

Exploring Governance and Well-Being in the Yukon Flats: A Culturally Grounded Research Approach

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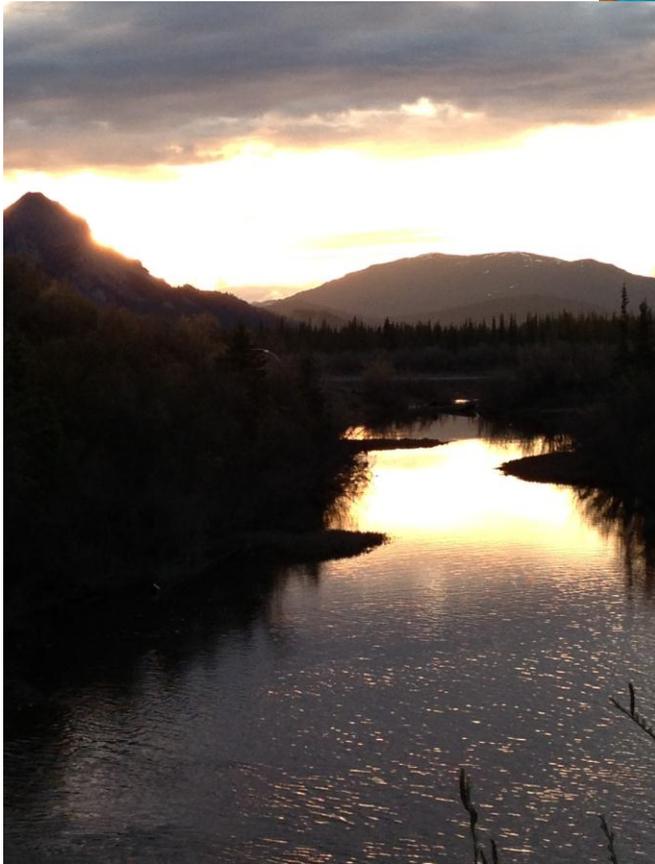


Overview

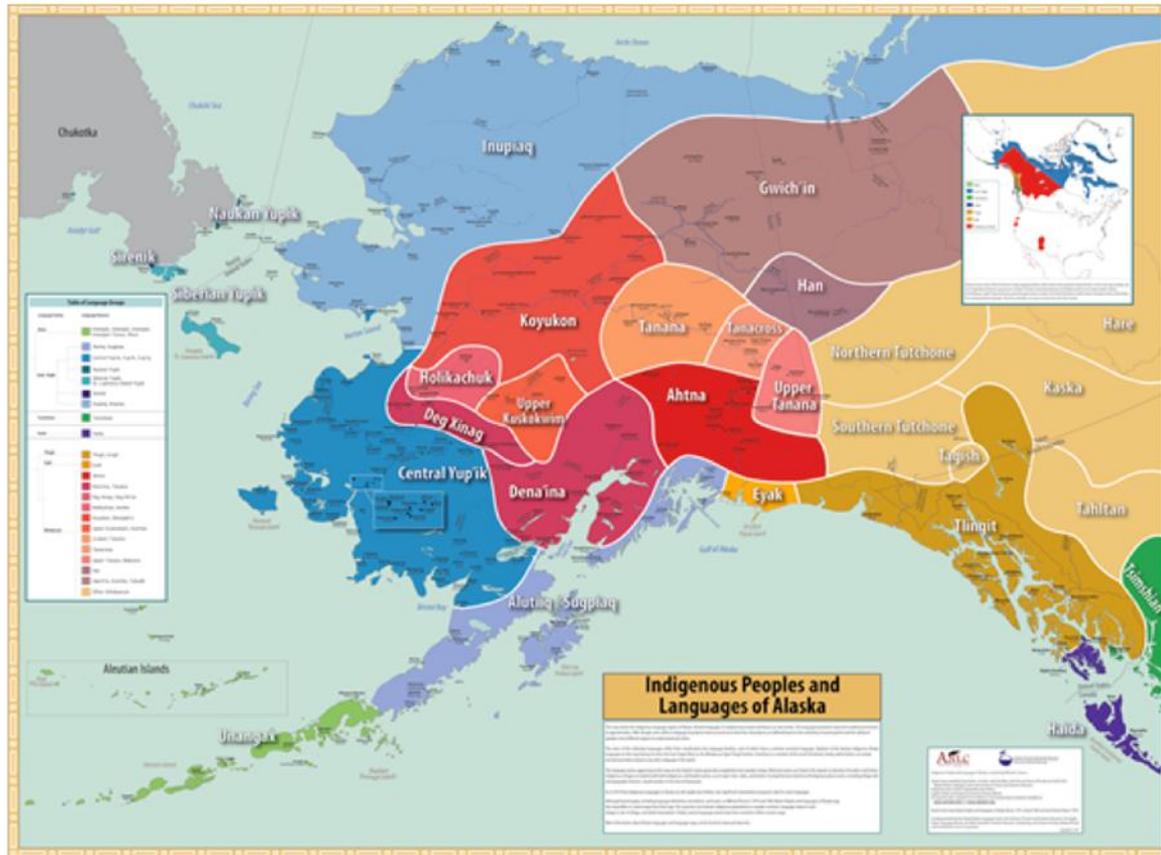
- Personal Background and Interest in this Topic
- Context
- Background and Significance
- Community Based Participation Approach
- Research Questions
- Research Design
- Preliminary Findings
- Conclusions



