concepts Explored

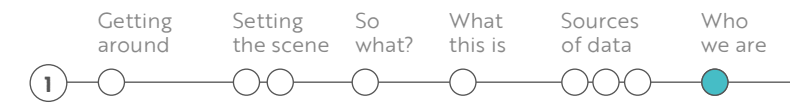Sense of identity, use of services, conceptions of healing and help, desired outcomes

Getting around   Setting the scene   So what?   What this is   Sources of data   Who we are

1

The questions of the ages

Who we are

We're a team whose mission is to reimagine our social systems from the perspective of people who have been left out, sidelined and marginalized. We are not experts in aging studies. We are story collectors, community-based researchers, and designers.

Our team reflects some range of identities and lived experiences -- many of which are privileged. If we were to make a word cloud to describe our full team, we might use: settler, millenial, Cis-gendered, middle class, post-secondary educated, able-bodied, Latinx, Indian, Chinese, Korean, Jewish, White, queer, bi, straight, citizen, immigrant, English as a first and second language, agnostic, buddhist, Muslim, Christian.

What brings us together is a commitment to learning: we try to listen, co-design and experiment with practices, policies and narratives that interrupt patterns of exclusion. As much as we seek to disrupt the status quo, we recognize we are also products of dominant and oppressive cultures. We're on a never ending journey to diversify our systems of thought and action.
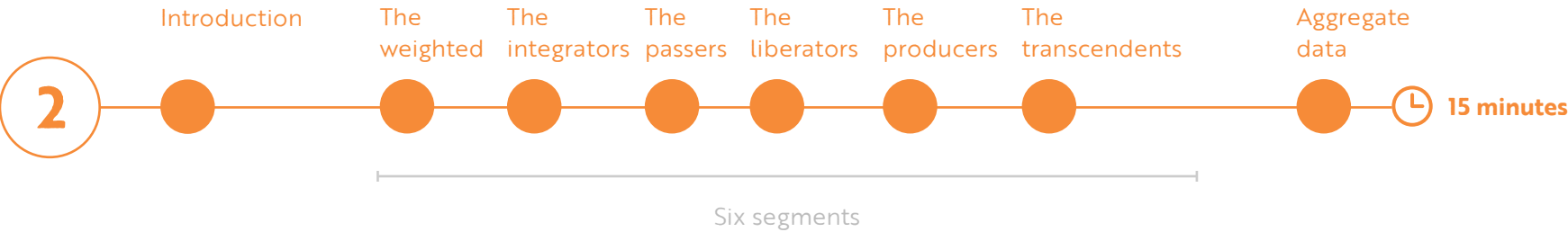

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The questions of the ages

Who did we meet?

2 — Introduction — The weighted — The integrators — The passers — The liberators — The producers — The transcendents — Aggregate data — 🕐 **15 minutes**

Six segments

The questions of the ages

Meet SH, William, Bob, Bai and Bertha. They are five of the 113 people who graciously shared their stories. While no two people's stories are the same, these five stories reflect five groupings, or segments, within the full dataset.

A segment is a group of people connected by a common narrative, with similar motivations, latent needs, and desires. Rather than treat older people as a homogeneous group, segments enable us to recognize a continuum of lived experiences, and design policy, services and narratives from multiple, patterned perspectives. Segments are neither mutually exclusive nor fixed.

Six segments

**The
weighted**

**The
Integrators**

**The
passers**

**The
liberators**

**The
producers**

**The
transcendents**

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segments   data

2

Segments

The weighted

Bogged down by past traumas and angsty memories, The Weighted go about their days in a fog, trying to forget, or at least not feel too much. Often living with addictions, The Weighted are, in many ways, courting the end. They neither avoid their mortality nor embrace the possibility of transcendence. Instead, they are just seeking some relief from the cumulative pain.

William
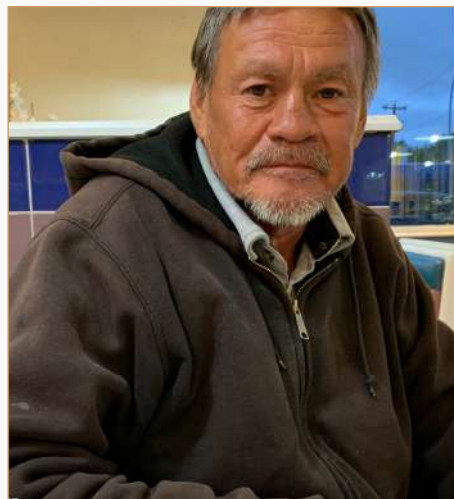
Male   Age 67   Cree

❝❝ It hurts to talk about it. To have to kill a human being. Even if that's part of the job.

"My story is quite different," William solemnly acknowledges, recounting the night that changed everything. Even military service, a deployment to Afghanistan, and being thrown from a bull couldn't prepare William for such an existential quandary: shoot or be killed, by a native brother on his native lands. A domestic violence call turned sour quickly: "I had to shoot him. Do or die. I think about it every day." As an RCMP constable working on reserves across Saskatchewan, Ontario and Alberta, William had reveled in his work. "I enjoyed helping my own people."

Becoming homeless himself, in need of help, still strikes William as unfathomable. The man who once rode bulls in Texas now drags a decrepit walker across an East Edmonton parking lot to the liquor store. His bladder and short-term memory have started to fail him — but past events still haunt him. "In 2012, I lost my mom, and became an alcoholic. I don't know why. I shouldn't have. It was my first time with addiction."

Most days, William wanders to the bus stop, seeking to escape the shelters. "I hate that place:, people fighting and stabbing each other day and night." He heads to a part of town where he might catch a glimpse of family, and the daughter he adopted. He's lost touch with family — and with the things he loves most: training horses, farming, culture, and music. Still, he believes he might "get his life back on track" if he had the support of somebody like a "life tutor." They'd be different than just a worker. "I do have a worker, but I don't even know her name. She tells me basically nothing."

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The questions of the ages

Segments

The integrators

Rejecting the goal of independence, The Integrators embrace interdependence. They see themselves as one part of a whole, and see their relationships with family and their chosen community as key to their wellbeing. Rather than focus on the self, The Integrators seek connectedness and balance.

SH

Female	Age 72	Immigrant
Kenyan	Toronto	

❝ *If I'm not here, I'm at Tim Horton's. We talk and have a lot of fun."*

SH has the wisdom of an elder and the energy of a teenager. The first time we knock on her door, she invites us in, serves us orange juice on a silver tray, and proudly shows off her henna painted hands, all the while giggling about last night's sleepover with her new Tunisian friend. They met at Tim Horton's. Tim Horton's plays a central function in SH's life: it is her gathering place, a source of laughter, friendships, and cross-cultural connections. SH's days are demarcated by praying (her Muslim faith is strong), socializing, and shopping. SH loves vibrant colours and has an enviable collection of perfumes.

She enjoys the simple things in life. It wasn't always that way. She was a new immigrant to Canada from Kenya raising six young kids when her husband died in a car accident. "It was a very, very hard time." Her kids are now thriving and live across Canada. She shows off photos of her grandkids on Whatsapp, which is how her family stays in close touch. As much as being a mother is central to her identity, so too is her independence. "I would never live with my kids. A son-in-law or daughter-inlaw could kick me out any time." Besides, SH needs space for entertaining. She often invites friends over, and even has an extra bed in her living room. Her biggest complaint is the mold in her bedroom and the lack of a balcony for fresh air. She fondly recalls social life back in Kenya, where everybody keeps their doors open, late into the night, to talk and share.

The questions of the ages

Segments

The passers

Seemingly content with the present, The Passers hold no grand ambitions or overarching narratives about the passage of time. "Life is what it is." They spend their days reading, watching TV, playing the lotto, and, as much as possible, avoiding deep thought about either life or death.

Bob

Male	75	White

Canadian-born

> I don't really have a use, designated purpose anymore. And I don't want one. I don't want any obligations.

Every wall of Bob's apartment is covered in art. The paintings have stories about past times and relationships. Now, they keep him company. The TV does as well - CNN from morning until night. "Trump is better than Netflix".

Bob says he's from a broken home and it seems like this shaped his relationships his whole life. He has 3 ex-wives, and kids, but hasn't talked to them in a while and that's "quite okay." "They're busy and I don't want to interfere with their lives." Bob doesn't want to burden anyone, it's repeated again and again. "I don't want anyone to worry about me." "Before, I had cars, went on trips, but that's in the past."

At retirement Bob realized his pension wouldn't be enough. So he withdrew his $17,000 in RRSPs and spent it all to get himself to the poverty line. He was then able to line up subsidies for housing and transport etc. His days are the same: wakes up, has 2 cigarettes, a glass of pepsi, and smokes a joint. Sometimes his lady friend visits. "I get by, sure I'd like to have more money. But I don't want to alter my life."
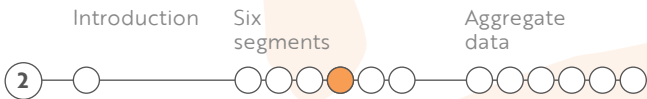
The questions of the ages

Segments

The liberators

After a lifetime of duty and obligation, The Liberators approach older age as a gift they shouldn't squander. Seeing themselves as a project, worthy of investment, The Liberators are focused on maintaining their, often hard won, freedom and independence. Many of The Liberators are women, long in caring and other supportive roles, who are ready to turn inward and flourish.

Bai
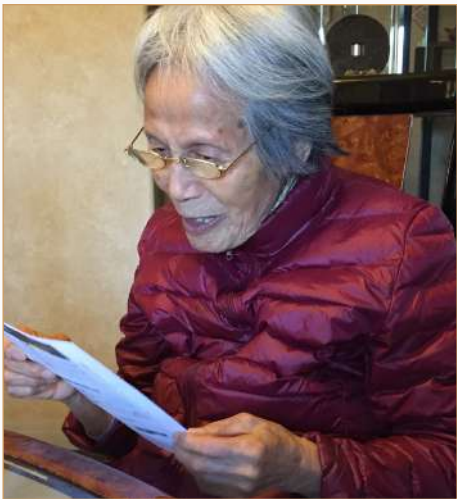
Female   Age 84   Born in China

❝ *I'm very helpful. Everyone is very good to me and I have many friends here. I am very proud and optimistic about my current life*

We are welcomed into Bai's house with open arms, homemade dumplings and walnuts served on Chinese porcelain. She lives alone in a large house owned by her son, and has been insistent on her independence. "I really like the living environment in Canada. The traffic here is very convenient and the road conditions are safe. In China, the road conditions are scary."

At age 84, Bai remains active, physically and socially. "I don't feel like I'm 80, I'm more like 60!" She grows vegetables in her garden, goes to church multiple times a week, and does her own shopping, cooking, and cleaning. Her younger days were a stark contrast to the life she's living now. Working as a construction material researcher during the Chinese Cultural Revolution made her family the subject of severe persecution.

She's grateful for what she has now, and tries to share her appreciation with others. Contribution is an important value. But she doesn't see how that can extend to people outside of her direct network. She sees the language barrier as a block to wider community engagement, such as voting in the recent election in Vancouver, or joining programs in the community centres "because of the language barrier, even if I want to fit in, I can't."

The questions of the ages

Segments

The producers

Carrying a sense of unfinished business into older adulthood, The Producers are looking for status, recognition, and relevancy. Uncomfortable with the idea of illness or disability, The Producers are highly motivated to overcome physical barriers and 'prove' themselves. Achievement still feels within reach, if only society would help them.

Bertha

Female	Age 84	White

Canadian-born	New Westminster

> In my mind, I've never felt differently: 50, 65, 79, it's all been the same, until now. Until the radiation three months ago.

Bertha doesn't know if her hair will grow back, or if her legs will regain their strength. She hopes so. More than hopes: she's determined to make it happen.. She only found out about the cancer six months ago. At age 84 she was living life with exuberance.

Luncheons, bridge, breakfasts with highschool friends, and still driving herself. Bertha's life has always been full - family, friends, shopping, work (she started a publishing company), travel, and other activities. "I chaired too many committees."

But when she started radiation, it presented itself as a 10 ton roadblock to her life. "This cancer annoys the hell out of me." When we visit with her at her house she uses a walker to get around. "I will drive again" she says repeatedly. "I have things still to do. I have the skeleton of my second book I have to write." Bertha lives with her daughter, and has lots of people around. "This place is like grand central station." How old she feels? "What a dumb question. Who knows what 84 feels like?"

The questions of the ages

Segments

The transcendents

Seemingly ready to go, when the time comes, The Transcendents neither fear nor avoid their mortality. While they recognize how uncomfortable others are with illness, disability and death, The Transcendents see this as a natural part of the life cycle. It's not that The Transcedents have 'given up' life -- they may still be actively engaged in pursuits -- but they are no longer attached to the concept of self or other.

Mr. Raj

Male   Age 75   Immigrant

Visible minority   Burnaby

> I am alone, and everybody likes someone to talk to, someone who speaks the same language – not language but at the same level."

The pain from Mr. Raj's arthritis envelops him. He still pushes himself to work, as a parking attendant, whenever he is offered a four-hour shift, but he doesn't really find it stimulating or rewarding. These days it is only the end-of-life questions that feel worthy of Mr. Raj's limited energy. So, though he is lonely, the only company he would relish would be that of a moral philosopher, someone well-educated like himself who is not "trying to achieve in the real [material] world."

Mr. Raj's career has allowed him to travel the globe: "I have lived my whole life alone. I have lived in all the desirable places, but I have had an extremely bad experience of human connections." He has tried to create meaning in his life by using all surplus income to help those with no prospects, and he is a strong self-advocate when challenged by the system, but can do nothing for his arthritic pain. "The only relief I can feel now is to die."

The questions of the ages

113 seniors in aggregate

By compiling all 113 portraits in one spreadsheet, and consistently coding themes, we can spot trends, identify anomalies, and gain a broad, statistical vantage point. Combining quantitative and qualitative data from the full set of stories, a fuller picture emerges.

Ethnicity

Our data set consists of similar numbers of white seniors compared with visible minorities and Indigenous seniors. 11.5% of our participants did not disclose their ethnicity.

Unknown
11.5%

Indigenous
17.7%

White
40.7%

Visible Minority
30.1%

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Gender

Cis female
38.9%

Cis male
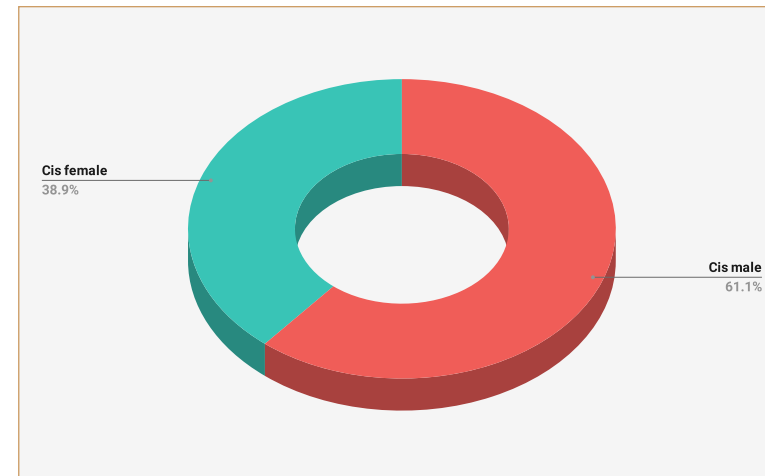61.1%
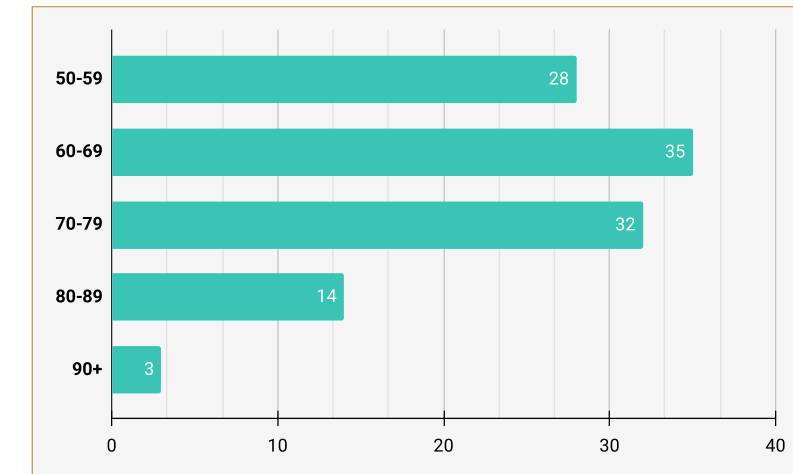
Our aggregate skews male (61.1%), and cisgendered. We recognize the limits of a dataset that does not include perspectives from older adults who identify as transgender and/or non-binary.

Age Range

Older adults, age 60 to 69, are the largest part of our aggregated sample, followed by people aged 70 to 79. For reference, the largest age bracket (from 50 - 90+) of Canada's general population are adults aged 50 to 59 (as of 2016), according to Statistics Canada.

Geography

Our aggregate dataset incorporated ethnographic research collected in three Canadian provinces. The largest contingent of older adults we spent time with live in Toronto, Ontario (29.2%).
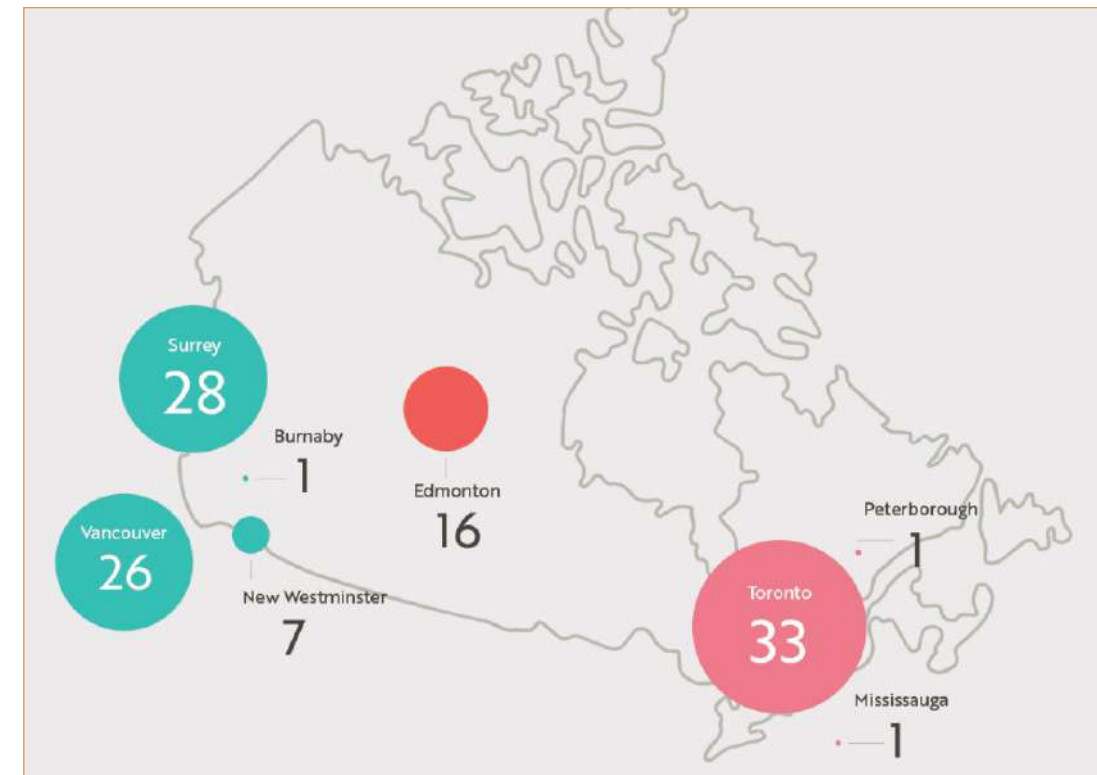
The questions of the ages
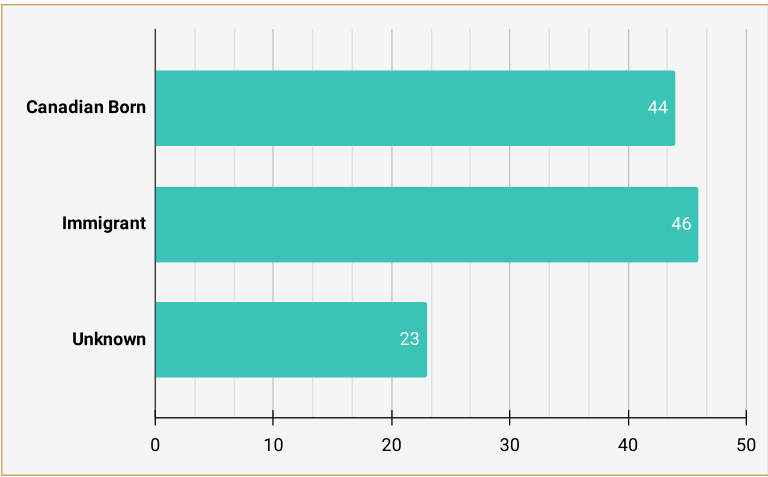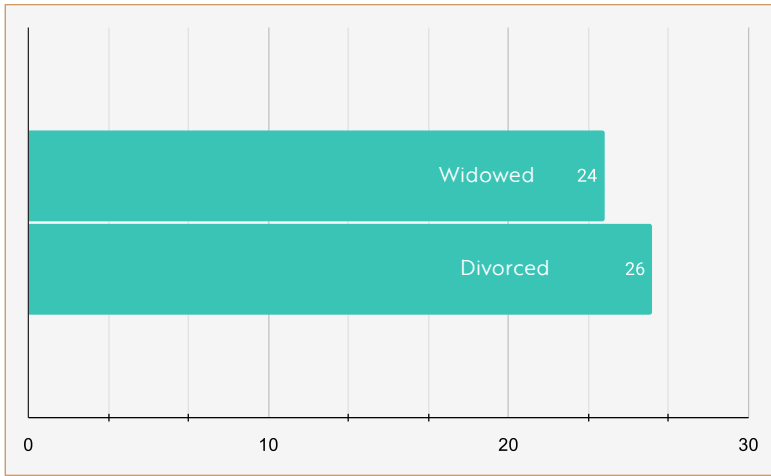
Citizenship Status

We collected a roughly equal amount of stories from individuals who are Canadian born (39.8%) and immigrants (40%). 20.2% of individuals did not disclose their immigrant or citizenship status.

Relationship status

Pertinent to the theme of loneliness and isolation, we considered the impact of divorce and widowhood. Twenty-four individuals reported the death of a spouse, and 26 individuals reported divorce in their stories.

Positive Deviancy

We've tagged about 10% of our sample (11 people) as positive deviants. A positive deviant is somebody who demonstrates an uncommon philosophy and approach to their day-to-day, having found work-arounds to challenges that other people, in their same demographic category, have not. Positive deviancy recognizes problem-solving often comes from the bottom-up, and seeks to use homegrown insights, to find novel, population-level solutions.
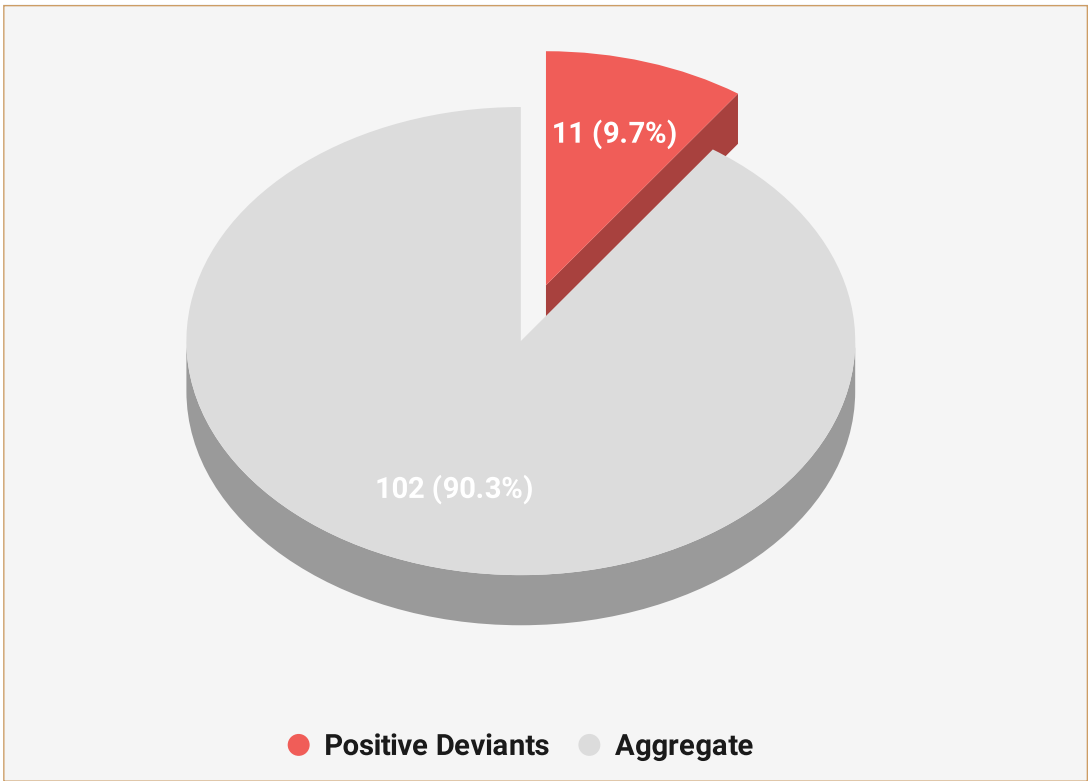
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The questions of the ages

Overall Desired Outcomes
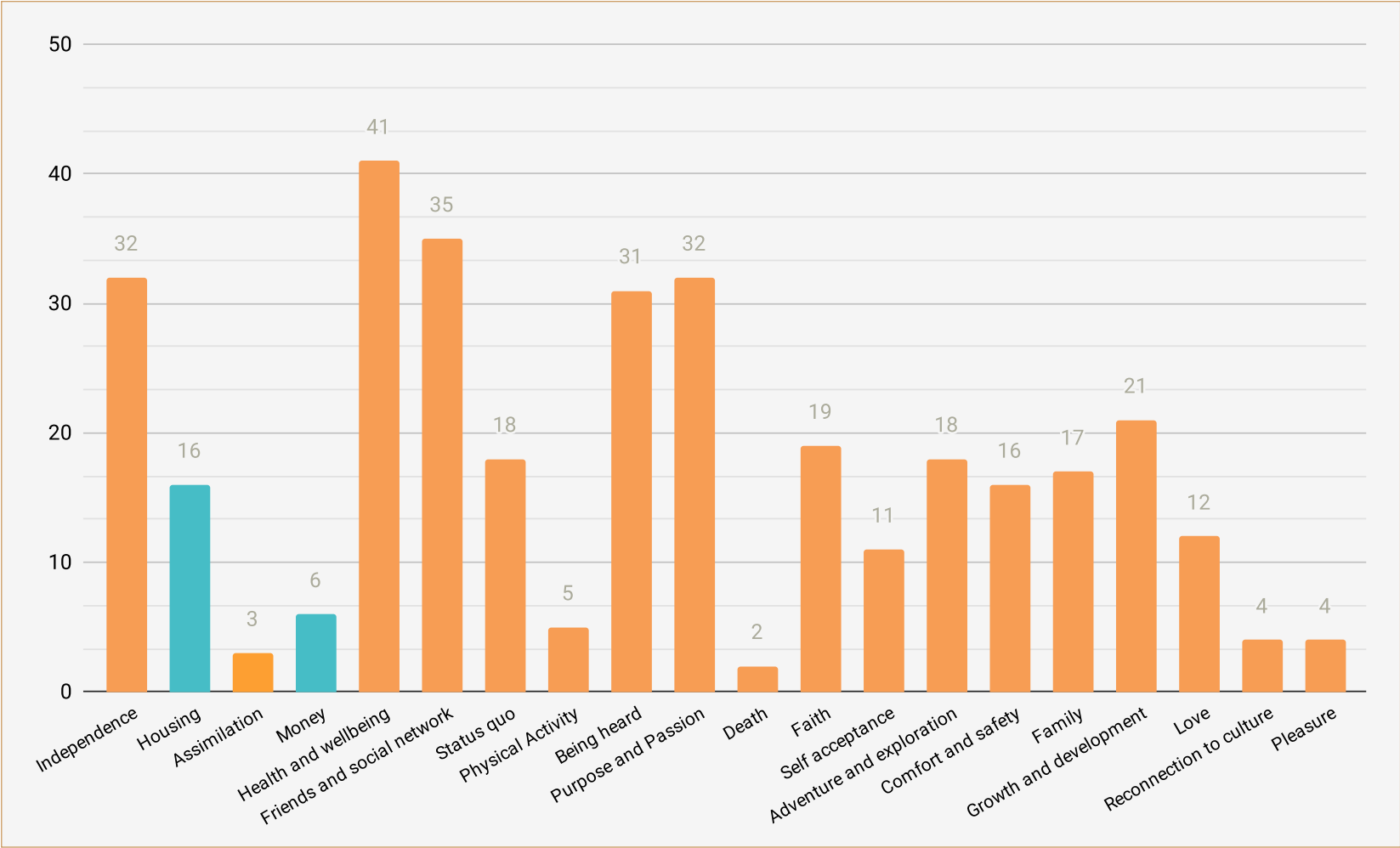
Amongst 113 individuals, there was a wide range of desired outcomes spanning across material and immaterial needs. Take a look at the spectrum.

Key

■ Material needs

■ Immaterial needs

The questions of the ages

Overall Desired Outcomes
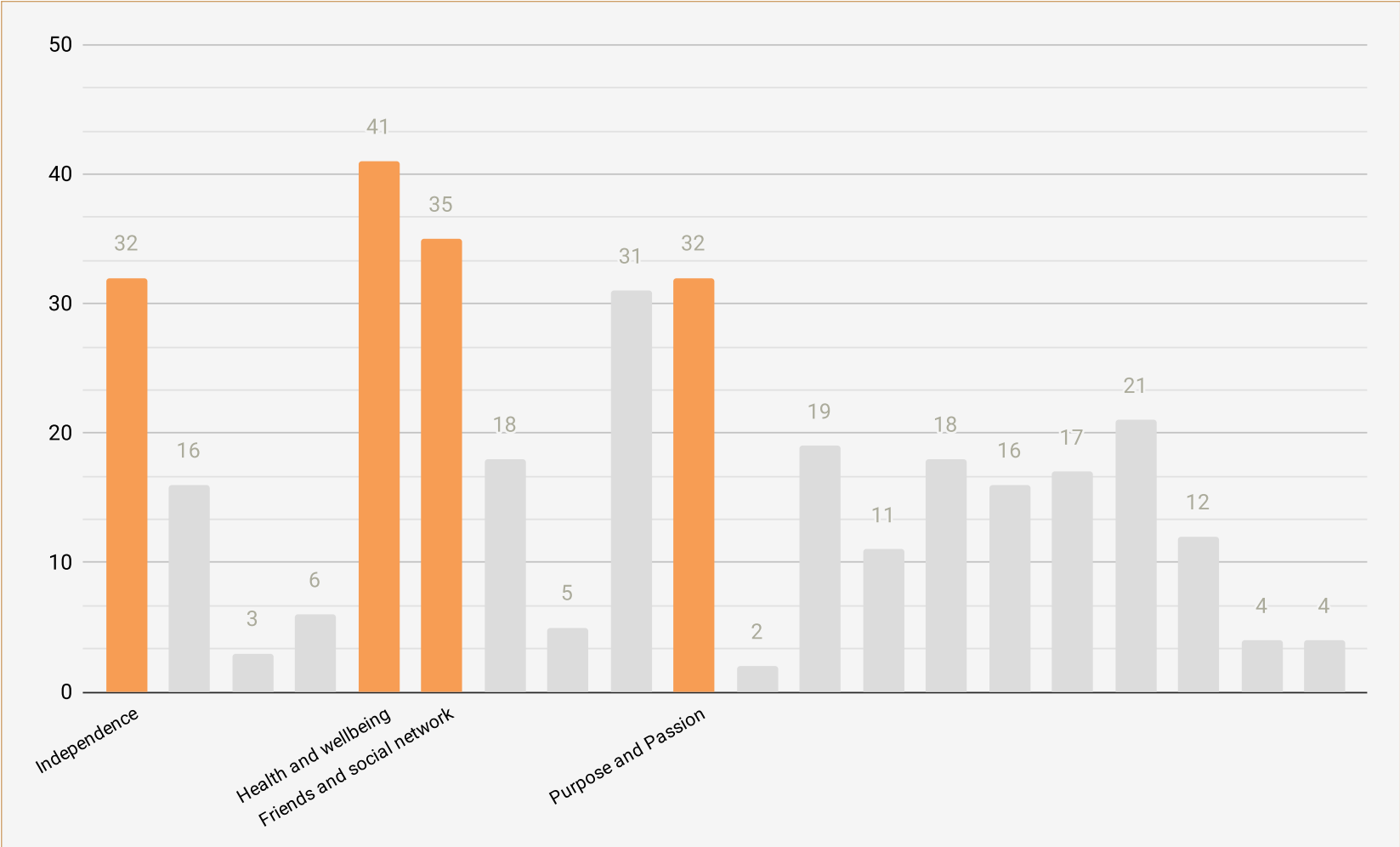
Top three

Out of all the desired outcomes, health and wellbeing topped the list. Following health and wellbeing, 35 individuals (30.9%) yearned for friends and social connection while 32 folks (28.3%) valued purpose and independence. This document will unpack these concepts, and detail how individuals interpret and articulate these outcomes.

Key

■ Material needs

■ Immaterial needs

The questions of the ages

Overall Stressors and Barriers

What stands in the way of older people living the life they value? The following diagram illustrates the spread of stressors that we heard. 42 folks expressed physical health as a dominant worry. Family and interpersonal relationships (which includes peers and community) and access to resources followed as the most mentioned sources of stress.
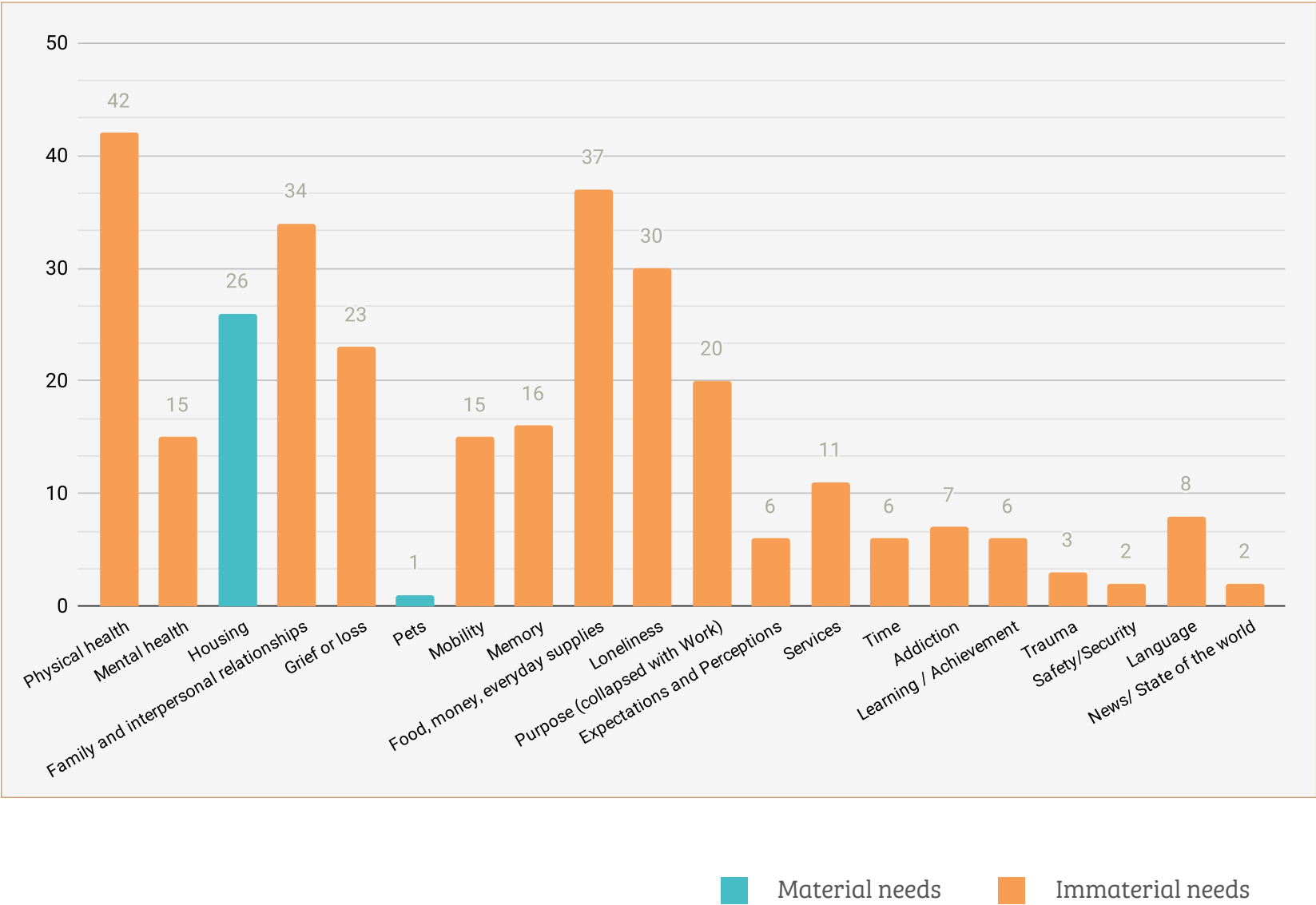
Bar chart — Overall Stressors and Barriers

Category	Value
Physical health	42
Mental health	15
Housing	26
Family and interpersonal relationships	34
Grief or loss	23
Pets	1
Mobility	15
Memory	16
Food, money, everyday supplies	37
Loneliness	30
Purpose (collapsed with Work)	20
Expectations and Perceptions	6
Services	11
Time	6
Addiction	7
Learning / Achievement	6
Trauma	3
Safety/Security	2
Language	8
News/ State of the world	2

Material needs   Immaterial needs

The questions of the ages

How did we meet people?

3 A Introduction   Value propositions   5 minutes

The questions of the ages

We met Esther on a raucous Sunday evening of bingo. She taught us how to dab. We met Bob after he spotted a poster of us in the laundry room of his apartment building, with an offer to do a light house cleaning in exchange for a conversation. We met Randle after we knocked on his door, sugar-free cookies in hand. We met Diego in the lobby of his highrise over an ice-cold cup of fresh-squeezed lemonade.

The assumption is that isolated and lonely older people are hard to find, sequestered away in their apartments and houses. While we've certainly found a segment of older folks who rarely leave their known habitats, nearly all interface with some sort of service: be it taxis, the postal service, a bank, a clinic, a pharmacy, a library, a grocery store, a liquor store, a lottery stand, a bingo hall, or a mall food court. Because our goal is often to meet people without strong social service affiliations, we typically recruit independently — though we find volunteer-driven services like Meals on Wheels can be a useful form of intelligence for which buildings and neighbourhoods to focus on. .

Running a lemonade stand, Toronto

Recruiting at a Legion Hall, New Westminster

The questions of the ages

Recruiting in an apartment complex, South Vancouver

Recruiting in front of a Chinese-speaking church, Vancouver

Meeting folks entails being where they are, and having something worthwhile to offer. For the socially inclined, that might be some company over a meal, a drink, and whilst going about the mundanities of the everyday. For the socially discerning, that might be an 'intelligent' conversation not predicated on their 'vulnerability' or 'needs.' For the helpfully minded, that might be a chance to shape services and policy. For the busy and hurried, that might be our flexibility, and willingness to meet anytime, anywhere. For the skeptical, that might be something tangible and instrumental: a ride somewhere or a light house clean. And for the cautious, that might be our repeated presence in safe public spaces like the food court.

Alongside crafting a range of value propositions, we embrace a plurality of outreach strategies — everything from putting up posters in elevators and laundromats, to running attention-grabbing spectacles (e.g distributing free watermelons or creating a 'sock consultancy' to match folks with a perfect pair of socks), to hosting delightful pop-ups in building lobbies and parks (e.g tea stands, free house plant stands), to door knocking with surprising treats (e.g a happy hour drink cart, fruit baskets). Across contexts and population groups, we consistently find bringing curiosity, whimsy, and surprise into everyday moments both attracts attention and piques interest, including from the hard-to-reach. Experimenting with what social theorist Ivan Illich called "convivial interactions" almost always offers clues for fresh ways to break down barriers and connect human-to-human.

The questions of the ages

Examples of value propositions we tried

Celebratory

Announcing a week of special events and offers, delivered to your door

Adventurous

Offering car rides, day trips, meals and more

The questions of the ages

Examples of value propositions we tried

Conversational

Bringing by tea, coffee, and sweets for
a good chat

Honest

Being an open ear to vent, share
worries and frustrations, or reminisce

The questions of the ages

Examples of value propositions we tried

Surprising

Giving away socks, watermelons, anything that is out-of-the-ordinary and prompts a second glance

FREE Sock Consultancy!
Help us help you...to find the right socks

What kind of socks make you tick?

Places we've recruited older people:

Residential	Commercial	Social	Transit
· Rooming houses · Lobbies of buildings · Shelters	· Grocery stores · Pharmacies · Health clinics · Barbershops & salons · Laundromats · Banks	· Mall food courts · Legion halls · Bingo halls · Casinos · Drop-in centres · Libraries	· Taxis · Buses · Vans · Meals on Wheels deliveries

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The questions of the ages

How did we engage?

Once we've met an older person, then what? How do we open up rich conversations about big topics and gain a picture of some of the structures and cultures in which they are embedded? Exploring questions of experience, meaning, and context calls for a blended methodology steeped in anti-oppressive research practices.

Practices   Features   Tools

3   B   ●——————●——————●————————————————————🕐 5 minutes

The questions of the ages

Practices

We bring together ethnography with phenomenology and design, drawing on observation, informal conversation, visual and tactile tools to try and understand what people say and do, what they may be wanting or needing but don't readily articulate, and the worldviews, norms and expectations that might be shaping values, behaviours, perceived opportunities, and challenges.

Ethnography

We observe how people interact, with whom they come into contact, their rhythms, routines, and the structures & culture in which they are embedded.

Methods:

- in-context observation

- photo documentation
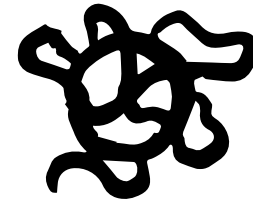
Phenomenology

We explore how people make meaning and interpret concepts, use language, and tell stories.

Methods:

- structured interviews

- conversational prompts

Design

We probe people's tacit and latent needs and wants, identifying what might attract and engage them.

Methods:

- exploratory dialogue

- projective prompts like 'fake services' and storyboards

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The questions of the ages

**Features
of our
engagement**

Rather than a highly structured and fixed agenda, we enter conversations with people transparent about our role and curiosities, inviting them to show us their environments, steer the conversation, set boundaries, and ask us questions.

We see conversation as a reciprocal exchange, rooted in relational values like trust, openness, honesty, and choice. People choose what of their story to make public, whether to use their name or a pseudonym, and what details to anonymize. We work to return stories to people for their edits, rewrites, and final approval.

Because we do not represent a particular service or institution — even where projects are funded by a service or institution, we retain our independence as a precondition of the research — we are able to hold space to talk about what matters most to folks. We're also able to probe their perceptions of services and institutions without having a vested interest in their maintenance. On the flip side, we do not have much leverage within those services and institutions for change. Our leverage comes from making visible and advocating for the stories we've collected and have consent to share.

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The questions of the ages

Tools

A tool is just that: an instrument that can help surface hard-to-talk-about ideas, and provoke revealing responses. We bring a range of tools into our interactions with people to complement informal conversation and observation. Unlike a survey, tools aim to spark divergent thoughts, rather than compel convergence.
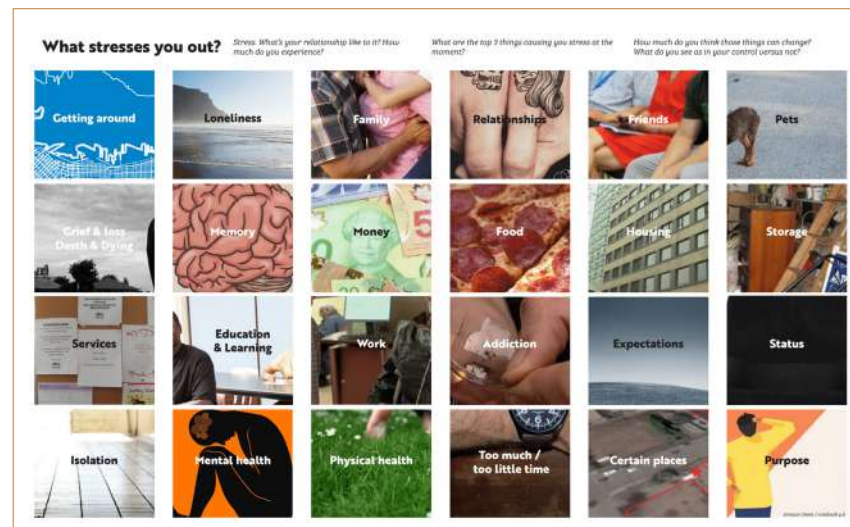
Stressors

To identify what stands in the way of people living the life they value, we use a series of picture prompts.
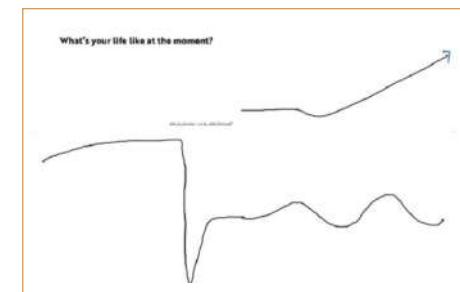
Past, present, future narratives

To explore how people conceptualize the past, present and future, we use a set of pattern cards to assemble into a story.
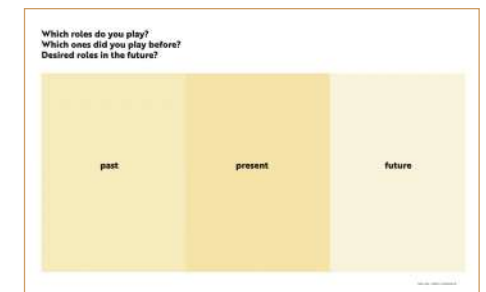
Social roles, status and purpose

To learn about social norms, expectations, and sources of structure and meaning, we use a set of stickers with roles like 'mother,' 'partner,' 'worker,' and 'retiree' that can be arranged on a tablemat.

The questions of the ages

Tools
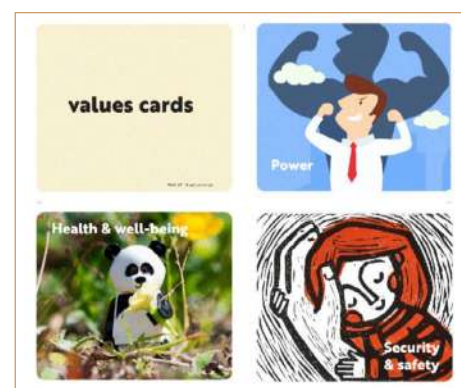
Values

To unpack what matters most to people, and how far away they are from living a life of their chosen values, we use a deck of cards for people to group, rank, add to, and define.

Helpful and unhelpful help

To delve into perceived support, we use a variety of social network maps, sometimes bringing along figurines to represent people.
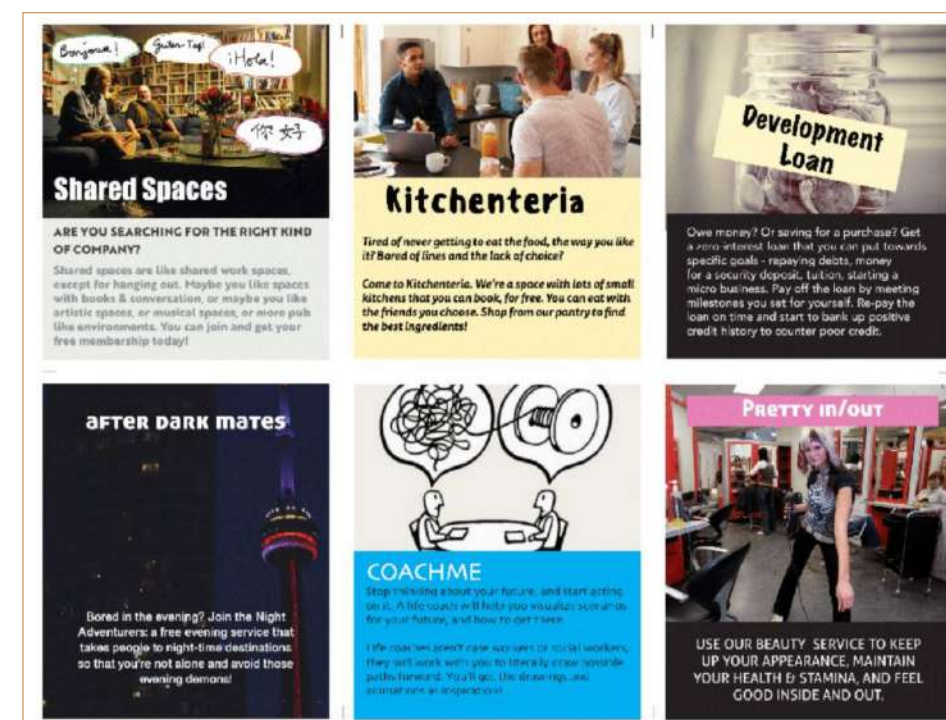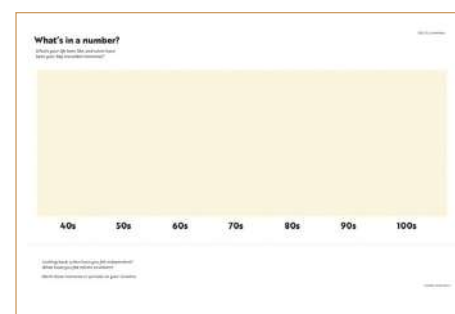
Motivators and hooks

To delve into latent needs and desires we use projective prompts like these 'fake service' cards which present a series of possible offers to see what people find appealing and unappealing.

Conceptions of Aging

To pull apart the concept of age, we use a timeline to sketch real versus perceived age alongside personal, family and social expectations.

How did we analyze?

To begin our analysis, we brought together multiple types of data, paying particular attention to which data points were context specific, and which might be comparable.

From profiles   Creating the spreadsheet

C ●———●——————————————————— 🕐 **5 minutes**

The questions of the ages

Starting from the profile cards

Our first step was to compile profile cards. Profile cards include a mix of narrative, qualitative, and quantitative data; some of the fields are project specific, and some are generic (age, city, desired outcomes and stressors). We built a spreadsheet using these variables, and adopted a 'tallying' system where we checked off older people with a '1' anytime they mentioned a particular subject or theme. This approach enabled us to spot recurring patterns and filter people into subgroups. We continued to extract data points from the profile cards that seemed to link to loneliness and isolation (i.e. relationship status, housing status, desire for change). As these data points might not have been reported in all of the profiles, where possible, we asked the original ethnographer to retroactively fill in missing data to the best of their recollection.

Example of the back of a profile card

The questions of the ages

Spreadsheet

Name	Project	Interviewer	Male	Female	50-59	60-69	70-79	80-89	90+	Vancouver	New Westminster	Burnaby	Surrey	Edmonton	Toronto	Mississauga
Lauren	Allies In Aging	Daniela	1				1				1					
Esther	Allies In Aging	Sarah		1				1			1					
Bertha	Allies In Aging	Daniela		1				1				1				
Mona	Allies In Aging	Daniela		1			1				1					
Maria	Allies In Aging	Daniela		1			1				1					
Peter	Allies In Aging	Daniela	1					1				1				
Bob	Allies In Aging	Sarah	1				1					1				
Bill	Allies In Aging	Sarah	1				1					1				
Mr. Raj	Allies In Aging	Natalie	1				1				1		1			
Emily	Allies In Aging	Daniela		1				1			1					
Katie	Allies In Aging	Natalie		1				1				1				
Kellie	Allies In Aging	Natalie		1			1					1				
Ofelia	Allies In Aging	Natalie		1			1					1				
Patrick	Edmonton		1		1									1		
Albert	Edmonton		1		1									1		
Eileen	Edmonton			1	1									1		
Escher	Indigenous Justice	Laura Orozco	1				1									1
Krizzy	Indigenous Justice	Laura Orozco		1			1									1
Morris	Indigenous Justice		1		1											1
John	Indigenous Justice		1		1											1
Angela	Indigenous Justice			1	1											1
James	Westlodge		1				1								1	
Jim	Westlodge		1				1								1	
Mr+Mrs. Anand	Westlodge		1	1				1	1						1	
Elizabeth	Westlodge			1				1							1	
Jenny	Westlodge			1			1								1	
George	Westlodge		1					1							1	
Marilyn	Westlodge			1					1						1	
Juliusz	Westlodge		1					1							1	
Arthur	Westlodge	Sarah	1				1								1	
Michael	Westlodge	Sarah	1					1							1	
SH	Westlodge	Sarah		1				1							1	
Diego	Westlodge	Sarah	1					1							1	
David	Westlodge	Natalie	1				1								1	
Sheila	Westlodge	Natalie		1				1							1	
Hamilton	Westlodge	Natalie	1					1							1	
Khemo	Westlodge	Natalie	1					1							1	
Jean	Westlodge	Daniela		1				1							1	
Gerry	Westlodge	Daniela	1				1								1	
Marjorie	REACH 24/7	Natalie		1	1										1	
William	REACH 24/7	Sarah	1				1								1	
Bonnie	REACH 24/7	Sarah		1	1										1	
Vernon	REACH 24/7	Sarah	1				1								1	
Jason	City Centre Mall		1		1										1	
Frank	City Centre Mall		1					1							1	
Dennis	City Centre Mall	Laura Orozco	1					1							1	
Pat	City Centre Mall	Valentina		1				1							1	
Karbear	City Centre Mall	Laura Orozco			1										1	
Bill	Strathcona	Natalie	1		1										1	
Earl	Strathcona	Natalie	1		1										1	

The questions of the ages

AQ	AR	AS	AT
Friends/ social life/ informal network (collapsed with community)	Keep Doing (Current State of things) - merged with Status Quo	Physical Activity	Being heard (collapsed with Respect and Integrity)
1			
	1		
	1	1	
1			1
			1
	1		
			1
		1	
1			1
1			
			1
1			1
		1	1

Some of our data was ordinal in nature, varying along a continuum. For example, the variables 'Time orientation' and 'Desire to change' varied along a three-point scale, with 3 signifying a high application and 1 indicating a low application. For example, a 3 on "Reported Loneliness" indicates that an individual felt really lonely. In most cases, the number 2 communicates a neutral, on the fence response.

We also used the spreadsheet to group and combine similar categories. For example, yearnings for 'food, 'new clothes' and 'money' were collated within the broader theme of 'material goods'. Although we never want to lose the nuance and specificity of qualitative data, clustering data is useful for the purposes of finding patterns and trends.

The questions of the ages

Five trends from the aggregate data

What did our crunched numbers reveal?

4

Trend 1: Health is not singular

Trend 2: Immigrant men of visible minority

Trend 3: Satisficing versus satisfaction

Trend 4: Low sense of control

Trend 5: Declining desire to look ahead

15 minutes

Theme 1: Health is not singular | Theme 2: Immigrant men of visible minority | Theme 3: Satisficing | Theme 4: Low sense of control | Theme 5: Decline in desire to look ahead

4

The questions of the ages
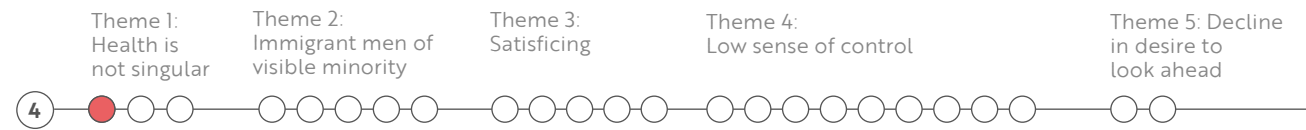
1 Health and physical wellbeing is not a singular concept

Not surprisingly, forty-one percent of folks over fifty identify health and wellbeing as a desired outcome. Only that's where consensus ends. Older adults conceptualize health and physical wellbeing in at least four distinct ways, along a continuum from burdensome to energizing. How older adults define health and wellbeing shapes the frame with which they identify problems, take up opportunities, engage with others, ask for help (or not) and make sense of what might be next.

a. A burden, a struggle, maybe even a lost cause

Bonnie's health causes her pain and keeps her from doing what's important, but she feels helpless in the face of addiction and grief.

"I have to go see a doctor for my Hep-C; they'll tell me to stop drinking... If I had a home, I wouldn't be in so much pain. But my drinking would not be different."

Jacquie has come out the other side of depression and works hard to maintain her mental health. The deterioration of her physical health, on the other hand, feels like an injustice.

"I look forward to it (death). I am fed up with breaking down physically."
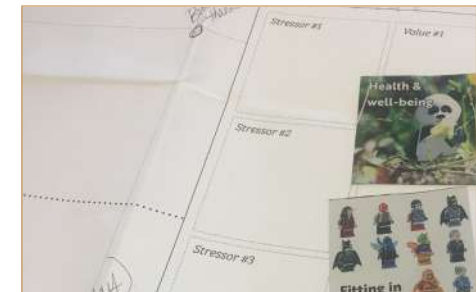
John identifies as an incorrigible street criminal. His poor health practices create anxiety; he knows he's on the decline.

"I'm not healthy right now and definitely unfit. I felt healthy 7 months ago. Now I've lost 80 pounds: it's a dangerous game. I have 2 puffers, 4 sets of pills each day... I wouldn't wish this on anyone."

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Low sense of control

Theme 5: Decline
in desire to
look ahead

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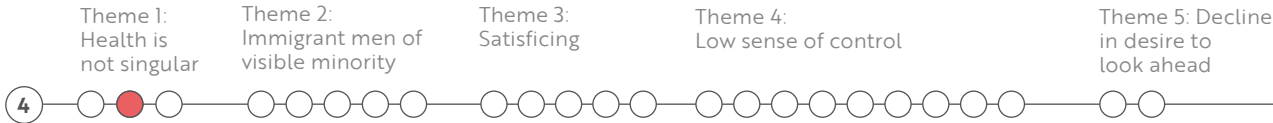
b. A risk, a vulnerability, a source of persistent worry
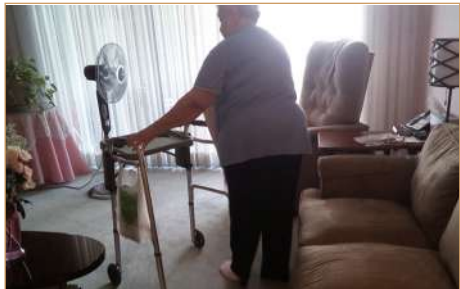
Above all else, **Ofelia** wants to maintain the independence that comes from staying in her own home. If she has a fall or her health fails, she may be forced to move. She avoids many activities or going outside when alone, Monday-Friday, to reduce that risk.

"I will be 78 years old in May so I cannot do too much. I can't walk. I use a walker all the time because I have fallen in the past and if I fall I go to the hospital. I do not want to go to the hospital again!"

c. A gift to be maintained, a resource to draw on

For **Maria**, who sees herself in good mental and physical condition, health must be carefully and actively maintained.

"I'm good in the head. I have to be careful to stay this way."

Linda stays physically active with dancing and swimming. She has many things left on her bucket list to do — all of which require staying in good health.

"We want to be healthy. We want to travel.."

Michael may have the signs of early dementia, but refuses to accept the prospect. He sticks to a regimented routine to keep his mind fit, including brushing up on calculus.

"I want to keep active physically and mentally – reading books, things I'm interested in. I think my health will come from purpose.

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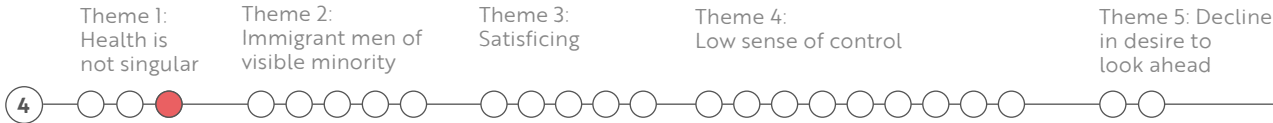
d. A life force, an energy, a holistic process of restoration & healing

Kellie's guilt about her husband's suicide, and the trauma of living with a suicidal man for so many years, had robbed her of her own lust for life. But recently she found therapeutic support, and feels herself healing. She's excited about life again. It comes from feeling good about herself for the first time in life. To Kellie, health is all about "having energy and appetite."

Eileen has been working on her mental and physical health like layers of an onion. There's always more to do, but it's worth doing.

"It's important to be straight up in the head. My hip could be at least 50% better."

Diego maintains mental and emotional health through the structure and rhythm of daily AA meetings, and walking. He has learned he must actively choose to ward off anger and loneliness: two powerful motivators for drinking.

"If you don't have your health, you are screwed. You need emotional health as much as physical."

Theme 1:
Health is
not singular

Theme 2:
Immigrant men of
visible minority

Theme 3:
Satisficing

Theme 4:
Low sense of control

Theme 5: Decline
in desire to
look ahead

2 Immigrant, male, visible minorities self-reported the highest level of loneliness

Twenty-seven percent of older adults (about 30 out of 113) told us that they experience high loneliness (3 on a scale from 1-3). What stood out to us was that this group consisted of more men (63.33%), immigrants (66.67%) and visible minorities (53.33%). And while we often conceptualize loneliness in terms of the lack of quantity or quality of relationships, this subgroup demonstrates that loneliness encompasses so much more.

	Number of seniors from segment with high self-reports of loneliness.	Percentage of seniors from segment with high self-reports of loneliness
Men:	19	63.33%
Women:	12	40%
Canadian born:	7	23.33%
Immigrant:	20	66.67%
White:	9	30%
Visible minority:	16	53.33%
Indigenous:	3	10%

Theme 1:
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not singular

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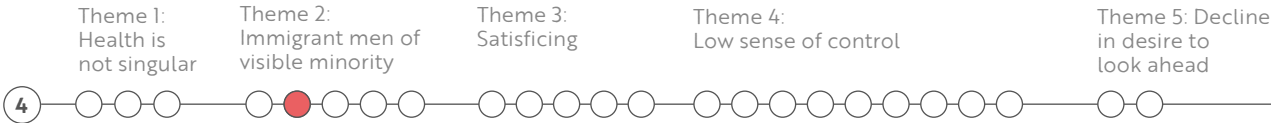
Zooming into the data, we identified eleven racial minority, immigrant males with striking similarity in their world-views, lifestyles, and conceptualisations of loneliness. First, we calculated the average score across a range of measures such as sense of control and time orientation to see if, as a subgroup, they demonstrated any dominant characteristics.

Subsegment: Immigrant men of visible minority who reported the highest loneliness

Mr. Raj
75 · Burnaby

Mr. Anand
92 · Toronto

Joe
76 · Vancouver

Randle
80 · Vancouver

Nadal
60 · Mississauga

Esho
50s · Rexdale

Zuhair
68 · Surrey

Yafi
61 · Surrey

Haci
65 · Surrey

Nasir
65 · Surrey

Mr. John
57 · Toronto

Out of this exercise, we noticed that this group is distinct for holding a high desire for change (average of 2.66/3) and a pretty high sense of control (average of 2.3/3). Despite their motivation for connection, these men reported a lower informal support network (average of 1.75/3)

and a lower sense of belonging to their environment (average of 1.66/3). Coupled with their high score of loneliness (average of 3/3), these lower averages suggest that they may be experiencing a mismatch between their expectations and their current realities.

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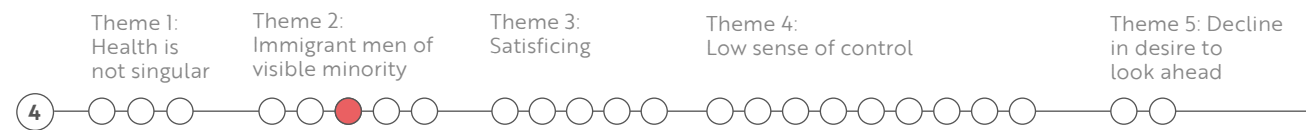
As we reread their stories, focusing on the words that they use, we began to see how this expectation-reality mismatch unfolds.

Many of these men moved to Canada from war-torn or politically fragile countries to seek a better life for themselves and their families. While many acknowledge and appreciate the stability of Canada, they have found it challenging to replicate and reassume the roles that they held with high esteem back in their hometowns. Indeed, feelings of high loneliness are strongly attached to a loss of identity.

It's not surprising that 81.8% of these men concurrently yearn for purpose and/or passion as the fulfillment they derived from prior roles has dissipated.

As Zuhair sees it

Zuhair, a refugee from Syria, describes himself as a "lifelong addict of laughing." He eagerly tells us of his goal to spread warmth and happiness in communities, telling us that he was very popular back in Syria and Egypt. However, he expresses disappointment that he struggles to speak to or connect with most of the people in Surrey.

Story from November 2018

❝ Laugh and the whole town laughs with you. When you cry, you cry alone.

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Racism and discrimination on the basis of status, language and age have not made it any easier for these men to carve out their desired roles. For some folks, discrimination has shown up explicitly, even confrontationally.

Nadal, not unlike Zuhair, used to live "like a king" and always hosted friends in his Syrian home, often connecting with his old neighbours through food and music. As he sets out to do the same in his Mississauga apartment building, he feels he's met with disdain. "It's a problem (for my neighbours) because I'm an Arab guy."

For others, discrimination is more veiled, manifesting through 'polite' service interactions. Nasir, who moved from Iraq has his eyes set on creating a better life for his family. "We want to get a bigger house, to live a better life, to buy more clothes, eat more." Even with years of work experience

under his belt, he feels that he can't get the break he deserves as "services lie to get rid of us and tell us that we are too old."

Randle moved from the Philippines in the 1970s and vividly recounts his former role as a gregarious, traveling salesman. As much as he wishes to strike up conversations with people of all backgrounds, he currently harbours a feeling that he's being looked down upon or judged. "I cannot open my mouth and say anything I want. What if I offend?" Randle currently has retreated to spending more time alone at home, avoiding any situations where he may step on cultural sensitivities.
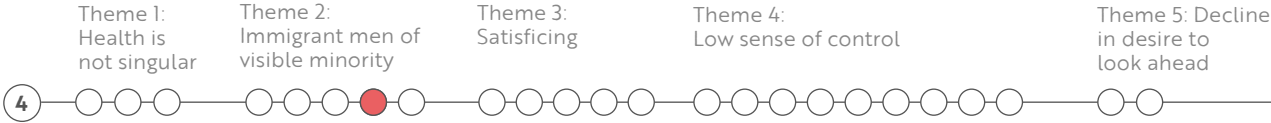
Randle

Zuhair

Nadal

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Nadal and Randle's experiences speak to another, arguably overarching, mismatch that these men face. Contrary to the Western 'achievement' mindset that links big effort with big rewards, many folks shared stories about how their effort to connect to others actually engendered pain. Negative memories are one of the most commonly cited barriers to active community re-engagement, alongside language difficulties. Mr. Raj identifies as someone who's been alone for much of his life. While he didn't endure a loss of identity in the same ways Nadal and Randle have, Mr. Raj still attributes his chosen solitude to "bad experiences with human connections." Mr. John laments how people around him always just steal from him and Mr. Anand held back from sharing details, but cautioned "when you think they're your friend, they cut your neck." Across all these examples, unresolved lack of trust from past interactions seem to shape their arms-length approach to interpersonal interactions.

Mr. Raj
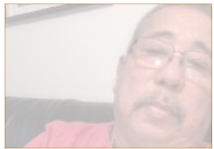
Mr. John
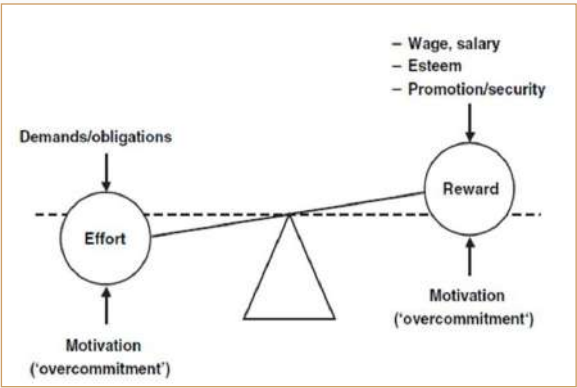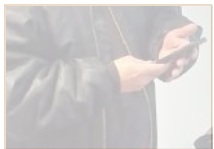
Theorist Johannes Siegrist's effort-reward imbalance model, originally developed in the context of occupational health, proposes that when an individual's effort is greater than the reward, it results in adverse health outcomes and high stress. In this context, not only do these men *not* get back what they put out there, but the losses they've experienced outweigh any potential gains. Here, feelings of high loneliness seem to be compounded by a sense of hopelessness. Mr. John and Randle notably recognize that loneliness is not a pleasant feeling, however it's better than the feelings of rejection or hurt that they have experienced from past social connections.

How can we support folks like Mr.John and Randle to not see missed connections as a mark of failure? How can we support them in stretching their definition of a gratifying reward?

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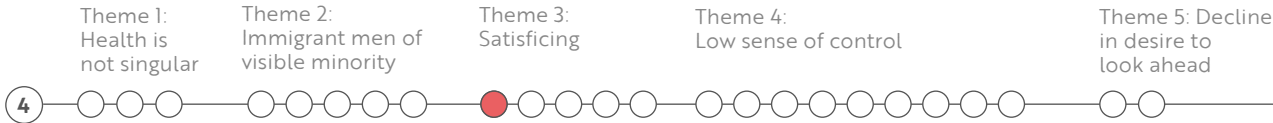
3 Low reported loneliness may speak to satisficing rather than satisfaction.

Subsegment: Seniors who report low support networks but low loneliness levels

Peter

M · 80 · New Westminster · White

Escher

M · 60 · Toronto · ¼ Mohawk

Khemo

M · 70 · Toronto · Visible Minority

Jean

F · 76 · Toronto · Visible Minority

Jenny

F · 62 · Toronto · White

Bryan

M · 57 · Surrey · White

Bernie

M · 60 · Surrey · White

Kate

F · 62 · Surrey · White

Tony

M · 63 · Surrey · White

Scott

M · 50 · Surrey · Indigenous

Robert

M · 60 · Surrey · White

While Mr. John, Randle and other immigrant men acknowledge that their loneliness may stave off the pain of rejection and status loss, we wondered about older people who didn't purport to feel lonely despite a pretty solitary existence. We started by identifying a subgroup of eleven older people who reported low loneliness and low informal support networks.

How does their point-of-view compare with the folks who reported the highest loneliness?

This subgroup has more of a demographic mix (a fairly even smattering of men, women, white, and Indigenous older people). The first noticeable difference? On average, this subgroup holds a significantly lower desire for change (an average of 1.54/3).

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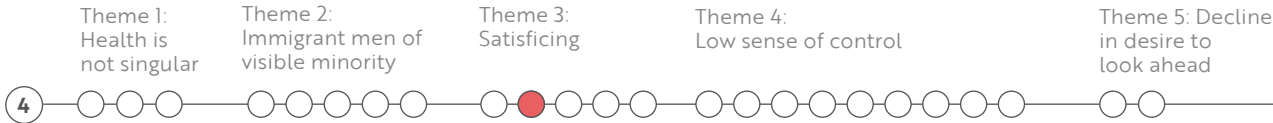
While the assumption might be that the absence of a support network might motivate change, this is not always the case. Solitariness can be liberating.

As Peter sees it

Peter, a white immigrant who resides in New Westminster, has freed himself from the obligations attached to his prior 'working' identity, and feels able to do whatever he wants at any given time without the pressures and peering eyes of people. He doesn't want more people in his life.

Story from February 2018

> Right now I'm free. I've never had that before. I don't get lonesome because I can do anything.

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Amongst others in this subgroup, we identified two distinct mental models intertwined with low social support and low loneliness. Referring back to Siegrist's effort-reward imbalance model, low loneliness seemed linked to how people allocated their time and energy. Perhaps they weren't as lonely because they weren't putting so much time and energy into seeking out or building relationships. The lack of social return was proportional to their efforts, and they had, by and large, come to terms with that.

Mindset 1: A hardened self-reliance

For folks with a strong sense of self-reliance and deep-seated belief in independence, relationships aren't necessarily a good thing. This mental model of fierce independence often emerged at a young age, as a way to cope with significant trauma and structural inequality.

Scott, an Indigenous man, has spent over twenty years on and off the streets and has grown accustomed to traveling lightly, without relational baggage, as a strategy for survival.

Bryan, who describes himself as a lone wolf, has had to fend for himself after leaving home at 13-years old and now sees people as fleeting subjects. "I get sick of people, seeing the same faces everyday." Years of internalizing racism and abuse seem to have trained people like Bryan and Scott to depend only on themselves, and reinforced a belief that they are destined to continue the path ahead, alone. Compared to immigrant, visible minority men, this subgroup confidently draws boundaries around themselves as a form of protection.

If anything, Bryan and Scott's ability to stand their ground and fend for themselves is a source of pride. They have survived despite the odds being stacked against them. Bryan tells us that he enjoys "being called the devil" and that his will to fight has earned him the respect he craves. Scott goes so far as to say that nothing in the world stresses him out; he's certain that he can find a solution to whatever comes his way.
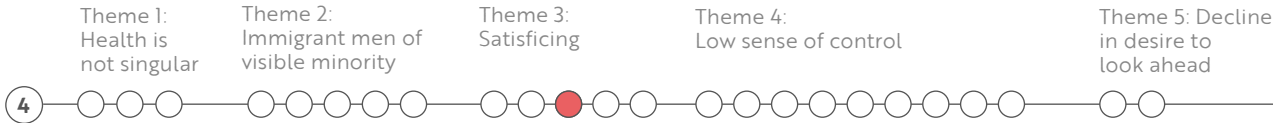
Scott
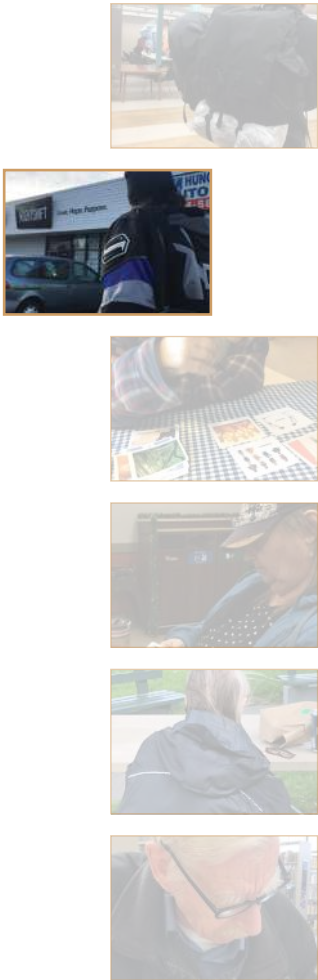
Bryan
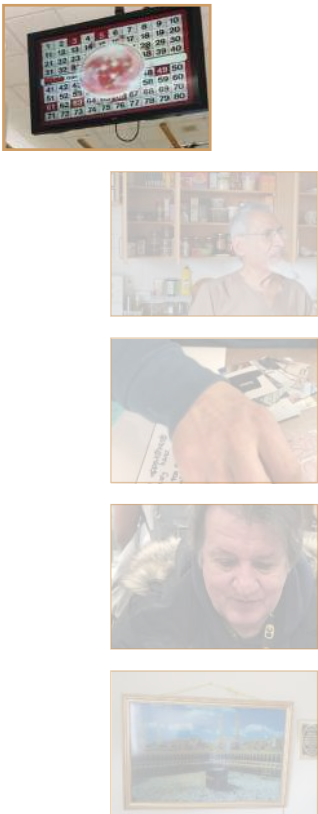
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For folks with a self-sufficiency mental model, not only do they see little need for relationships, they see relationships as a threat to the hard-won stability they've managed to achieve. Their environment might be unstable, but they are not. Because they've never really seen the value of social connections, they don't desire greater sociality. Cognitive psychologist and political scientist Herbert Simon introduced the term "satisficers" (a portmanteau of satisfy and suffice) to describe people who accept what is 'good enough' over exploring the 'best possible' options for themselves.

We wonder whether the Bryans and Scotts have learned to satisfice their whole lives, and whether dogged self-sufficiency is an active choice or a reality foisted on them, which they have come to embrace. Might there be ways to introduce them to relational models that enhance their sense of self, and honour their commitment to independence?
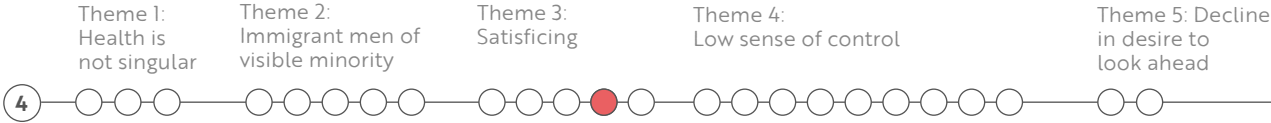
Satisficers

- Settle for good enough
- Don't obsess over or seek alternative options
- Don't entertain should'ves & could'ves
- More likely to be satisfied with outcomes

Maximizers

- Pursue and seek out the best options
- Compare their possibilities
- Expend more time, energy and thought
- More discerning of outcomes

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A second mental model shows up in stories within this subgroup: that of low self-concept. Unlike the Bryans and Scotts who have maintained a robust sense of self, another group of older people expressed a lack of trust in themselves.

They weren't actively seeking out relationships because they didn't think they could be in relationships. They no longer expressed loneliness because they rejected relationships as a possibility.

Mindset 2: Undeservedness

Folks with this mental model were grappling with addiction and estrangement. They tended to blame themselves for their situations, leading them down a shame spiral, where they felt they didn't deserve people in their life.

Jenny is a resident in a large social housing complex in Toronto who has gone through years of grief and months in jail for drug trafficking. She's embarrassed about the state that she is in, and her ongoing experiences colour her view of her own self-worth. "I don't blame the residents for finding me annoying." Even when she gets invitations to parties from residents in the building, Jenny declines, maintaining that she prefers to just be left alone.

Kate, a resident of a large social housing complex in Surrey, shares a mirroring decline. Going through a worsening addiction to crack, she reveals that she hears voices in her mind that make her unworthy of friendship or love. "They want me gone. I take a butcher knife to bed."

This raises an important question in addressing loneliness: how might we identify those who carry shame narratives, and find ways for them to see their worthiness and capacity for love, friendship and conviviality, even and especially as they age?

Kate

Jenny

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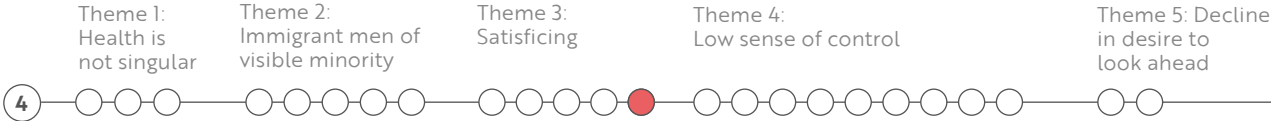
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People between 70-79 report the lowest sense of control

People aged 60-69 reported the highest levels of loneliness in our dataset, so we wanted to see what else might be happening around this time that may contribute to these feelings. According to Statistics Canada, in 2019, Canada's average retirement age hovers around 64, making us wonder how much this milestone marks a change for folks' wellbeing. For the following analysis, we shifted to comparing behaviours by age bracket. As people age, their stories suggest an increasing loss of control.

Reports of low sense of control in each age bracket

Age bracket	Percentage of seniors within age bracket who report **low** sense of control	Percentage of seniors in this age bracket who report **neutral** sense of control	Percentage of seniors in this age bracket who report **high** sense of control	Total of seniors within age bracket
50-59	21.43%	53.57%	25%	28
60-69	28.57%	40.00%	31.43%	35
70-79	31.25%	43.75%	21.88%	32
80-89	28.57%	35.71%	35.71%	14
90+	0%	33.33%	66.67%	3

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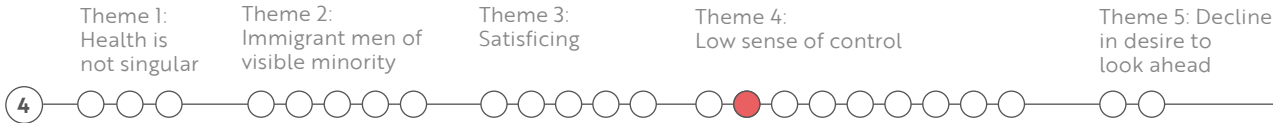
Subsegment: Seniors between 60-79 who reported declining sense of control

We identified 18 seniors between the ages of 60-79 who reported a declining sense of control, to understand how that feeling shows up. What emerged were a cluster of experiences that consistently presented plotlines of being forgotten, let down, and left behind.

Mona
F · 70 · Vancouver · White

Maria
F · 75 · Vancouver · White
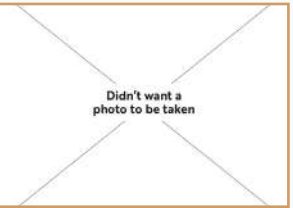
Bill
M · 71 · New West · White

Mr. Raj
M · 75 · Burnaby · Visible Minority

Elizabeth
F · 77 · Toronto · White

Juliusz
M · 76 · Toronto · White

Diego
M · 75 · Toronto · White

Donna
F · 71 · Vancouver

Pap
M · 77 · Etobicoke

James
M · 69 · Toronto · White

Jim
M · 64 · Toronto · White

Jenny
F · 62 · Toronto · White

David
M · 63 · Toronto · White

William
M · 67 · Edmonton · Cree

M.G
F · 69 · Vancouver

Welson
M · Late 60s · Etobicoke

Nadal
M · 60s · Mississauga

Stephen
M · 61 · Toronto · White

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An RCMP constable badge replaced by a walker. A home adorned with one's own art collecting dust. A flourishing engineering career cut short. William, Mona, and Juliusz are just three of many seniors in this subgroup with rich and diverse interests and credentials who are now reckoning with bleakness that they didn't see coming. A sudden death, an unexpected accident, and a heart attack respectively changed all their trajectories, relegating them from painting their own vivid futures to depending on others to fill in the colours. Their low sense of control is linked to a growing belief that future successes and failures rely on external factors beyond their control (their locus of control has shifted from internal to external). Where they once held a valued social role, now their purpose is less clear, as dependence starts to outweigh independence.

Western concepts of wellbeing emphasize individual achievement: the pursuit of life, liberty, happiness is up to each of us. We've got limitless potential, but we're responsible for our own self-actualization. Anything that takes away our autonomy is a source of embarrassment, even shame. Rather than frame interdependence as a mainstay of the life cycle, Western narratives pit independence against dependence. We are told 'healthy' aging means maintaining independence and control for as long as possible. Dependence is positioned as a loss of selfhood and identity (Lamb, 2014). We come under other people's control and authority.

Sociologist Zygmunt Bauman eloquently describes this tension as "a nasty fly of impotence in the ointment of freedom." It is a tension that people like William and Pap viscerally experience. To William, it's unfathomable that he's in need of help after spending years as the helper in his community. As a bull rider, police officer, and veteran, William has spent his adult life honing his strength. He will sleep rough in the bushes before he cedes what little control he has left to a shelter and a set of services, with their controls and asserted authority.

Another senior named Pap came to Canada from Iraq under a family sponsorship visa. He acutely feels the internal conflict and insecurity that comes with being dependent on his son after years as an independent businessman. For him, being totally reliant on his son makes him feel like he's not a person of value anymore. "I have a lot of knowledge going nowhere."
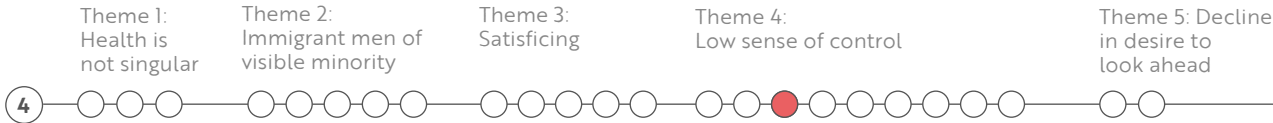
Pap

William
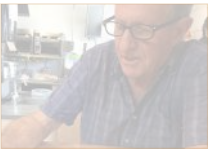
Mona
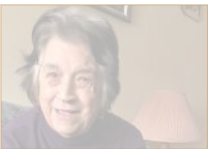
Juliusz
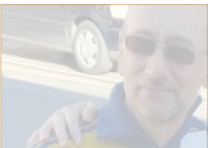
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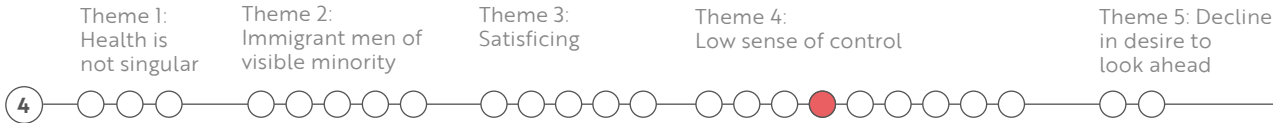
That sense of shrinking purpose and shrinking place is an all too common feeling within the dataset. Between the ages of 60-79, many tell us that they're already dealing with the loss of family members and friends. Contact with their children may be dwindling.

As their natural support systems fade, and their physical needs grow, they are left with little choice but to accept transactional help. The loss of their independence is directly linked to the rise of their dependence, with little space for interdependency: for mutuality, for an exchange of care, for love. They recognize they have been reduced to a set of needs on a need assessment.
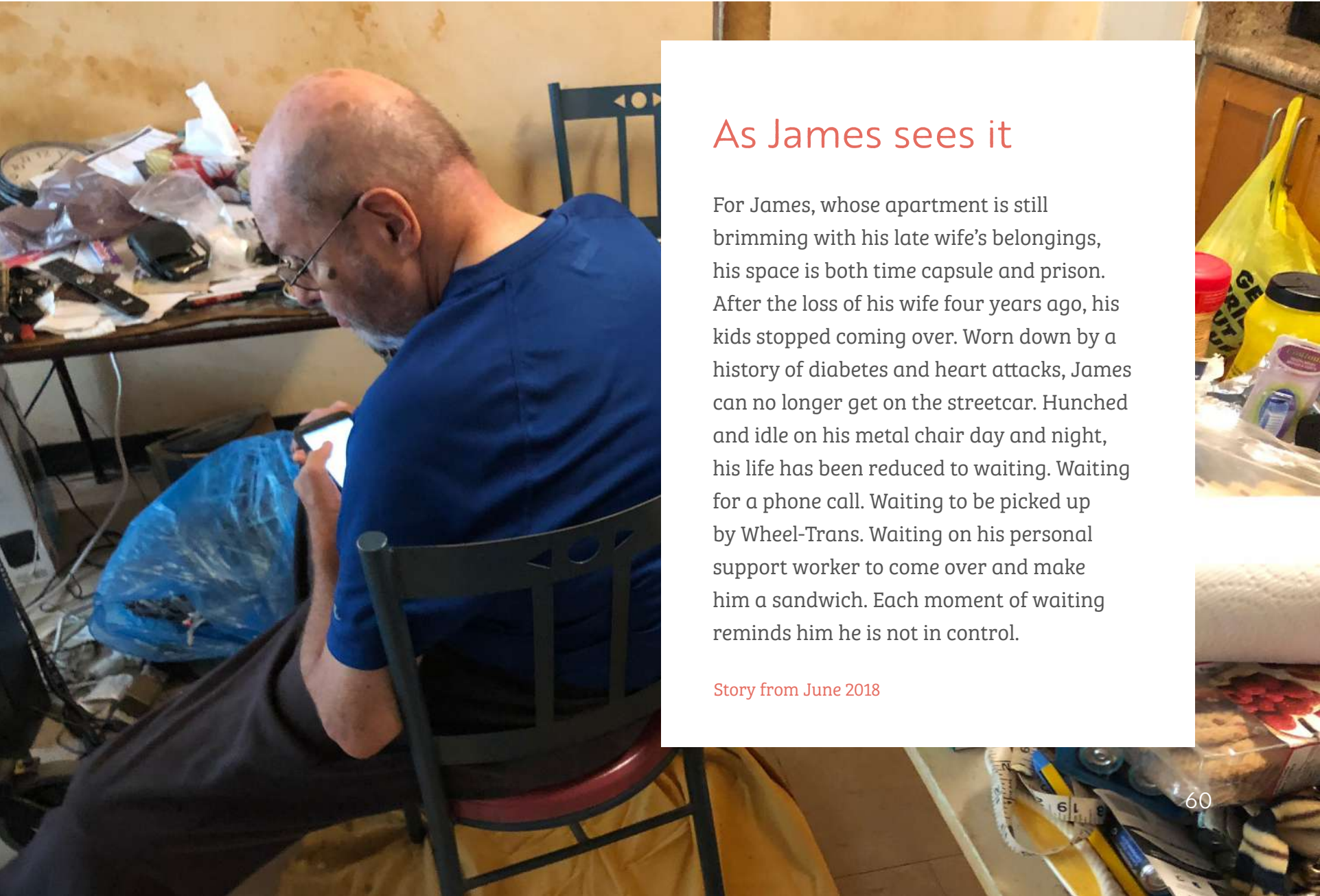
As James sees it

For James, whose apartment is still brimming with his late wife's belongings, his space is both time capsule and prison. After the loss of his wife four years ago, his kids stopped coming over. Worn down by a history of diabetes and heart attacks, James can no longer get on the streetcar. Hunched and idle on his metal chair day and night, his life has been reduced to waiting. Waiting for a phone call. Waiting to be picked up by Wheel-Trans. Waiting on his personal support worker to come over and make him a sandwich. Each moment of waiting reminds him he is not in control.

Story from June 2018

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As Mona sees it

Mona's experience with the service system has only reinforced a feeling she is losing control. She emphasizes how she's committed her blood, sweat, and tears to Canada after years of being a professor, a writer, and an artist, but now, immobilized from an arm injury, she struggles to complete ordinary hygiene routines like bathing or changing her sheets. She's waited for three months to receive some home support, but was dismayed to find out she does not qualify. Mona didn't get a real reason and suspects that her financial standing, on paper, prior to the accident, kept her from qualifying for help. She financially supports two adult children with severe mental illness.

" You see my home and you think I must be well-off, but no, I'm single, living below the poverty line. I have no financial support from family or the government, it's truly Kafkaesque.

Story from February 2018

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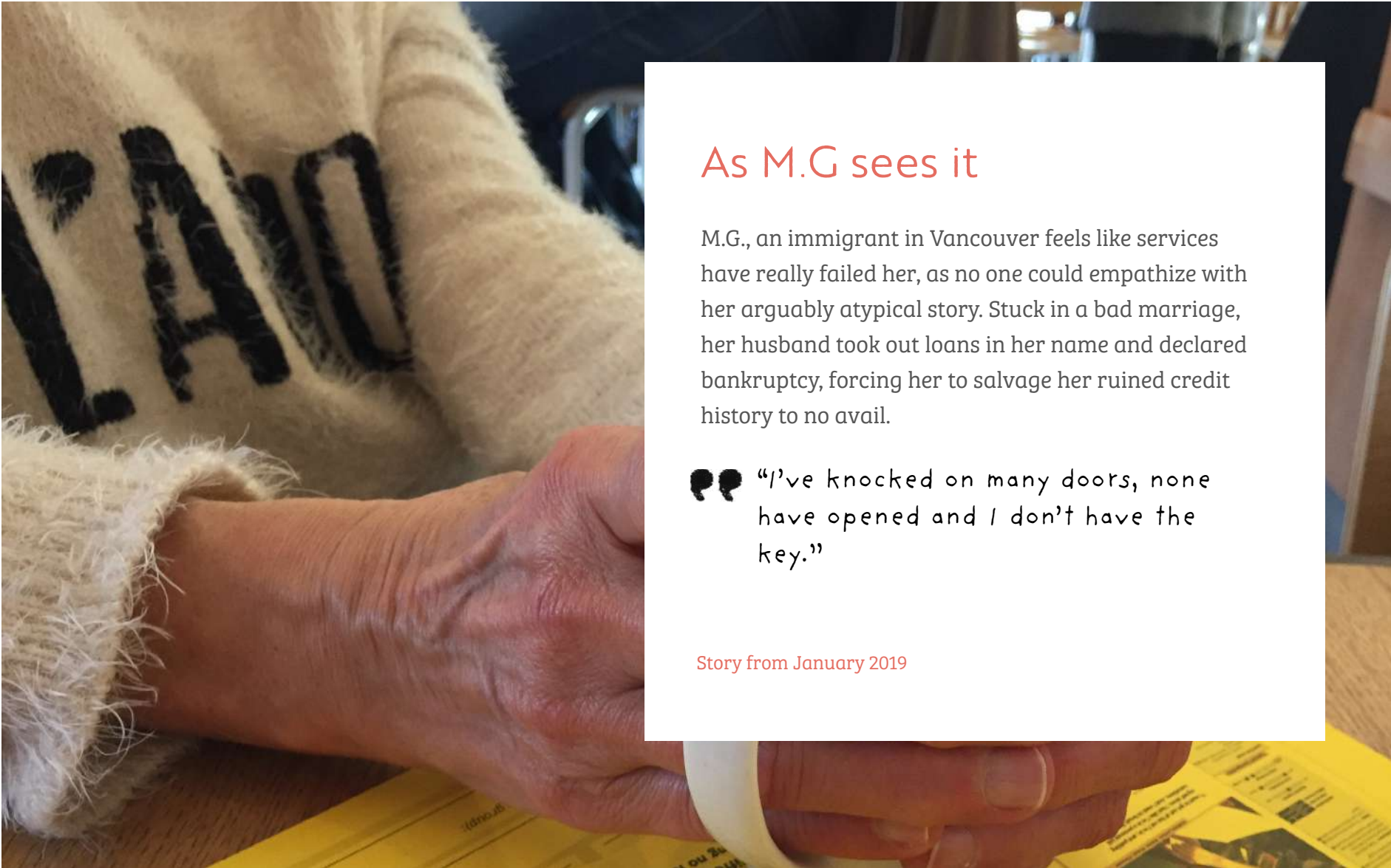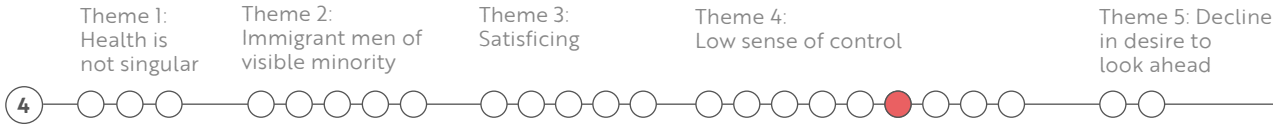
As M.G sees it

M.G., an immigrant in Vancouver feels like services have really failed her, as no one could empathize with her arguably atypical story. Stuck in a bad marriage, her husband took out loans in her name and declared bankruptcy, forcing her to salvage her ruined credit history to no avail.

❝ "I've knocked on many doors, none have opened and I don't have the key."

Story from January 2019

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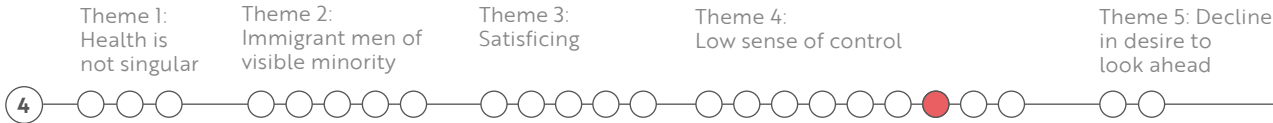
For older people in social housing complexes, stuckness is an especially prominent feeling. Many older social housing residents have internalized the message that they are supposed to be "grateful" for having a roof over their head, even if that roof is contributing to their perceived decline, and standing in the way of healing.
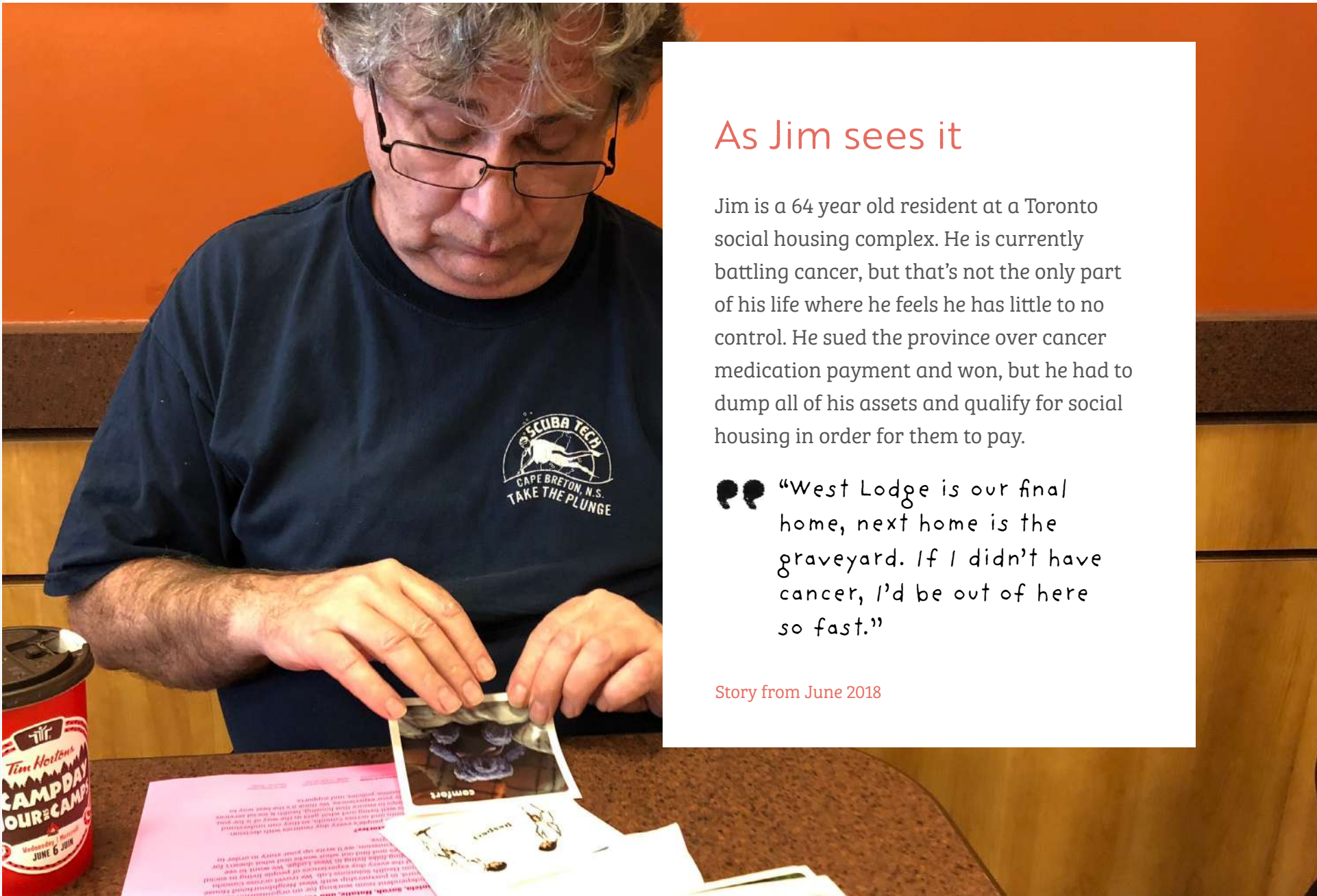
As Jim sees it

Jim is a 64 year old resident at a Toronto social housing complex. He is currently battling cancer, but that's not the only part of his life where he feels he has little to no control. He sued the province over cancer medication payment and won, but he had to dump all of his assets and qualify for social housing in order for them to pay.

"West Lodge is our final home, next home is the graveyard. If I didn't have cancer, I'd be out of here so fast."

Story from June 2018

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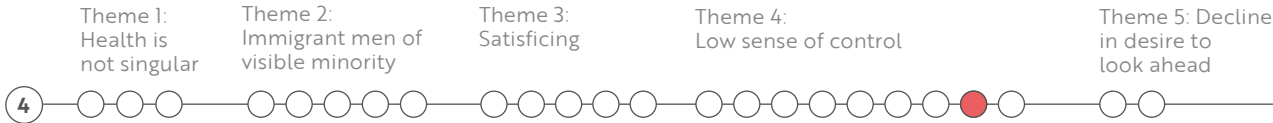
Subsegment: Seniors between 60-79 who reported high sense of control

When we flip our focus to people, ages 60-79, who report the highest sense of control, we can start to identify some of the other environmental and cultural factors critical for purposeful living. Thirty six percent of the positive deviants in our dataset fall within this 'highest control' group.

Escher
M · 60 · Toronto
· ¼ Mohawk

Dana
M · 62 · Vancouver

Elder Marr
F · 62 · Vancouver

Courtney
F · 65 · Vancouver

Haci
M · 65 · Surrey · Arab

Bill
M · 60s · Toronto

Kellie
F · 72 · New Westminster
· Indigenous

Sheila
F · 70s · Toronto · White

Jean
F · 76 · Toronto
· Visible Minority

Pat
F · 72 · Edmonton
· Filipino

Linda
F · 77 · Vancouver ·
Chinese

Robert
M · 79 · Vancouver ·
Czech
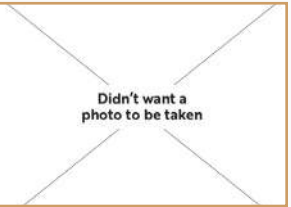
Zhang
M · 70s · Surrey
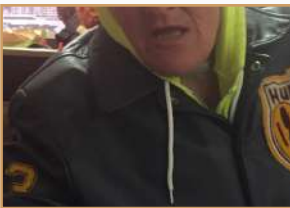
Krizzy
F · 66 · Toronto
· Indigenous
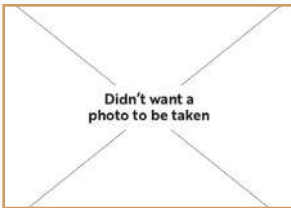
Lu
F · 60s · Surrey
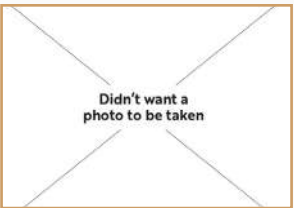
Nandeep
M · 60s · Surrey

Dennis
M · 65 · Toronto · White

Arthur
M · 60s · Toronto · White

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Dana is one of our positive deviants. Dana's life is filled with loss as he grieves both his birth family and his chosen family. But, he doesn't subscribe to the idea that he has no control nor the idea that he has full control. What he can do is focus on the seemingly small, everyday interactions that add up to a vibrant life. "If I go outdoors and make someone laugh, I'm happy for the rest of the day. You can't be judgmental when looking for new friends."

Elder Marr takes a similar approach, recognizing the limits of Western scripts of self-reliance, and embracing a generosity of spirit. Whatever she learns, she also teaches. Conceptualizing her role and her value, not on the terms that Western society sets, but in terms of her culture, has been a source of great strength.

Dana, Elder Marr, and so many of the positive deviants have come to define agency as a collective rather than solo pursuit. Despite, or perhaps because of, experiences of marginalization, these positive deviants have found solace in cultural traditions, alternative philosophies, and faiths. Rather than outright dismiss dominant social norms, or feel excluded by them, they've sought out a community, outside of traditional supports and institutions, willing to construct their own norms and frames. These seem to offer a sense of purpose, even in the face of health setbacks, accumulated loss, and trauma.

Elder Marr

Dana

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look ahead

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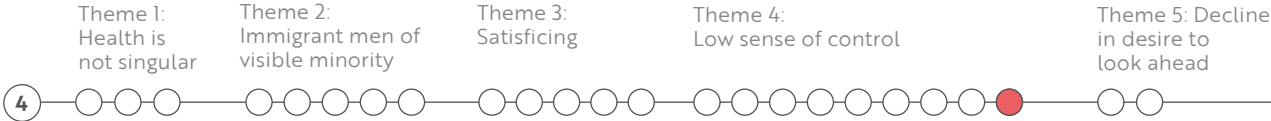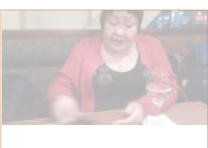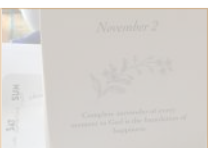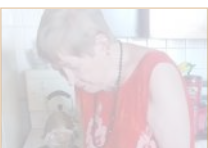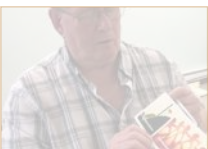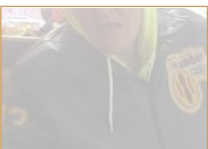
5 The desire to look ahead and seek purpose declines over time

The diagram on the next page visualizes how time orientation, sense of control and desired outcomes shift as people age. We looked at desired outcomes with a present versus future focus. For example, purpose, exploration, and achievement are about striving forward, while comfort, safety and maintenance start with the present moment. Perhaps, not surprisingly, as folks age, the striving subsides. Present-day orientation steadily increases across time.

One of the clearest trends is how dominant the desired outcome of purpose is before age sixty (15/28 seniors between age 50-59 articulated it as a core need) and how quickly this desire drops after age sixty. The desire for maintenance (which encompasses a low desire to change anything and the prioritisation of routine) gradually increases and hits its peak at ages 80-89.

This raises the question: have folks moved beyond self actualization to achieve self-acceptance, in step with what the literature sees as one of the developmental milestones of aging? And/or have folks internalized social scripts that they no longer have purpose? That led us to look again at the data: who might be stressed by a lack of purpose, but not prioritize purpose as a top desired outcome? Eleven older people, with an average age of 70, fit into this segment. Given that purpose reflects socio-cultural roles, norms and expectations, how might we begin to acknowledge the cultures in which these older people are steeped and understand the messages they have imbibed about their value and worth? This leads us towards a socio-cultural analysis.

Theme 1:
Health is
not singular

Theme 2:
Immigrant men of
visible minority

Theme 3:
Satisficing

Theme 4:
Low sense of control

Theme 5: Decline
in desire to
look ahead

4

Percentage
out of

| | 28 respondents | 35 respondents | 32 respondents | 14 respondents | 3 respondents |

100%

90%

80%

70%

60%

50%

40%

30%

20%

10%

50-59   60-69   70-79   80-89   90+

Number of
mentions

20

18

16

14

12

10

8

6

4

2

High sense
of control

Neutral sense
of control

Low sense
of control

Future oriented

Present oriented

Past oriented

▲
PEAK
Purpose

▲
PEAK
Exploration

PEAK
Achievement

▲
PEAK
Maintenance

▲
PEAK
**Comfort and
Safety**

**Desired
outcome**

(Outcomes around
doing more)

**Desired
outcome**

(Outcomes around
staying the same)
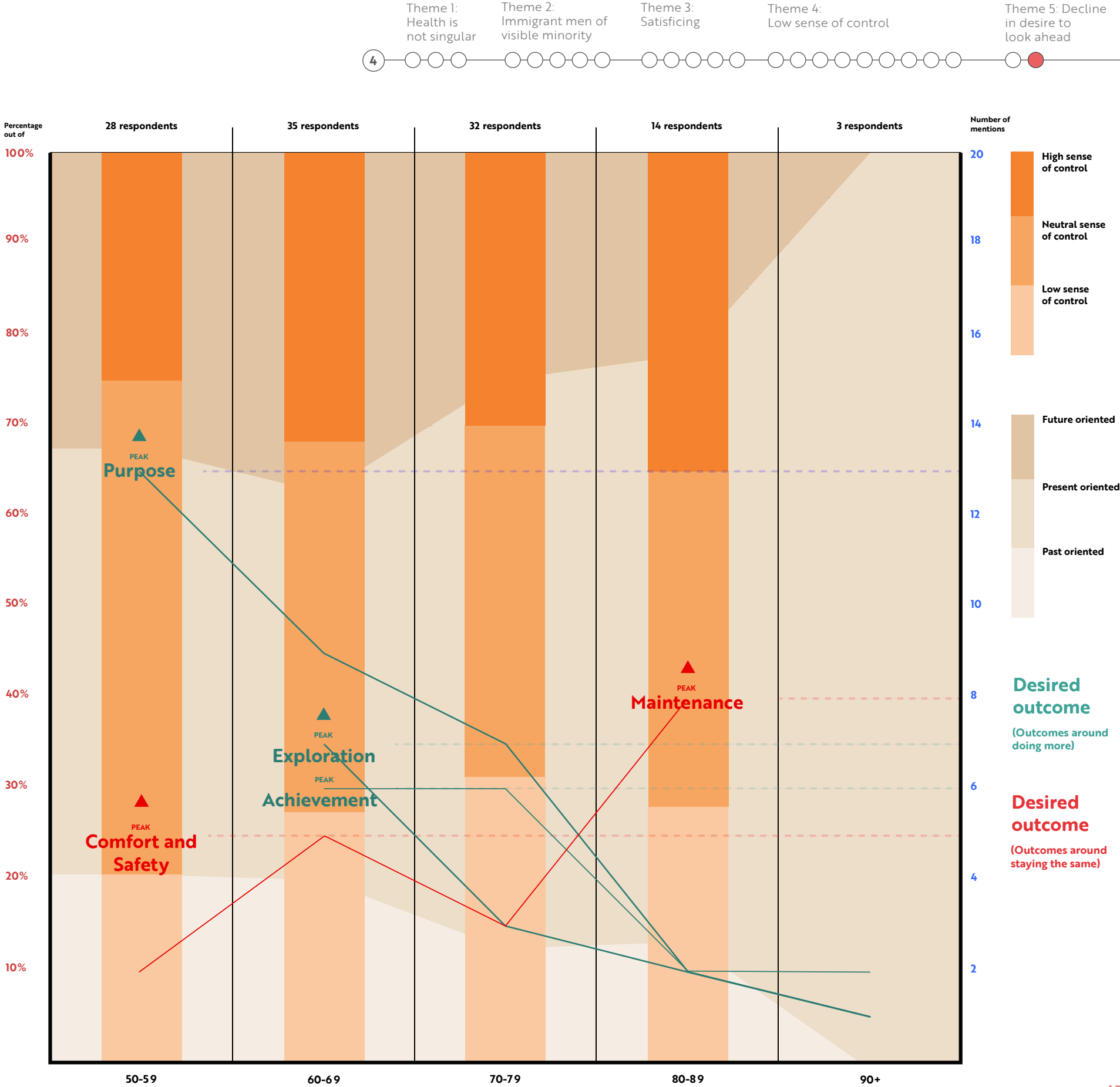
Taking a cultural lens

(5) —— Provocations —— Reflections —— Pluralistic lens —— What next? —— 🕐 **10 minutes**
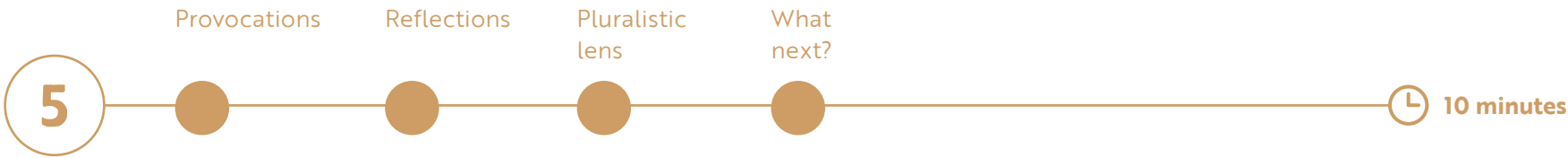
The questions of the ages
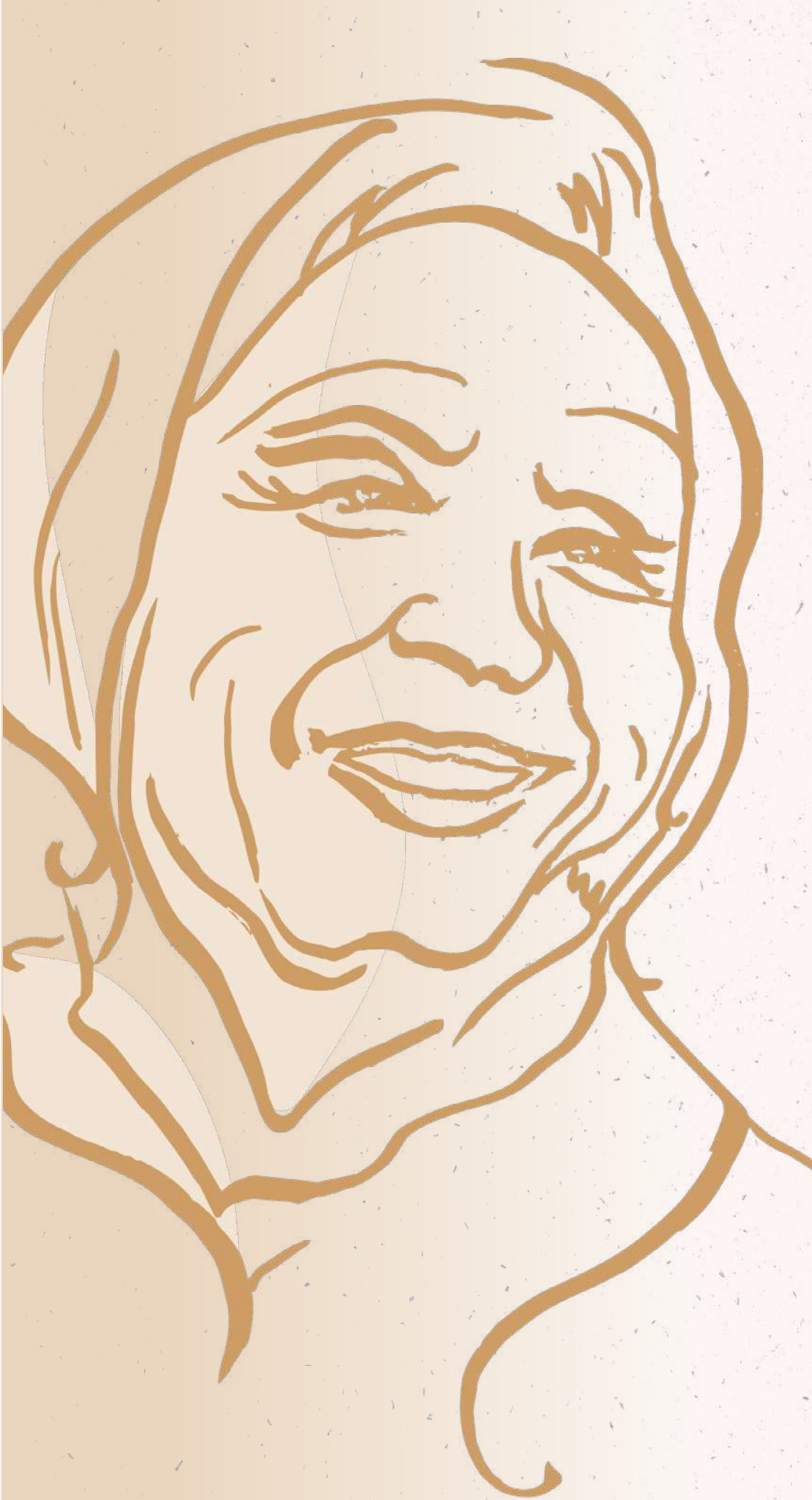
Provocations

We tend to look to the individual and their immediate context for answers as to why they are disconnected, purposeless, and unwell. So much of the West's narrative on healthy aging reduces disease and disability to bio-psycho-social variables. That is, people's well-being comes down to their genetics and behaviours: their risk profile, what they eat, how much they exercise, whether they take up and maintain activities, their outlook, their acceptance of help.

We tend to see it as the welfare state's job to offer activities, services and benefits. We see it as the individual's job to make a good effort. When people don't take up these offers, we seek to close the gap. We increase information and awareness. We expand service delivery. We develop new products and pilots to persuade and cajole people to get with the 'successful aging' program.

What we rarely do is question the dominant socio-cultural context around aging that imprints the activities, services and benefits on offer. Professor Sarah Lamb calls the dominant frame 'successful aging' and notes that: "Aging was previously imagined in North America as largely a natural and deleterious process beyond the control of the individual, but the successful aging project turns that assumption on its head. The declines commonly associated with aging are not inevitable; you as an individual can fashion your own successful aging."

The questions of the ages
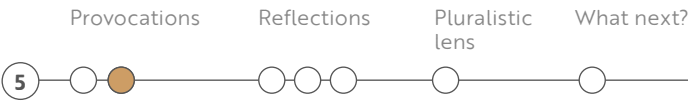
While the idea that independence equals successful aging is deeply steeped within individual and organizational values and practices, Lamb reminds us that this is not true everywhere. In India, for example, where more than 80 percent of people 65 and older live in multi-generational households, dependency isn't a bleak reality to avoid. "Assistance with toileting, in fact, is often presented as a paradigmatic act that Indian parents first naturally provide for their young children and then naturally receive from these same children in a relationship of life-long inter generational reciprocity."

The discomfort North Americans have with bodily and cognitive breakdown contributes to exclusion and abandonment, says Anthropologist Janelle Taylor, whose research on dementia shows how families and institutions, in big and small ways, strip those experiencing decline of social status and humanity. Again, Lamb offers an insightful point of difference: "Such forms of exclusion of frailty and decline from

social personhood and visions of a normal later life strikingly contrast the prevalent talk in India of natural human transience and the regular cycle of life and death, growth and decay."

Our language serves to underscore a defiant, individualistic bias. The words isolation and loneliness are common parlance, but they refer to individual experiences, not to the social structures which exclude and abandon. For sociologists Werner Schirmer and Dimitris Michailakis, experiences of isolation and loneliness are the direct result of social structures explicitly designed with boundaries that exclude and abandon. Where pre-modern societies included people, from birth, in multifunctional units like families, farms and villages, modern societies include people, according to performative roles, in stratified units like departments and organizations. When we retire or fall sick, we lose our performative roles — and with that our identity, status, and social relevance.

> *Retirement then means losing most social contacts related to a person's professional activity. This means not only the formal, direct, work-related dealings with people ranking above and below but also colleagues, customers and other business partners. A lot of the communication in an organizational context takes place in informal interactions. These deal with 'social', functionally diffuse, aspects beyond the performance; this is where memberships in informal, functionally diffuse collectives are forged...where people are transformed into individual personals with idiosyncratic identities...Being included in organizations as consumers or paying members (layman roles) will not alleviate the risk of loneliness. Mere membership does not grant access to functionally diffuse communities.*
>
> *Schirmer and Michailakis, 2016*
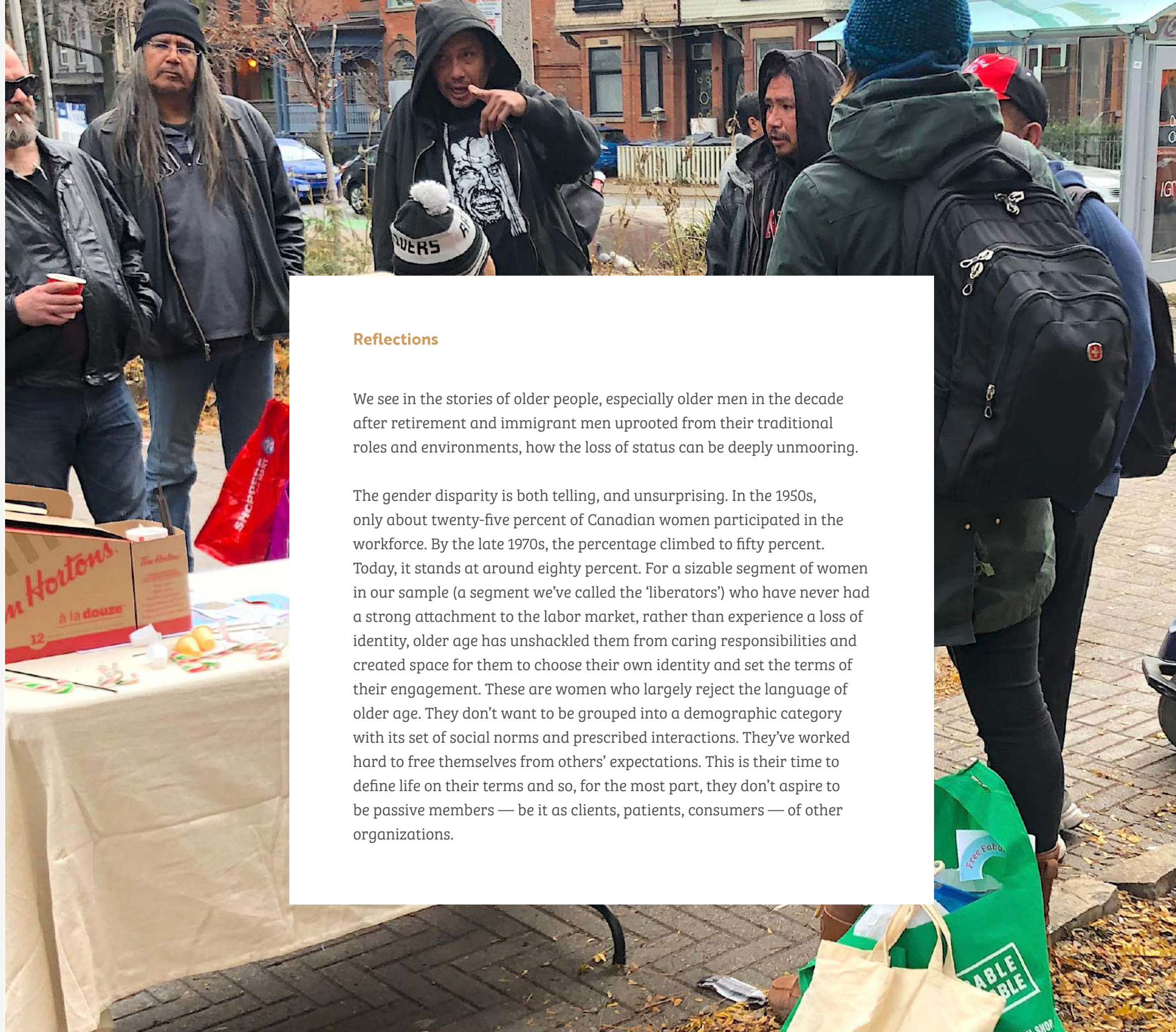
Reflections

We see in the stories of older people, especially older men in the decade after retirement and immigrant men uprooted from their traditional roles and environments, how the loss of status can be deeply unmooring.

The gender disparity is both telling, and unsurprising. In the 1950s, only about twenty-five percent of Canadian women participated in the workforce. By the late 1970s, the percentage climbed to fifty percent. Today, it stands at around eighty percent. For a sizable segment of women in our sample (a segment we've called the 'liberators') who have never had a strong attachment to the labor market, rather than experience a loss of identity, older age has unshackled them from caring responsibilities and created space for them to choose their own identity and set the terms of their engagement. These are women who largely reject the language of older age. They don't want to be grouped into a demographic category with its set of social norms and prescribed interactions. They've worked hard to free themselves from others' expectations. This is their time to define life on their terms and so, for the most part, they don't aspire to be passive members — be it as clients, patients, consumers — of other organizations.

The questions of the ages

Dominant frame:
Successful aging

An alternative frame
Conscious aging

Within this frame, good aging is defined as the cultivation of self

Relationships
Focused on independence, productivity

Relationships
Focused on interdependence, intimacy

Within this frame, good aging is defined as the letting go of self

Structures
Differentiated with boundaries; identity based on performative roles

Structures
Integrative; identity based on family roles

Values and beliefs
Fight to maintain control; define self in terms of achievement

Values and beliefs
Accept loss of control release notion of self

Indeed, the role of program participant, aged care client, health care patient, or service consumer is often a weak replacement for the conviviality and purpose that comes from performance roles; from feeling part of a system, rather than as a transaction within a system. Across all of the segments in our story set, older people expressed real reluctance at being lumped together, and defined by their age or perceived vulnerability. While about a third of our sample subscribed to the dominant cultural frame of 'independence' and 'self-sufficiency' — some are seeking independence to redefine self, while some are seeking to sustain their current definition of self. This difference matters. Those looking for self-acceptance are craving different kinds of social interactions than those looking to maintain a sense of productivity and achievement.

The questions of the ages

Culture A

Engagement with:
· Spirituality
· Human project

Acceptance or Rejection of:
· Loss of control
· Sickness, death

Belonging to:
· Family
· Workplace

Culture B

Belonging to:
· Profession, workplace, role identity

Acceptance or Rejection of:
· Loss of control
· Sickness, death

Engagement with:
· Spirituality
· Higher power

Culture C

Belonging to:
· Family, community, holistic identity

Acceptance or Rejection of:
· Loss of control
· Sickness, death

Engagement with:
· Human project (e.g. achievement, learning)
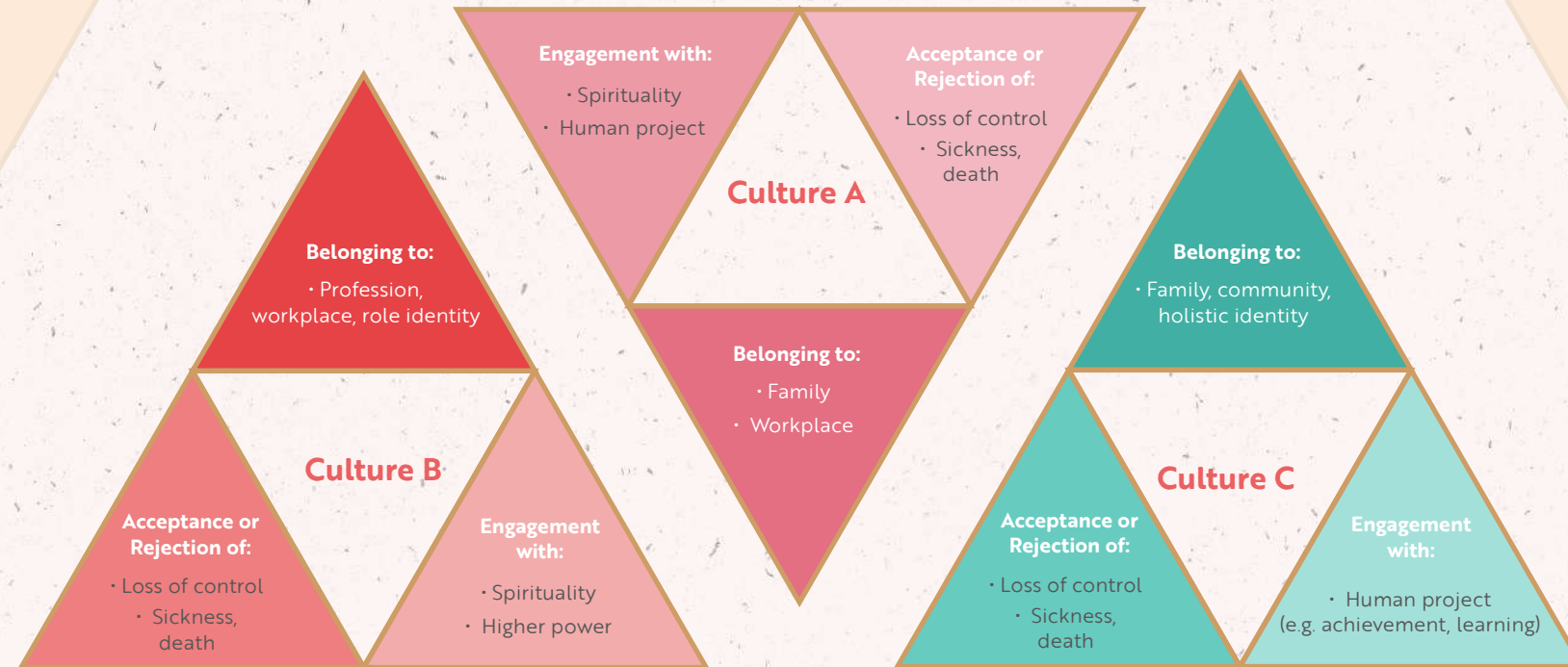
When we design policies and services for a homogenous demographic, we not only turn people off, we risk creating existential harm; as in, we risk ignoring people's deep-seated needs for meaning and belonging. Randle not only doesn't want another program for seniors, he finds the banality of age-based programming loneliness-inducing. He wants to find fellow Shakespeare lovers, regardless of age. And for those older people operating outside the dominant cultural frame — especially immigrants coming from more collectivist, less individualistic societies — there are few policies and services which start from logics and values rooted in interdependence and transcendence.

While Canada is a proudly and increasingly a multicultural society — in the throes of decolonization and reconciling with Indigenous peoples — we would argue that older age policies

and services are largely situated within one Western cultural frame. Although we collected stories of older people across three provinces, and seven different cities, we spotted little substantive differences in the mix of service offers.

There seems to be little public recognition that aging is both a biological reality and a social construct — that the ways in which we choose to conceptualize aging determine how both individuals and institutions define problems, articulate needs, and see possibilities. Opening up conversations about "good" and "successful" aging, and intentionally embracing a plurality of perspectives, could help to not only diversify what's on offer, but expand the levers available for change.

Adopting a pluralistic lens

Services are only one instrument for change, and they largely reflect, rather than shape, structure and culture. Shaping structure and culture means pulling some different levers such as (1) knowledge and meanings, (2) narratives and frames, (3) societal roles and resources, (4) rituals and routines, (5) environments and interactions, and (6) laws and incentives.

Adopting a pluralistic aging lens might mean legitimizing Indigenous and cultural knowledge bases; advancing a broad range of narratives (in film, popular media, news) about what 'good' aging means; rethinking roles and milestones across the lifespan; giving public space and resources for rituals around death and dying, growth and decay; reimaigning boundaries and interactions between professionals and people, and between neighbours and strangers; and more.

The questions of the ages

What next?

When we begin to acknowledge how social phenomenon like loneliness and isolation are products of our values and structures — of how we've chosen to organize the life course, set norms, and pattern social relationships — we begin to see that our current menu of older age services may be more band-aid than antidote. Well intentioned efforts to coordinate and streamline older age services will likely do little to address why so many people - young and old, alike - feel sidelined by social norms, expectations and roles.

Perhaps as Brave New World author and philosopher Aldous Huxley reminds us, loneliness and isolation isn't the problem so much as the structures and cultures which prescribe one way of interpreting loneliness and isolation.

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If one's different, one's bound to be lonely.

- Aldous Huxley

Wellbeing Reframed

A Case Study of RECOVER Edmonton's Urban Wellness Journey

Five chapters

Cast

The central characters of this story

(1)

Cast

Outside partners in thinking

🕐 5 minutes

Plot

Key moments and milestones

(2)

Setting the scene

Plot twist

🕐 5 minutes

Acts

Five acts to describe the team's process

(3)

Act 1: Awareness

Act 2: Listening

Act 3: Acting on Insights

Act 4: Compiling a framework

Act 5: Socializing the framework

🕐 12 minutes

Shifts

How this inquiry process shifted the team's approach to strengthening urban wellness

(4)

Introduction

Shift 1: Solution-led to inquiry-led

Shift 2: Language of deficits to abundance

Shift 3: Material to immaterial

Shift 4: Rational to constructed knowledge

Shift 5: Solutions in provisions to culture

🕐 12 minutes

Conclusion

Final takeaways

(5)

Conclusion

🕐 10 minutes

77
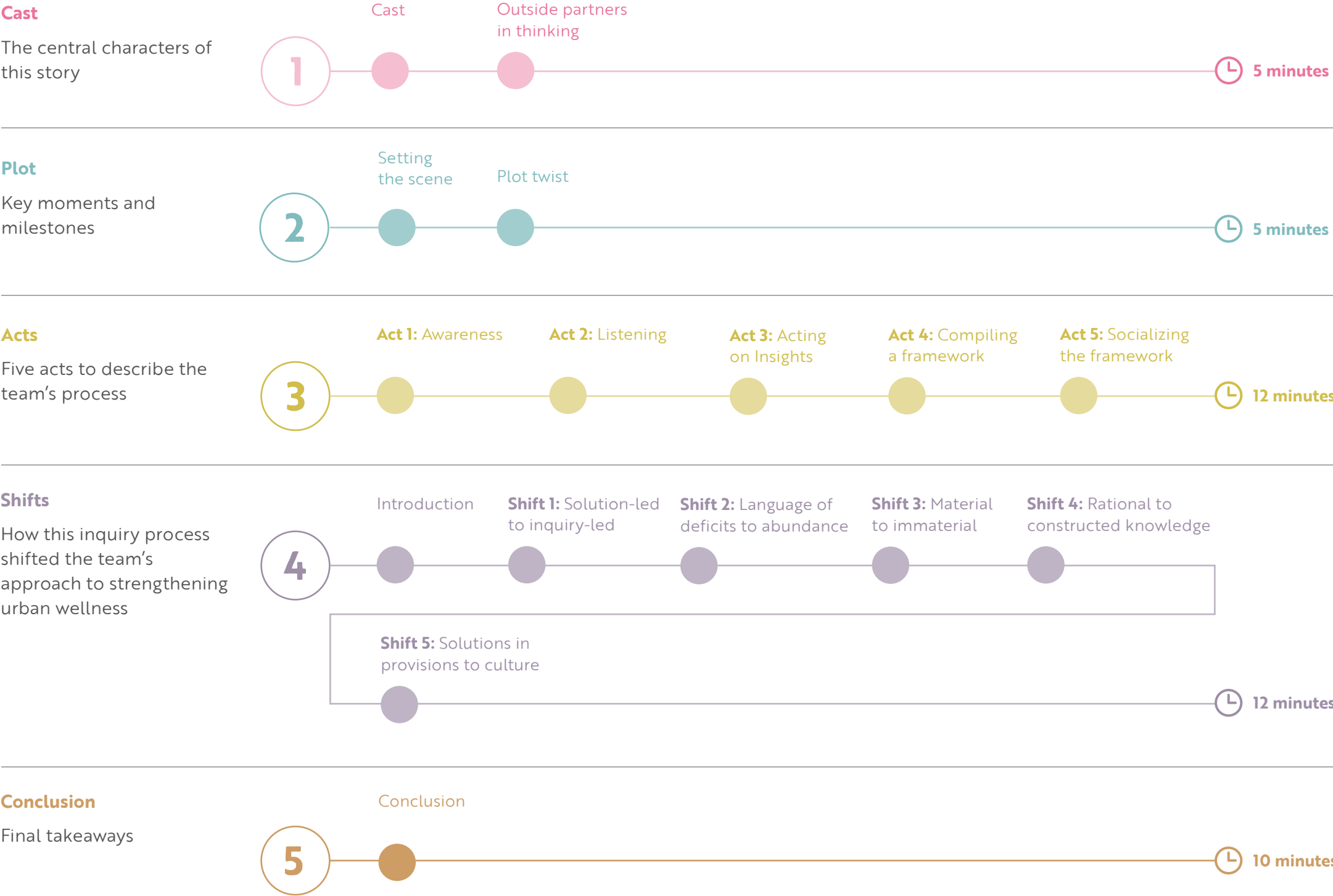
Acknowledgements

The deep learning of RECOVER has been happening, and continues to happen, on Treaty Six lands. These lands are a traditional and contemporary gathering place for Indigenous peoples including the Cree, Blackfoot, Nakota Sioux, Haudenosaunee, Saulteaux, Métis, Inuit, and many others whose histories, languages, and cultures shape who our community is, and can become.

We appreciatively acknowledge the generous contributions of many Indigenous Edmontonians who shared their experiences, aspirations, and challenges to better our understanding of wellbeing. We also recognize that InWithForward and the City of Edmonton's RECOVER team are composed of settlers who are interpreting through lenses that are undoubtedly limited. We strive to adopt two-eyed seeing, bringing together the best of Indigenous and Western ways of knowing, while humbly acknowledging that we have blindspots and unidentified biases. We make a commitment to foster deeper relationships across difference so that the work of connection can expand our collective wellbeing.

Two-eyed seeing is a concept popularized by Elder Albert Marshall in Canada, and shared with us by Naheyawin: "To see from one eye with the strengths of Indigenous ways of knowing and to see from the other eye with the strengths of Western ways of knowing, and to use both of those eyes together."

Introduction

Asked to describe their work to date, members of the RECOVER team use the word "learning" more than any other. Everyone agrees that their work, of exploring urban wellness, has stretched them, and at the same time, that engaging with a concept so core to our collective human experience has been sustaining and meaningful. Now, in their third year, they have a framework that presents a definition and theory of wellness that's based in local ethnographic research, community engagement, psychosocial literature, and thousands of years of philosophy from Eastern, Western, and Indigenous traditions. They have convinced Edmonton's City Council to consider and value different kinds of evidence, and different ways of knowing. They have modelled a spirit of inquiry and experimentalism that is unusual in their municipal context. As a result, they are effectively demonstrating some of the core tenets of systemic change: figuring out how to shift hearts, minds and souls -- not just programs, services, and resources.

This case study is offered up in the spirit of shared learning, reflexivity, and commitment to furthering work that is grounded in the experience of people who are often sidelined by our systems and cultural narratives. Throughout, there are questions about how ESDC, as a funder and policymaker, can create the conditions for systemic change. The following pages invite you to consider what funders and policymakers might need to learn and unlearn to disrupt longstanding patterns of social isolation, exclusion and marginalization and actually enable wellbeing.

"I would say it's all about learning. One is, just, you know, the initial learning and then deepening it, and then digesting and sharing it and applying it."

"We were getting grounded research, learning about ethnographic research and prototyping... I was learning the language, learning what it meant."

"It was learning and applying process at the same time."

"You do have to invest yourself in this learning journey."

"One of the other pieces that we're learning, through [the prototype] Expectant, is how hungry people are for these deeper conversations"

"I think this is a way of working and a way of learning. And we try to talk about that - that this is a mindset."

"Understanding what my own biases are...and what additional unlearning I need to do because man-oh-man, there's a lot."

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79

1 — **Cast**   2 — Plot   3 — Acts   4 — Shifts   5 — Conclusion

A cast of characters

The cast of RECOVER is broad, spilling beyond the Edmonton City staff to city councillors, residents, social service organizations, and beyond. The central characters of this story are the RECOVER team itself: a set of civil servants who were intrigued by what they understood to be a complex problem and the opportunity to learn and model a different kind of municipal response.

Cast

Outside partners in thinking

1

5 minutes
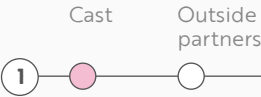
It was really going to be a plan. But then Oksana came into my office one day, and she said, 'you should talk to Alex Ryan [at MaRS]: you could use social innovation and take a systems approach.' And I said, 'I don't even know what those words mean. But I'm desperate.

I always liked the idea of, you know, government isn't about just coming at things [with] these action plans, and that just solves the problem. That never works. So what I liked about what we were hoping to do, was...[that] it was actually finally being realistic about the work that needed to be done.

Susan Coward

Manager of Urban Wellness at the City of Edmonton and Team Lead at RECOVER *(2017-present)*

Oksana Niedzielsk

Strategic Design at RECOVER *(2017-2018)*

Sam Juru

Strategic Planner at RECOVER team *(2017-2018*

Raffaella Loro

Strategy and Communications Lead at RECOVER team *(2017-2020)*

Kate Gunn

Director, Community Initiatives at the City of Edmonton, and Co-lead at RECOVER *(2017-2019)*

Keren Tang

Project Manager at RECOVER *(2017-2020)*

Sue Holdsworth

Project Manager at RECOVER *(2020)* Strategic Planner at RECOVER *(2017-2020)*

Amanda Rancourt

Strategic Analyst at RECOVER *(2017-present)*

Nor'Ali McDaniel

Community Development Social Worker at City of Edmonton and Strathcona Neighbourhood Lead at RECOVER *(2019-2020)*

Miki Stricker-Talbot

Strategic Design at RECOVER *(2018-2020)*

"In the beginning, there's more I didn't know than I did know. I was very happy to be brought in. But I was also really uncertain about so much..."

"I was very interested just hearing [Susan and Oksana] talk about it, because it sounded quite different from the work that I had been doing and the work that was happening in our section in general. I liked that it was a lot closer to the community and the vulnerable folks themselves. And they were really interested in being data-informed. So that's kind of where I came in."

Interviewed for this case study

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The questions of the ages

Some Outside Partners in Thinking & Doing

RECOVER invited a number of consultants and partners in thinking and doing into their work. For simplicity, only those explicitly referred to in quotations from the team are introduced here. However, many external partners in Edmonton were part of this work, many of whom are listed here.

Alex Ryan & MaRS

SVP, Partner Solutions, MaRS Discovery District

Alex Ryan leads partner solutions at MaRS, helping government and corporate partners accelerate the adoption of innovation in their organizations, markets and cities.

InWithForward

A social design shop brought in by Alex Ryan's Solutions lab to do ethnographic research. The team has continued to provide coaching support, research, synthesis, and storytelling.

> *So I joined the team...in their second year. Because...they were expanding over to Strathcona. And that's the area that I was assigned to as a Community Social Worker...I basically was pulled in because of that southside connection.*

Nor'Ali McDaniel

> *My role, in the beginning was really to help frame the public gatherings. ...In having watched the RECOVER team in the first year of the journey, in the same office, but off to the side, I was really struck and compelled by the framing that they had done, and really actually diving into the complexity and not ignoring it. ...It really seemed to me that RECOVER was going into territory that as a City, as an organization, we hadn't gone before.*

Miki Stricker-Talbot

1 — Cast 2 — **Plot** 3 — Acts 4 — Shifts 5 — Conclusion

Setting the scene

In spring 2017 Edmonton was making its own history as it laid the path to respond to the opioid crisis in new ways.

2 — Setting the scene — Plot twist — 5 minutes

Setting the scene...

On May 2, city council voted 10-1 in favour of requesting federal exemption to bring supervised safe injection services to Edmonton. There were four proposed locations: an inner city hospital for in-patient intravenous drug users, and three inner city social service delivery organizations in close proximity to each other, that would together provide 24/7 access. These neighbourhoods were targeted because many injection drug users were already living and utilizing services in the area. However, residents and business owners showed up at council to register their frustration and sense that the burden carried by their neighbourhoods was too great. They asked why other neighbourhoods in Edmonton weren't expected to care for people experiencing homessness and addiction.

The City forged ahead with its plans, however Mayor Don Iveson offered something in exchange. Tweeting on the same day as Edmonton City Council voted in favour of the supervised consumption sites, the Mayor posted a new motion to work with the Province, Edmonton Police, and community stakeholders to create a shared 'Inner City Wellness Plan.' The first and only item articulated for that plan was a "firm proposal of a Community Wellness Centre," designed to achieve a reduction in "crime and social disorder in core neighbourhoods," coordinate police, health, and social support services, and aid in the transition of wellness centre clients to permanent housing. Upon approval, a week later, a new team was formed at the City of Edmonton to develop an urban wellness plan focused on a new community wellness centre.

Plot Twist!

But then something unusual happened. The team assigned to develop an urban wellness plan, called RECOVER, decided to start with inquiry rather than a solution. Their inquiry engaged residents, business owners and people living rough in the inner city, and led to a reframing of what wellness, or wellbeing, actually consists of. That reframing set the stage for new narratives, scenes, actors, and props, none of which included a new wellness centre. Rather, RECOVER's new framing of wellness was about re-establishing connection and making space for healing - not just for marginalized Edmontonians, but for all Edmontonians. Shifting the solution space from one of infrastructure, housing, and service coordination, to one of building cultural capacity, challenged the very systems within which the RECOVER team and its partners are situated, and opened the door to transformational change.

The City of Edmonton's RECOVER initiative continues to be supported by council, as of November 2020 and so their story is ongoing. This case study looks at how decisions within the team's first three years (2017-2020) have set the work of urban wellness on a different course.

Photo credit: RECOVER Edmonton

The questions of the ages

" The event that led up to the creation of RECOVER was the City seeking federal approval to allow supervised consumption sites to open up in McCauley Boyle and Central McDougall area. And so that of course, became public information, where those sites were going to be located, and people from the Downtown Business Association from Chinatown, and residents, descended upon council, and all registered to speak against the supervised consumption sites. And they understood harm reduction, and they understood the value of these sites.

But their question was, 'why does everything have to keep getting put in these central downtown areas? Because we're all struggling: we're struggling to keep our businesses going. And this is a city-wide responsibility. So let's put these sites in different parts of the city.'

...Council still approved the consumption sites, and they said, 'but, we're going to work on an Inner City Wellness Plan that's going to address the issues that you've just talked to us about.' And that's how RECOVER was created... [They told us,] 'Come back with a proposal of what this wellness centre will look like. And also work with the community and the agencies to improve urban wellness.

Susan Coward

Mayor Don Iveson's tweet about the Inner City Wellness Plan

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Act by act

Early on, the RECOVER team abandoned a traditional process of stakeholder workshops and jurisdictional scans followed by the publication of a plan and implementation. Instead, they opted for an unknown path that offered the possibility of deeper change and more meaningful engagement with community. Heading in, they weren't sure what the phases of their work might be: it was all too new.

Act 1: Awareness   **Act 2:** Listening   **Act 3:** Acting on Insights   **Act 4:** Compiling a framework   **Act 5:** Socializing the framework

3 — ○ —— ○ —— ○ —— ○ —— ○ —— 🕐 **15 minutes**

Act 1:
Awareness

Act 2:
Listening

Act 3:
Acting on
Insights

Act 4:
Compiling a
framework

Act 5:
Socializing
the framework

3

The questions of the ages

Map of a few team members' emotional journeys of the process so far

Positive
emotions

Negative
emotions

Feedback from
the Community
Advisory
& External
Partners

Vision
workshop

Government
mapping

Community
mapping

Ethnography:
Inner core

Intro to
prototyping

Table top
prototyping

Strathcona
kick-off

Year 2
kick-off

Ethnography:
Strathcona &
City Centre Mall

Sense-making
workshops

Starting with
research
workshops

Ethno
story return

Co-design
workshops

Ethnography:
24/7 Crisis
Diversion

Theory of
change
with IWF

Intro to new
framework

Socializing the
framework

Covid-19

2017   2018   2019   2020

Act 1:   Act 2:   Act 3:   Act 4:   Act 5:
Awareness   Listening   Acting on   Compiling a   Socializing
                             Insights   framework   the framework

3

Act 1   ## Awareness

The RECOVER team was assigned to pursue a solution: an urban wellness plan focused on a community wellness centre. However, early on, the team chose to explore alternate approaches to problem solving for complex human challenges. Rather than take the problem of 'urban unwellness' as a given, with a building as the inevitable solution, the team took time to learn about different methods, and the assumptions and logics underlying them. Specifically, they drew on social innovation, design, and systems thinking methods. Making room for new approaches also meant doing away with some current practices and expectations that were incompatible, like creating big guiding documents, with prescriptive action plans. Instead, the RECOVER team needed to ask council for permission to take the time to engage stakeholders in new ways, and go deeper in understanding what the urban wellness problem actually might be.

> *It was really going to be a plan. But then Oksana came into my office one day, and she said, 'you should talk to Alex Ryan (MaRS): you could use social innovation and take a systems approach.' And I said, 'I don't even know what those words mean. But I'm desperate.' We called Alex and Alex helped us understand that we weren't even clear about the problem... And so it changed our RECOVER work really early, from being a usual planning process where we run stakeholder workshops and do some jurisdictional scans into 'you've got to do ethnography, you've got to do codesign, you've got to do prototyping.' So it totally changed the process.*

Susan Coward

> *Well, the first phase was like the deer in headlights phase. So basically learning about the social innovation kind of approach and learning about ethnographic research. That was a huge learning that first year: learning from [InWithForward] and learning about doing the first round of prototyping. [It was] learning from experts... and also learning by doing.*

Sue Holdsworth

> *It was a lot of learning... about the neighborhoods and the communities in question, learning about defining wellbeing, learning about these new processes, to try and be more human centered, community driven. So bringing in some of these new ways, like the social innovation process that we had MaRs help guide us through, and then bringing in the ethnography to say, there's even deeper ways to connect to the community.*

Amanda Rancourt

Act 1:
Awareness

Act 2:
Listening

Act 3:
Acting on
Insights

Act 4:
Compiling a
framework

Act 5:
Socializing
the framework

Act 2 **Listening**

For the RECOVER team, the new methods presented a steep learning curve: a barrage of new ways of engaging people, new data to make sense of, and an entirely different performance of public servant. They were used to playing the roles of coordinators, planners, and recommenders. Now they were listeners and facilitators of sense-making, idea generation, and idea testing, alongside citizens. The RECOVER team proved adept at engaging Edmontonians, with an estimated 650 individuals attending their events.

Places we've recruited older people:

Residential
- 4 business associations
- 11 small local businesses
- 5 larger corporations

Commercial
- 9 community leagues
- 650 individuals

Social
- 46 agencies, nonprofits, and community organizations

Transit
- 46 agencies, nonprofits, and community organizations
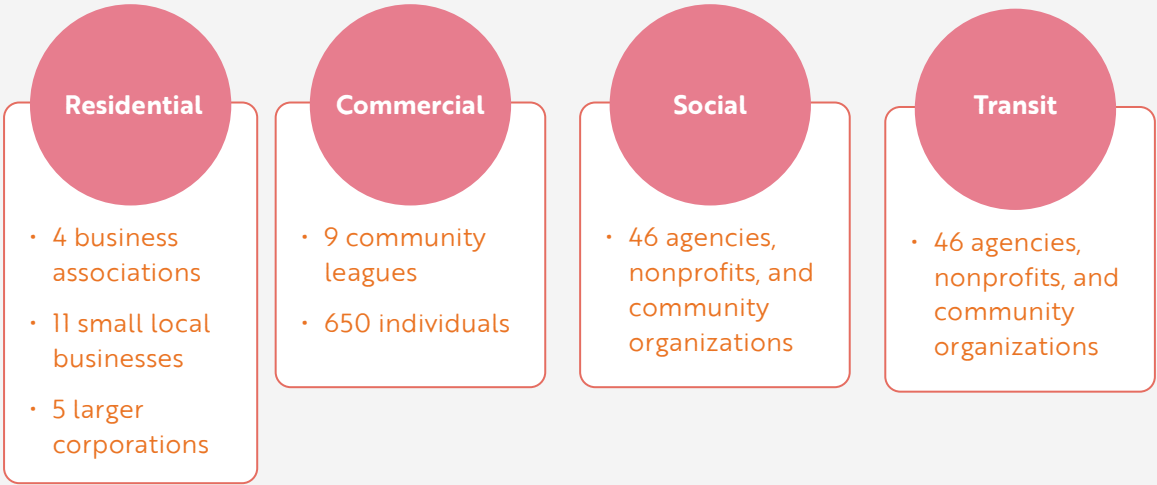
> 66 I think that in that first year, we needed to understand a good structure that we could work in, and how we could explain a process. And I do think that we ended up figuring out a process framework of how you could tackle some of this complexity within the government system that we have. And how [you could] do this without it being, 'write a plan, have actions and then move forward.
>
> **Raffaella Loro**

> 66 We tried to make sure we got as many voices heard in different ways as possible. So there was a door knocking campaign, walks to the community with open invitations to do tours that were both information out and information in. The walks were pre-designed with specific spots along them that we were pointing out to neighborhood members. It was also for us to take in information about additional spots along the way that they felt strongly about.
>
> **Amanda Rancourt**

The questions of the ages

Act 1:
Awareness

Act 2:
Listening

Act 3:
Acting on
Insights

Act 4:
Compiling a
framework

Act 5:
Socializing
the framework

3

" The ideas that we tested, were really just kind of preliminary things that might not even have been the best things to test. [They] were really just kind of tests of the process... we just did spaghetti on the wall.

Raffaella Loro

" Before they did [a second round of] field prototypes, [teams] went back and they revisited the research, kind of dug down [and adopted] a different lens, and there was some coaching that was involved with that. So there was a bit more intentional work to develop their field prototype and how they would go about [it] and engage with the communities that way.

Nor'Ali McDaniel

Act 1:
Awareness

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Listening

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Act 3   **Acting on Insights**

Instead of the typical surveys, public consultations and desk research, the Recover team sought to diversify its data sources. Alongside a review of the literature and existing indicator data, they invested in ethnographic fieldwork with street-involved adults experiencing the effects of urban unwellness and conducted interviews with local business owners and community members.

And instead of landing on a top-down strategy, the Recover team convened groups of community members and service providers to come up with ideas and quickly test those ideas on paper, and with rapid prototypes. In a prototype, a concept is quickly brought to life, for a short period of time, to understand its viability and possible impact. Alongside the prototypes, InWithForward -- who collected the ethnographic data -- worked to synthesize recurring insights and formulate an overarching framework.

Act 1:   Act 2:   Act 3:   Act 4:   Act 5:
Awareness   Listening   Acting on   Compiling a   Socializing
                                Insights   framework   the framework

The questions of the ages

Perhaps because the prototypes ran concurrently with the data synthesis, and were led by different groups, they weren't always in alignment. Still, knowing there wasn't going to be a single, magic bullet solution, the Recover team resisted the urge to over-plan or micro-manage: it was thrilling to have so many stakeholders so actively involved in imagining and trying out positive interventions for the purpose of learning.

In time, RECOVER was able to nudge prototype teams towards generating ideas that could help them learn more about the research insights and identified opportunity areas. For example, the Old Strathcona Business Association formed a team to respond to ethnographic data that showed Strathcona attracted a significant segment of homeless and precariously housed individuals for whom work and relationships to local business were identified as among the most important conditions of wellbeing and forward movement in their lives. The Odd Jobs prototype is running a trial service that connects such people to work opportunities in their community, to see if it might produce the desired outcome of developing an increased self-esteem, self-worth, and sense of belonging.

Also, RECOVER team members are mostly part time and work on projects in other parts of the City. They talk about applying insights and problem-solving approaches from RECOVER to enrich, connect, and reframe other pieces of work.

> " Leading up to the first prototype that I was the City Connector for in that first year, I would say I was super stressed... and then super happy with how it worked out. I mean, there was just so much uncertainty, and I had no idea how it was actually going to play out. That one was Project Welcome Mat. And for all I knew, we were headed for this giant disaster. But instead, it was very positive. So I was very, very happy.
>
> **Susan Coward**

Act 1:   Act 2:   Act 3:   Act 4:   Act 5:
Awareness   Listening   Acting on   Compiling a   Socializing
                           Insights   framework   the framework

3

Act 4

Compiling a framework

By fall 2019, RECOVER wondered what story they had to tell from all the bottom-up efforts. By this point in the process, there was so much data: tafour ethnographic data sets plus input from residents who joined them on walks, at town halls, and through community engagement sessions. They had also commissioned a grey literature review of previously evaluated wellbeing interventions. They wondered what patterns and insights all this data could reveal. What might all of the work to date tell us about urban wellness: both what it means to Edmontonians, especially the most marginalized, and how to enable it?

InWithForward reviewed the data, along with 3000 years of literature on what it means to live a good life, and produced a digital document called The Soulful City.

> 66 In the fall of 2019, early September, [InWithForward] came and we were going to work on a theory of change. And that's where we were having a hard conversation of 'do we continue with what we've been doing as social innovation process? or do we [have a] rethink about what we were created to do, and if we can go at it differently and make more of an impact?' I thought it was very helpful because [it got] us to differentiate process from [wellbeing] outcomes and impacts. And it was a harder conversation than I thought it was going to be.

Susan Coward

> 66 I think initially with the process and everything - it was a tough sell with the City. People just didn't get it. I think the framework is actually giving us a little bit more substance: 'this is what we found from the work that we're doing.'

Nor'Ali McDaniel

Act 1:
Awareness

Act 2:
Listening

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Compiling a
framework

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Socializing
the framework

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Framework for a Culture of Wellbeing

For example: Films | TV | Podcasts | Imagery | Messages | Mythology | Role models | Legends

For example: Oral histories | Assessments | Case notes | Language | Teachings | Council Reports

For example: Tickets | Fines | Bans | Leases | Rewards | Punishment | Bylaws

Frames & Narratives — What's valued & believed?

Laws, regulations, incentives — What's reinforced & punished?

Knowledge and meanings — What's understood?

Routines & repertoires — What's practiced and...

Sense of refuge, protection

Feelings of "at-homeness"

Consistent nourishment

Celebration of seasons or time

Closeness to plants & animals

Moments of contribution & learning

Outlets for meaning, purpose, & creativity

Feelings of mastery & efficacy

Expressions of mutual respect

Access to traditional knowledge

Sense of affiliation

Engagement in

Rest & movement

Expressions of identity

Feelings of agency & autonomy

Working through pain & shame

Enduring anxiety, boredom

Expressions of love & care

Outlets to openly share or laugh

Recognizing hurt, grief & loss

Feeling listened to & understood

Trusting & reciprocal relationships

Feelings of hope, wonder, awe

Practices of worship or

Connection to **land/ground**

Connection to **body & self**

Connection to the **human project**

Connection to **family, friends, community**

Connection to **culture**

Connection to the **sacred**

Outcomes

A deep sense of connection and balance

Looks like

Before we get to the outcomes we need acknowledge people's grief & loss

3. Acts

The Soulful City presented a concept of wellbeing rooted in the intangibles, specifically, healing from grief and loss, and finding connection to six core elements: land and ground; body and self; family, friends, and community; the sacred; culture; and the human project of learning, creating, and self-actualization.

The framework identified a series of cultural change levers for influencing the conditions for connection and healing in Edmonton. Cultural change tools included: frames & narratives; laws, regulations, and incentives; roles & resources; interactions & environments; routines & repertoires; and knowledge & meanings.

This framework attempted to do justice to the breadth and depth of the work to be done, while identifying a theory about how that change would be achieved. For the RECOVER team, it led to a lot of discussion about where they had a role and influence as a City, where impact would be achieved through partnerships and collaborative approaches, and where conditions created by the City might prompt action by unconnected agents of change.

Download framework for a Culture of Wellbeing

Act 1:
Awareness

Act 2:
Listening

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Compiling a framework

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Socializing the framework

3

The questions of the ages

Framework for a Culture of Wellbeing

For example
Films | TV | Podcasts | Imagery | Messages | Mythology | Role models | Legends

Frames & Narratives
What's valued & believed?

For example
Oral histories | Assessments | Case notes | Language | Teachings | Council Reports

Knowledge and meanings
What's understood?

Laws, regulations, incentives
What's reinforced & punished?

For example
Tickets | Fines | Bans | Leases | Rewards | Punishment | Bylaws

Routines & repertoires
What's practiced and habitual?

Roles & resources
Who's equipped and in power?

Interactions & environments
What's modelled?

Before we get to the outcomes we need acknowledge people's grief & loss

Sense of refuge, protection

Feelings of "at-homeness"

Celebration of seasons or time

Consistent nourishment

Closeness to plants & animals

Rest & movement

Expressions of identity

Feelings of agency & autonomy

Working through pain & shame

Enduring anxiety, boredom

Moments of contribution & learning

Outlets for meaning, purpose, & creativity

Feelings of mastery & efficacy

Expressions of mutual respect

Expressions of love & care

Outlets to openly share or laugh

Recognizing hurt, grief & loss

Feeling listened to & understood

Trusting & reciprocal relationships

Connection to **land/ground**

Connection to **body & self**

Connection to the **human project**

Outcomes
A deep sense of connection and balance

Connection to **family, friends, community**

Connection to **culture**

Connection to the **sacred**

Looks like

Access to traditional knowledge

Sense of affiliation & belonging

Engagement in routines, ceremony

Moments of beauty

Feelings of hope, wonder, awe

Practices of worship or renewal

Sense of perspective, solace

For example
Ceremonies | Rites of passage | Celebrations | Gatherings | Medicine | Traditions

For example
Peers | Allies | Healers | Elders | Doula | Brokers | Practitioners | Artists | Musicians | Planners | Researchers

For example
Meals | Conversations | Movement | Animals | Space | Layout | Use | Artifacts

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The questions of the ages

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Awareness

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> " I was doing some work with Clareview Rec Centre because they were experiencing some safety issues and security concerns and we thought that bringing the approach that we had used in RECOVER to this Rec Centre might be a good way to approach some of the problems that they were having better than a survey, or, you know, some of our more standard responses...
>
> It was a bit more removed from the heavy focus on marginalized populations that we were doing with RECOVER...And then, shortly after we finished our research, COVID happened and all the rec centres were shut down entirely. So the people who are running Clareview Rec centre were put in charge of the City side of things at the Expo Response Centre [temporary shelter.]
>
> Now we're carrying a lot of their learnings from that back into how we can better use our rec facilities to support these marginalized populations. ...Because of my work on RECOVER I'm seeing the connections between these things, and trying to figure out how we can start to lace these things together rather than them standing as kind of discrete operations on their own...

Amanda Rancourt

Photo credit: City of Edmonton

Act 1:
Awareness

Act 2:
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Act 5   ## Socializing the Framework

In early February 2020, InWithForward met, mostly 1:1, with several stakeholders who had been part of the RECOVER process so far: from street-involved participants in the ethnography, to business owners and leaders of social organizations. We wanted to see if the framework resonated with them. Overwhelmingly, people were able to use the framework to explain their experience and their own wisdom, but also to identify barriers to prioritizing connection in their lives and work. The RECOVER team continued this work, with City councillors, staff, and other stakeholders, such as the Edmonton Federation of Community Leagues.

> " I think what's possible is that there's wider applicability of our work, right? That it's not just applicable to X service provider, or this service or this program, that it has wide, wide, wide applicability to anything really. All city-building or community-building exercises, right? And it's not geographically limited or, you know, limited to any kind of particular aspect, really. I mean, because if we're all not working to improve well being, what's the point?

Nor'Ali McDaniel

> " The first two years, we were figuring out sort of like the process-y stuff, but we didn't have anything to hang it on. It was cool stuff, but we didn't have anything to root it to. And so now with the wellbeing framework, it gives us something to work towards. And so the first two years, we were figuring out the how… how we might want to work in community, with community, creating relationships, creating connection, but what the wellbeing framework has given us is something to test all of that against, and something to build potential good ideas towards.

Miki Stricker-Talbot

Act 1: Awareness | Act 2: Listening | Act 3: Acting on Insights | Act 4: Compiling a framework | Act 5: Socializing the framework

3

Awareness

Listening

Building on insights & compiling a framework

Socializing the framework

Mandate:

Make a Wellness Centre plan

Exploring systems change, social innovation, and design approaches

- Inner city ethnography
- Community engagement (walks, town halls, interviews)
- Data gathering

- More community engagement
- Broad, community-led prototypes
- More ethnography (Strathcona)

- Socializing the framework
- Indigenous engagement around framework
- Refining prototypes

Adopt social innovation process: "What is wellbeing?"

Insights leading to multiple starting points/ opportunity areas

Data aggregation leading to new wellbeing framework
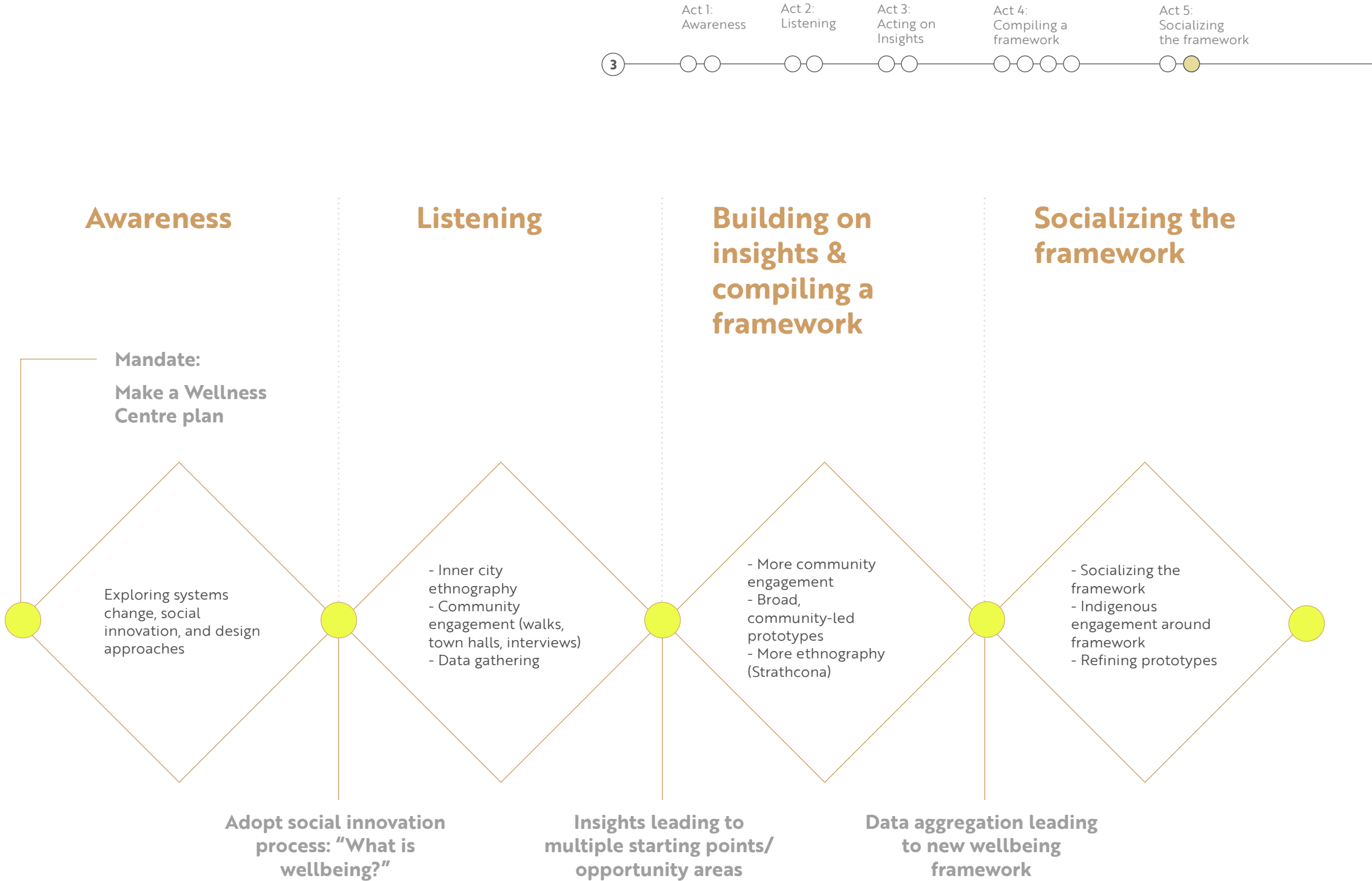
How the inquiry process shifted the team's approach to strengthening urban wellness?

Paying respect to the stories of 59 people who live rough and precariously in Edmonton has asked RECOVER and its partners to let go of a number of starting assumptions and make room to become curious about different perspectives. Cultivating and tapping into this willingness has been one of the strengths of RECOVER. Flowing from that willingness, RECOVER has made five key shifts over the course of its first three years.

The questions beside each shift ask the reader to consider how, in their role, they create enabling conditions or barriers for grantees who take systemic and inquiry-led approaches to their work, and attempt to integrate learning as they go.

4

Introduction

Shift 1: Solution-led to inquiry-led

Shift 2: Language of deficits to abundance

Shift 3: Material to immaterial

Shift 4: Rational to constructed knowledge

Shift 5: Solutions on provisions to culture

🕐 12 minutes

Introduction

Starting with inquiry and choosing research methods that produce "thick data," or ethnographic data that is rich with contextual meaning helps to re-frame the original "problem." We often begin with problems rooted in dominant points of view: for example, vocal and disgruntled taxpayers who are concerned at seeing rising homelessess, or funders lamenting the 'uncoordinated' spending of dollars. When problems are situated in these ways certain solutions rise to the forefront: better case management, greater service coordination, improved intake processes -- all of which are aimed at tackling perceived inefficiencies and tamping down on the visibility of marginalization in neighbourhoods.

Layering on data about other people's experiences adds complexity. At one workshop with RECOVER's social service organization partners, agency participants sorted through a stack of the first 17 ethnographic stories, to identify people for whom a centralized service hub, and more coordinated services, might address the needs and outcomes they themselves articulated. By and large, agency participants came to see how coordinated services addressed their pain points more than the pain points of people living on the streets.

The
questions of
the ages

Introduction

People

Methodology

Patterns
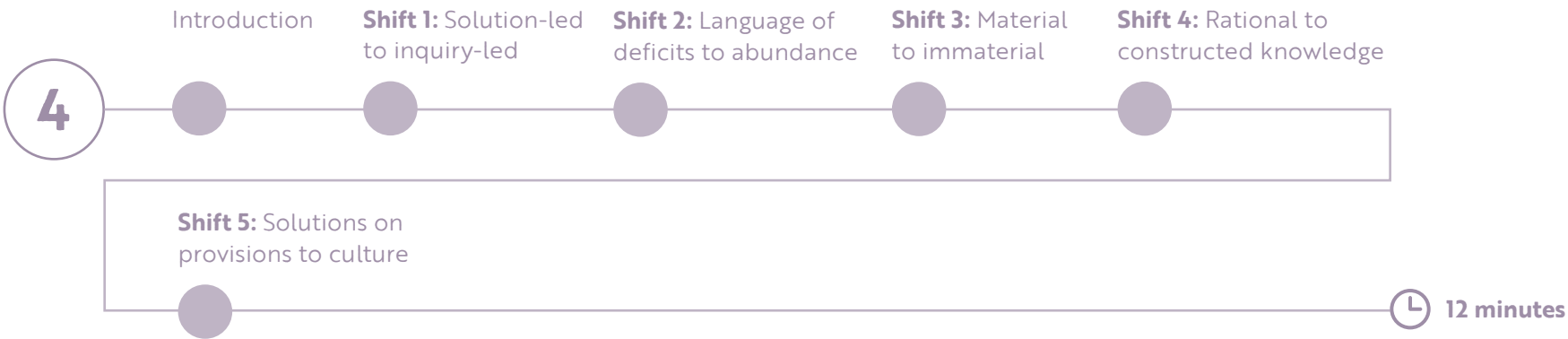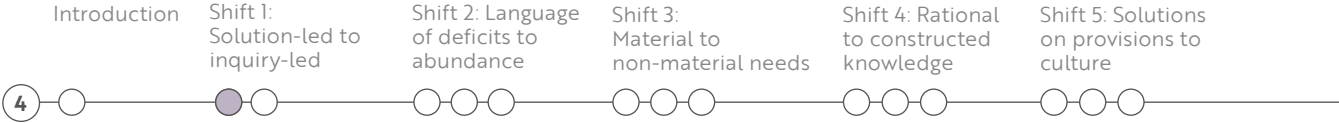
Lenses

Case Study

1. Cast
2. Plot
3. Acts
4. Shifts
5. Conclusion

Introduction | Shift 1: Solution-led to inquiry-led | Shift 2: Language of deficits to abundance | Shift 3: Material to non-material needs | Shift 4: Rational to constructed knowledge | Shift 5: Solutions on provisions to culture

4

Shift 1   From solution led to inquiry led

The very first shift made by the RECOVER team was to move away from a solution-driven approach focused on a community wellness centre as an answer to the concerns of vocal inner city residents and business owners. Instead, they pursued an inquiry-driven approach that sought to more deeply understand the neighbourhoods, what kind of wellbeing different people aspired to, and what might be standing in the way of, or enabling it.

Conflict or tension

Maintaining political buy-in and support without a clear deliverable.

Going beyond middle class citizen engagement, getting deeper richer data.

> *[What]'s been reinforced in this work, is just to forge ahead, without knowing everything, or having everything just right. Like I have always had a bit of an ethic of, 'it just needs to be good enough.' And that's totally reinforced in this work. And because you don't know everything, and nor do you need to know everything before you act, you have to be humble. There's still so much to learn every time. I do presentations without knowing everything, and people ask me questions afterwards, and I have to admit, I don't know the answer. And that this is kind of a co-learning journey, and I invite them to join me on it.*
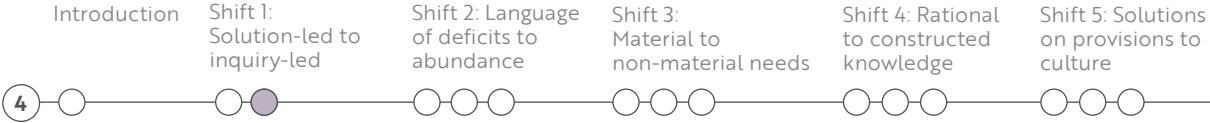
Sue Holdsworth

Introduction | Shift 1: Solution-led to inquiry-led | Shift 2: Language of deficits to abundance | Shift 3: Material to non-material needs | Shift 4: Rational to constructed knowledge | Shift 5: Solutions on provisions to culture

4

The questions of the ages

Open-ended questions

1. How can policymakers and funders create the conditions for inquiry-led approaches to complex social challenges?

2. Where are inquiry-led approaches most in tension with funder expectations?

For example, do ESDC'S systems of accountability rely on a fixed plan of work?

Is there openness to 'questioning the brief' or frame that ESDC has applied to an issue?

3. What mechanisms do funders have to keep up with the learning of their grantees?

> *I think to do this kind of work a leader really needs to do all [the learning] with their team members: roll up their sleeves, try this stuff, try the application.*
>
> *Whether it's the book club, or…workshops. Now, I regret in the one workshop that I didn't go out and do ethnography. I thought, 'well, I'm the organizer, I shouldn't do it,' but I should have done it. And so I think for this new kind of work, you do have to invest yourself in this learning journey. It's just not the usual 'make sure the permissions are set up and the approvals and the resources are made available,' which a leader usually does. I think, if the leader does only that, then when something happens, and there's a little pressure…they'll they'll give it up. Because they won't see that it is worth the investment, it is worth putting the time in to try it out.*

Susan Coward

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Introduction

Shift 1:
Solution-led to
inquiry-led

Shift 2: Language
of deficits to
abundance

Shift 3:
Material to
non-material needs

Shift 4: Rational
to constructed
knowledge

Shift 5: Solutions
on provisions to
culture

4
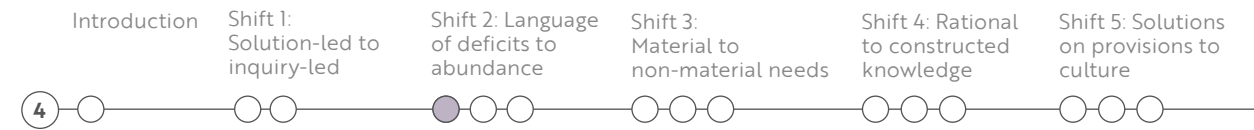
Shift 2

From a language of deficits -- needs, vulnerabilities, risks -- to a language of abundance and potential: resources, capacities, agency

RECOVER's choice to pursue an inquiry-led approach meant starting by listening to understand, rather than consulting to validate a hypothesis. The design ethnography methods used by InWithForward are based on the belief that people marginalized by systems are a source of intelligence about how things could be different. Ethnographers observed and asked about what helps, what gets in the way, and what kinds of workarounds people have developed to look out for their own and others' wellbeing. Ultimately, labels like "vulnerable inner city population" can serve to separate us, turning vulnerability into a definable deficit, rather than a defining feature of being human and one that connects us. RECOVER seeks to learn from the resourcefulness and strengths

Conflict or tension

Tension between reducing harm and increasing flourishing.

Tension between the urgency of crisis response and laying the ground for a future in which there is less cyclical crisis.

> " I've learned, in working with community members on the Expectant prototype, ...how meaningful the process has been for them in actually feeling connected.
>
> One of our team members ...was reflecting on how the team had been operating from a place of shared leadership. And she called it a 'hierarchy of competencies,' where, on our prototype team, she noticed that different people would step forward and lead at a given time, depending on what was required of the prototype in that moment. And then they would step back and then the next person would step forward as needed.
>
> I thought that that was really interesting language that she used about a hierarchy of competencies as opposed to a hierarchy of power. Because usually when the City shows up in a thing, the City is the one with all the power.
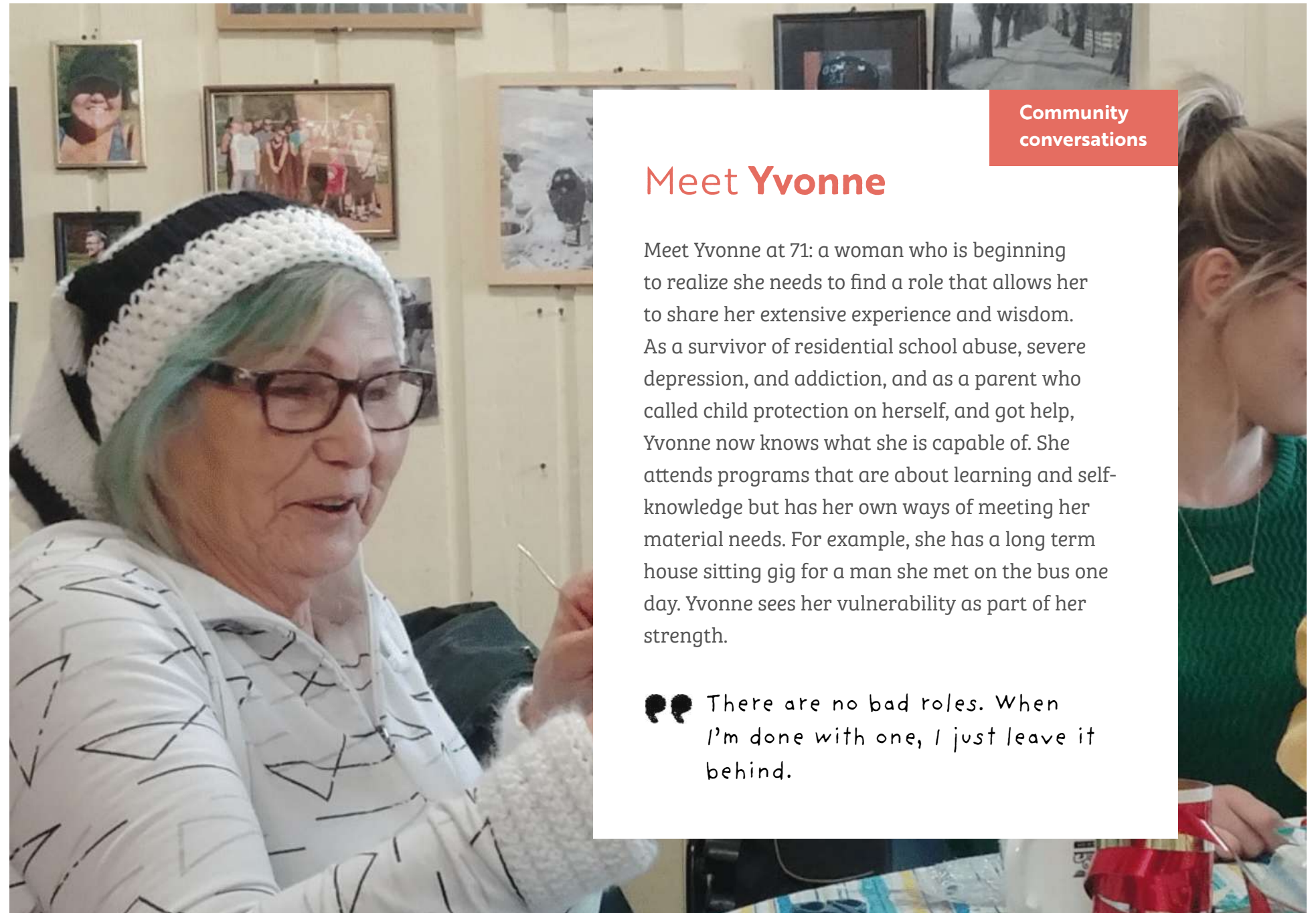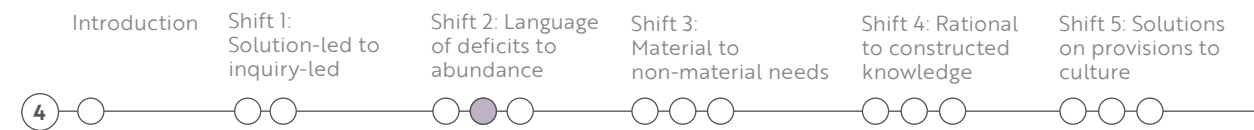>
> **Miki Stricker-Talbot**

Introduction Shift 1:   Shift 2: Language Shift 3:   Shift 4: Rational   Shift 5: Solutions
              Solution-led to of deficits to   Material to   to constructed   on provisions to
              inquiry-led   abundance   non-material needs knowledge   culture

4

**Community
conversations**

Meet **Yvonne**

Meet Yvonne at 71: a woman who is beginning
to realize she needs to find a role that allows her
to share her extensive experience and wisdom.
As a survivor of residential school abuse, severe
depression, and addiction, and as a parent who
called child protection on herself, and got help,
Yvonne now knows what she is capable of. She
attends programs that are about learning and self-
knowledge but has her own ways of meeting her
material needs. For example, she has a long term
house sitting gig for a man she met on the bus one
day. Yvonne sees her vulnerability as part of her
strength.

❝ There are no bad roles. When
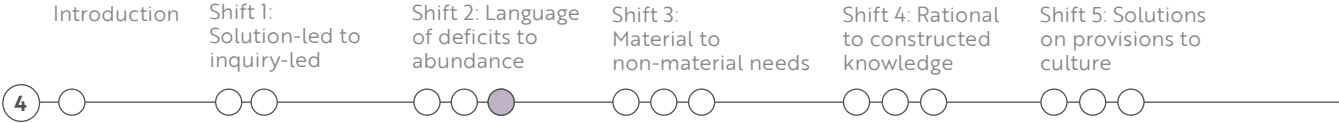I'm done with one, I just leave it
behind.

Introduction   Shift 1:   Shift 2: Language   Shift 3:   Shift 4: Rational   Shift 5: Solutions
                Solution-led to   of deficits to   Material to   to constructed   on provisions to
                inquiry-led   abundance   non-material needs   knowledge   culture

4

Shift 2

**Open-ended
questions**

1. How does ESDC's framing suggest where expertise might come from, or where a deficit might be located?

2. What are the solutions advanced in ESDC's programs? What are the assumptions behind them? How is ESDC testing its assumptions? How does ESDC work with organizational partners to test assumptions on the ground, in their own contexts?

> *[It's] about the way we see issues of marginalization or people that are street involved who might be struggling with issues of addiction, and housing, and mental health. It's a culture change, moving away from ...managing deficits and focusing on basic human needs and [instead] moving towards a way where we're all in it together. It's about us together. It's about building capabilities together. ...It's not just managing a problem, social disorder, or vulnerability.*

Sue Holdsworth
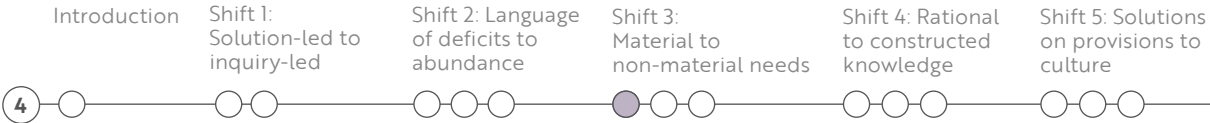
The questions of the ages

Introduction | Shift 1: Solution-led to inquiry-led | Shift 2: Language of deficits to abundance | Shift 3: Material to non-material needs | Shift 4: Rational to constructed knowledge | Shift 5: Solutions on provisions to culture

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Shift 3

From problems framed as material need (for housing, clothing, and food) to problems that recognized non-material ends such as connection, esteem, and purpose.

Conflict or tension

Tension between what's measured and valued by systems, and people identified as their desired outcomes

Open-ended questions

1. What kinds of indicators and metrics for non-material outcomes (such as social inclusion) have been used to show positive movement?

2. How can government pioneer ways to support and storytell the work of long-term change and gifts to future generations? Such as work on climate change and cultural evolution?

> 66 *I think now we're getting a bit more of the opportunity to understand the theory [of wellbeing] and make a bit more of a shift, but still, everything does seem to move really quickly. I'm a firm believer that if you want to be able to change and shift things, you need that time to steep in that: what it is that you're learning, what it is that you're finding out. And [then] plan and do things differently.*

Nor'Ali McDaniel

> 66 *One of the other pieces that we're learning, through [the prototype "Expectant,"] is how hungry people are for these deeper conversations -- 'to enter the soul space' is what we're calling it on the prototype team -- to have real authentic and true conversations about what they might need, and how they might be well, and what they need to be well. To be honest, it feels like it's a real honour to be able to do this work."*

Miki Stricker-Talbot

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Introduction | Shift 1: Solution-led to inquiry-led | Shift 2: Language of deficits to abundance | Shift 3: Material to non-material needs | Shift 4: Rational to constructed knowledge | Shift 5: Solutions on provisions to culture

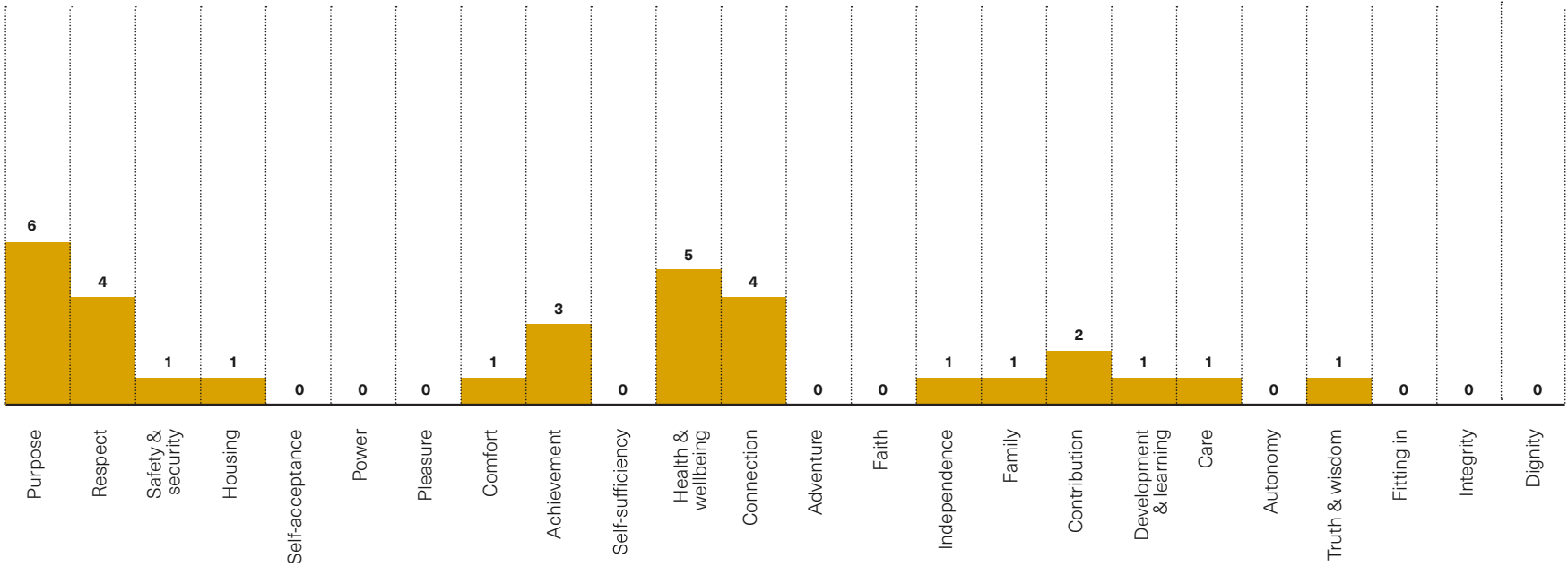4

The questions of the ages
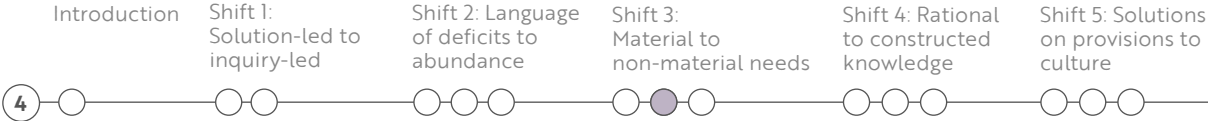
While non-material outcomes topped people's list, it's not as though material goods didn't register as having any importance for people. Among street-involved Edmontonians, material lack is the biggest perceived barrier. Housing, services, money, storage and getting around consume people's days; taking away opportunities for acceptance, calmness, peace of mind, etc. Relational stressors are a close second, upsetting harmony and balance. While existing policies and services put much of their attention on addressing material needs, how they do so can shape overall outcomes. Focusing exclusively on material barriers can negatively impact nonmaterial outcomes. For example, when systems house people away from their chosen communities, or place restrictions on living arrangements, people describe a palpable loss of agency, control, respect, and connection.

> 66
>
> *It's still about well being. It's still about shifting systems. We just have a better understanding of the ways that we want to see the system shift. Our definitions of wellbeing are getting more nuanced and less quantitatively defined.*
>
> **Amanda Rancourt**

Desired outcomes, for those unhoused

Introduction　Shift 1:　　　　Shift 2: Language　Shift 3:　　　　Shift 4: Rational　Shift 5: Solutions
　　　　　　　Solution-led to　of deficits to　　Material to　　to constructed　on provisions to
　　　　　　　inquiry-led　　　abundance　　　non-material needs　knowledge　　culture
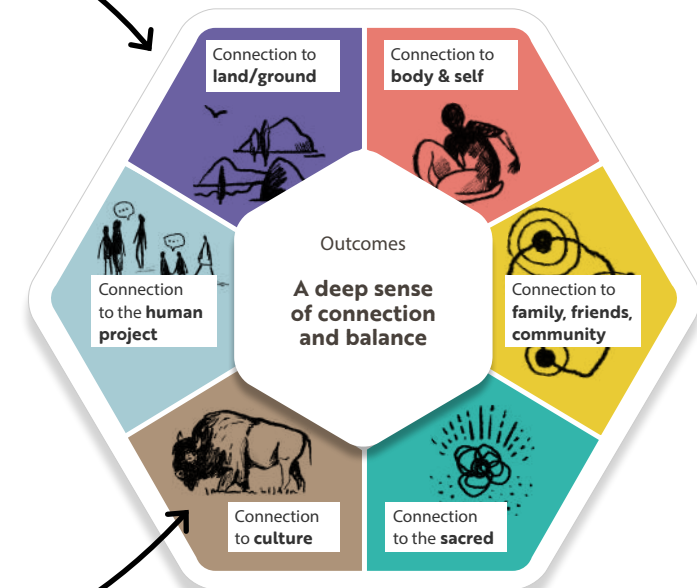
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The questions of the ages
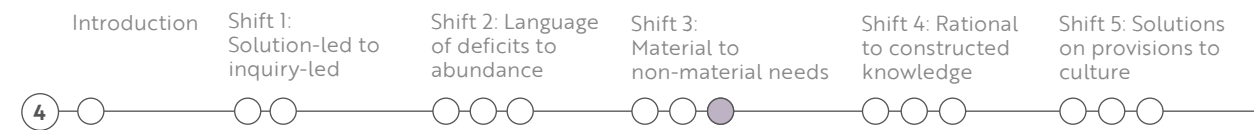
Community conversations

What does hope look like?

We try to balance the material and the non-material. If we didn't, we'd have a shitty Christian worldview. ...We will talk about how to do things with people, not just for people. And the material is always for people, always, always for. So, you need shelter, we give you a place to live, shelter, that's for. You're hungry, we give you something to eat, that's for. You need snowpants because it's minus a gazillion in Edmonton again, it's doing something for them. With is always about the non-material. When we walk alongside people, that is when we enter into, not just a relational sense...forgive me, for sounding like a good preacher now: soul connections happen in with. That is where the non-material begins to blossom. When people find identity, find wholeness, when they find that sense of full wellbeing. And so, at the Mustard Seed we try to do both those things.

Dean Kurpjuweit,
Executive Director,
The Mustard Seed

Connection to **land/ground**

Connection to **body & self**

Connection to the **human project**

Outcomes

A deep sense of connection and balance

Connection to **family, friends, community**

Connection to **culture**

Connection to the **sacred**

Introduction

Shift 1: Solution-led to inquiry-led

Shift 2: Language of deficits to abundance

Shift 3: Material to non-material needs

Shift 4: Rational to constructed knowledge

Shift 5: Solutions on provisions to culture
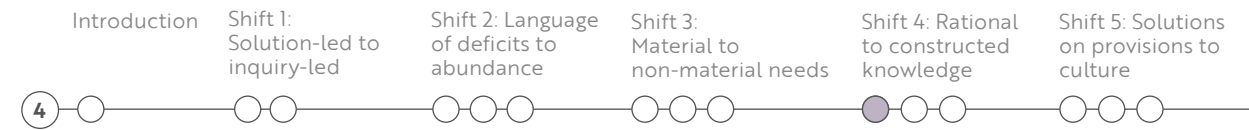
Shift 4

From knowledge expressed as rational and empirical to the recognition of knowledge as constructed, intuitive, and relational.

Conflict or tension

Tension between Eastern, Western, and Indigenous ways of knowing

Open-ended questions

1. How can government policy makers and funders demonstrate openness to different ways of knowing? For example, is ESDC able to recognize the value of people's reported subjective experience? For example, a reported increase in self-acceptance, or sense of belonging?

2. In the age of a global pandemic, it is more clear than ever that the actions of government are important, but not the biggest factor shaping people's lived experience. If population level changes in, for example, people's sense of connection to community or nature, cannot be attributed to one set of initiatives, how else can ESDC and others assess impact?

3. How can ethnographic data and other forms of contextual, local knowledge that is based in people's experiences shape ESDC's understanding of the problem area? How would you represent that knowledge in briefs and other artifacts of government communication and persuasion?

4. What are examples of people's reported lived experiences informing and shifting government framing of an issue area and subsequent action?
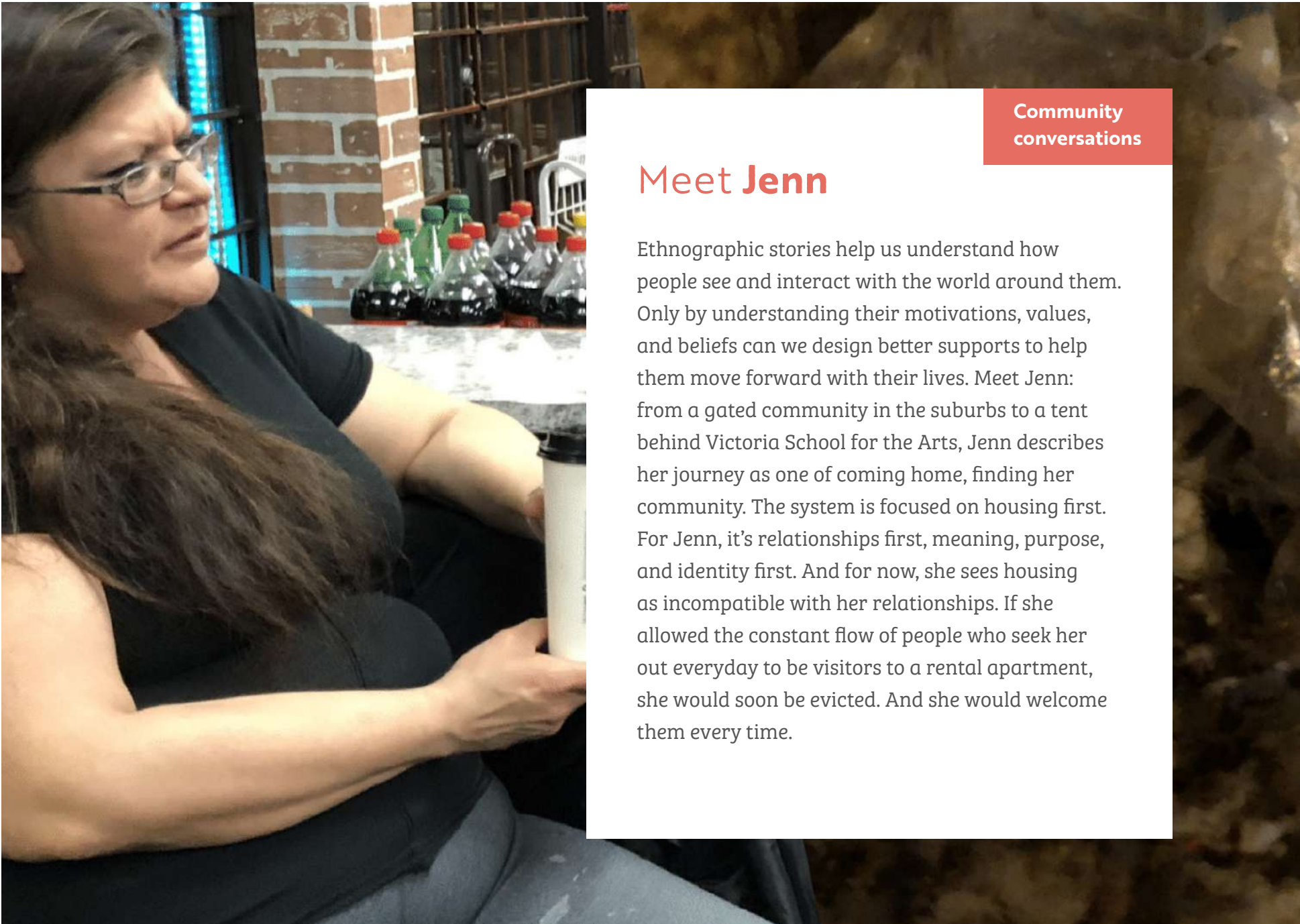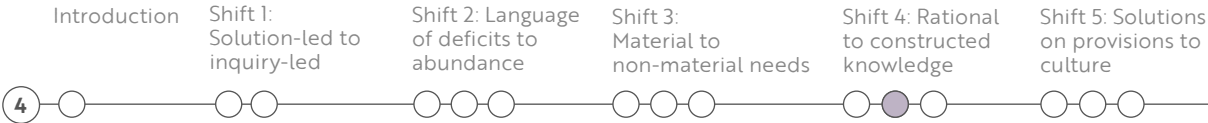
Introduction   Shift 1:   Shift 2: Language   Shift 3:   Shift 4: Rational   Shift 5: Solutions
                Solution-led to   of deficits to   Material to   to constructed   on provisions to
                inquiry-led   abundance   non-material needs   knowledge   culture

④

Community conversations

Meet **Jenn**

Ethnographic stories help us understand how people see and interact with the world around them. Only by understanding their motivations, values, and beliefs can we design better supports to help them move forward with their lives. Meet Jenn: from a gated community in the suburbs to a tent behind Victoria School for the Arts, Jenn describes her journey as one of coming home, finding her community. The system is focused on housing first. For Jenn, it's relationships first, meaning, purpose, and identity first. And for now, she sees housing as incompatible with her relationships. If she allowed the constant flow of people who seek her out everyday to be visitors to a rental apartment, she would soon be evicted. And she would welcome them every time.

The questions of the ages

Introduction   Shift 1:   Shift 2: Language   Shift 3:   Shift 4: Rational   Shift 5: Solutions
                Solution-led to   of deficits to   Material to   to constructed   on provisions to
                inquiry-led   abundance   non-material needs   knowledge   culture

4

> ❝ We learned a lot about how we can be informed by different types of research, so it's not just the quantitative research...
>
> It wasn't just doing it in a lab, or doing it behind closed doors: we were doing it in real time out in the open. We presented it to council, and we said, ... 'should there be a central Wellness Center? No, definitely no.'
>
> Not just because we don't think it's the right idea. It's because this is what we heard: this is the evidence of when we spoke to people. It's not even about a central Wellness Centre. These are the themes and this is what we heard from ethnography, and these are the things that we should be moving forward with.
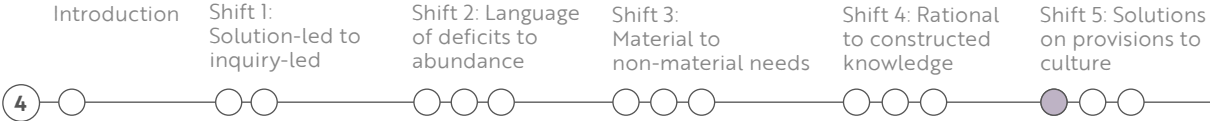
Raffaella Loro

> ❝ I like the way RECOVER has evolved to us talking about wellbeing and I like that we've put something forward, really concrete, for people to respond. And so if I were to finish RECOVER at the end of this year - and you know how people always like to have a legacy, like what was the million dollars we put towards RECOVER? What did it get us? I feel that's really solid, having the wellbeing framework, with the levers.
>
> Plus one thing I've liked that the Councillors have said, is 'wow, you've got really good data substantiating your wellbeing framework, nobody can argue.' ...So they feel like this is really solid grounding for the wellbeing framework.

Susan Coward

Introduction   Shift 1: Solution-led to inquiry-led   Shift 2: Language of deficits to abundance   Shift 3: Material to non-material needs   Shift 4: Rational to constructed knowledge   Shift 5: Solutions on provisions to culture

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Shift 5   **From solutions focused narrowly on provisions** (programs, services, benefits, and buildings) **to solutions focusing on culture** (interactions, incentives, narratives, and roles). Where services and programs largely conform to current social norms and expectations, cultural interventions like ceremonies and stories are about broadening norms and expectations.

Conflict or tension

Tension between helping marginalized people conform with current cultural expectations and evolving and expanding our culture.

Open-ended questions

1. Culture is central to societies. It shapes how, whether, and for what ends, we interact with social supports, and benefits. How can/do funders support work in the space of culture change?

2. What tensions arise when strategies veer into the cultural space?

3. Social programs tend to treat individuals as the unit of change. Cultural approaches look at how the environment around people provides the conditions for people to make different choices or behave in different ways. For example, a cultural change approach might target the wider population's attitudes towards aging as a central force shaping our elders' experiences of loneliness or social inclusion. How does ESDC value and measure culture change approaches? What kinds of supports might grantees need to do this work?
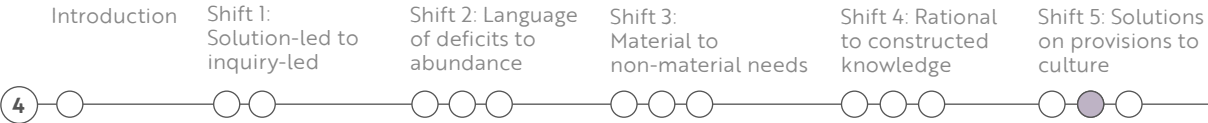
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The questions of the ages

The ring of cultural levers

Frames & Narratives
What's valued & believed?

For example

Films   TV   Podcasts   Imagery

Messages   Mythology   Role m...

Legends

Laws
Wh...

Knowledge and meanings
What's understood?

For example

Oral histories   Assessments

Case notes   Language

Teachings

Council Reports

For example

Ceremonies   Rites of passage

Celebrations   Gatherings

Medicine   Traditions

Routines & repertoires
What's practiced and habitual?

For example

Meals   Conversations   Moveme...

Animals   Space   Layout

Use   Artifacts

Interactions & environments
What's modelled?

Community conversations

" I love framing things as part of the human project. I love that idea. The human experience is something that I find in our work all the time, like, this is the point of this. Even with our staff, the point of this work is not just to do charity work. If you're doing that you're not going to reach a human connection.

Nova Winter,
The Mustard Seed

Story from February 2020

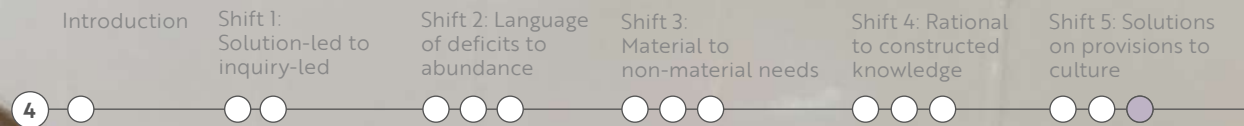Introduction   Shift 1: Solution-led to inquiry-led   Shift 2: Language of deficits to abundance   Shift 3: Material to non-material needs   Shift 4: Rational to constructed knowledge   Shift 5: Solutions on provisions to culture

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> *You saw me all stressed out all the time, because in government, you are to produce what City Council directs you to do. And I was the project manager [directed] to come back with this Wellness Centre concept. So to me, I would have had how many square feet, what are the services that are going to be offered, all of that stuff: I was honed in on a wellness centre.*
>
> *And when you guys [InWithForward] and Alex Ryan [MaRS], you know, bringing in the social innovation...It didn't take me long, where I was going 'Oh no, we're not going to come back with a wellness centre!' But I have to tell you, that was one of the best feelings, going to Council, or even socializing with Council before we brought the final report, to say 'Wellness Centre is the wrong solution.' It felt so good to be able to say that. I think it felt good because that was the first time our information showed the people at the centre, like Al...for the hour and a half, City Councillors cared about the people at the centre. And they talked about them. And it was a different conversation. And they never once brought up a wellness centre. I just sat there going 'I'm like in an alternate universe. I can't believe this is going on!' It gave me great hope that we can start to have different conversations. I just didn't know it would be so darn hard.*

Susan Coward

Conclusion

RECOVER's work combines systemic ambition with the humility to know that shifting population-level outcomes takes a village. The work to be done takes many actors united by a common purpose, and also requires that we legitimize alternative ways of knowing and measuring wellbeing. Objective, empirical measures -- rooted in dominant socio-economic conceptions of productivity and health -- do not tell the full story, and exclude the perspectives of the most marginalized.

Many of the choices RECOVER has made challenge traditional funding agreements and policy silos, but strong and courageous city-level leadership has opened-up a rare opportunity space This story is intended to provoke and inspire: to show other funders and policymakers -- whether at municipal, provincial or federal levels -- what it can look like to adopt an inquiry-led versus solution-led approach to policy making and service delivery. As a funder and policymaker, do you value systemic, inquiry-led work? Where do your current narratives, policies and practices -- as exemplified in your Request for Proposals, funding agreements, and metrics -- facilitate or impede bottom-up approaches?

Despite a trend toward more flexible and collaborative funding -- through mechanisms like partnership agreements, collective impact tables, and coordinated service initiatives -- reliance on linear work plans, with clearly defined problem statements, targets and deliverables -- often leads to a further entrenchment of the status quo. That's because core assumptions and logics go unchallenged, and instead are baked into language and thinking. Excavating assumptions, logics, language and thinking is key to systemic change -- the kind of change that gets at the root causes of isolation, exclusion, and marginalization. While instruments like collective impact and coordinated service initiatives can help to reduce inefficiencies and improve access to benefits and programs, they can't, on their own, tackle the reasons why benefits and programs are needed in the first place. To do that, there's a need for different data, different relationships, and different perspectives. RECOVER's work, although ongoing and incomplete, gives us some clues on how to embrace different data, different relationships, and different perspectives.

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