Personal Background and Interest in this Topic



Geographic Context-Alaska

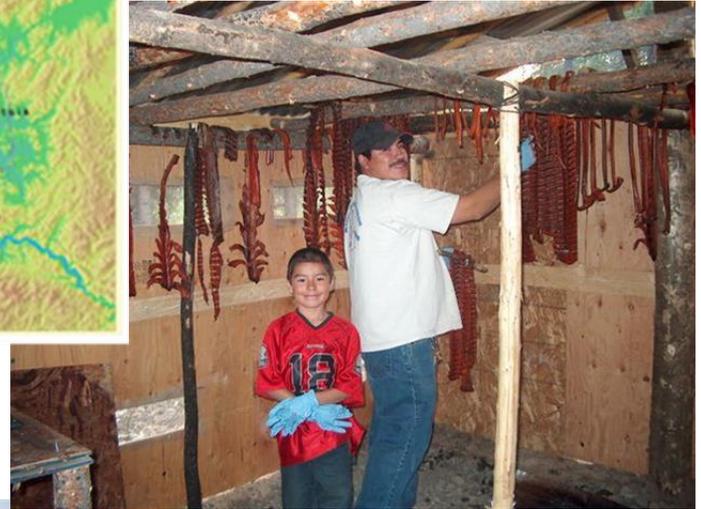
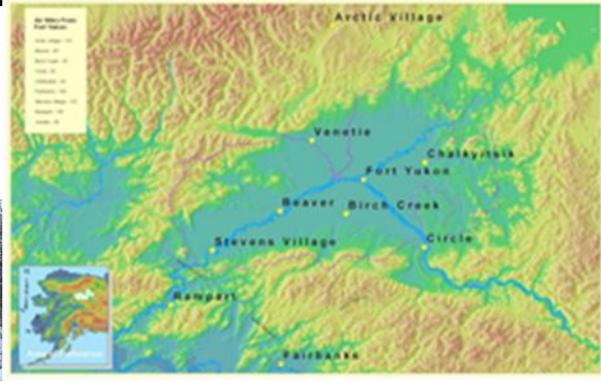




Demographics of Alaska and Presenting Issues

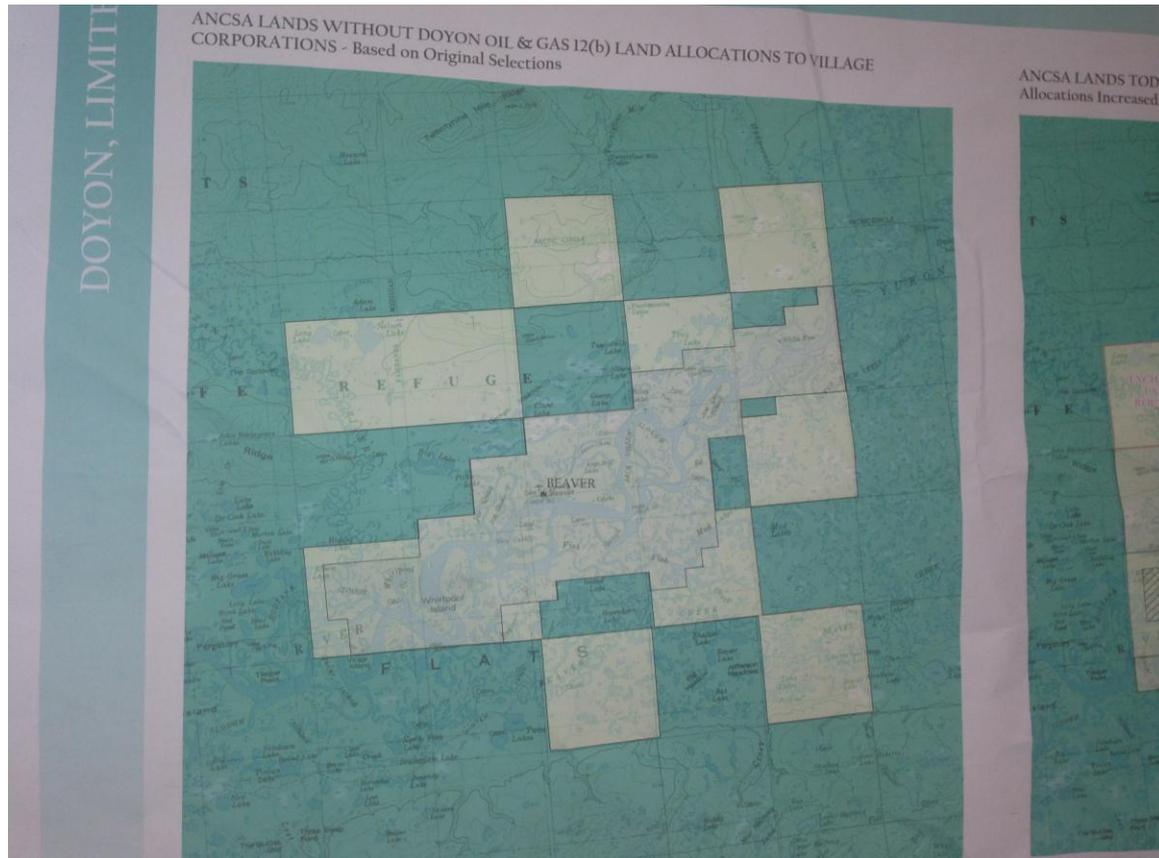
- 122, 000 Alaska Native people, which is nearly 20% of all Alaskans
- Poverty among Alaska Natives is twice that of the general U.S. Populations (22% versus 13%)
- Unemployment is three times that U.S. National Average
- Drop out of Alaska Natives students from High School is three times that of the National average
- Suicide rates among Alaska Natives are among the highest in the U.S.

Geographic Context-Yukon Flats



Historical Context







Terminology

- *Governance*
 - “We can think of governance as tools, the instruments that Indigenous nations use to address and solve the problems they face-maintaining good relations among themselves, surviving hard times, interacting with other nations, caring for the land, educating the young, and so forth” (Cornell, Jorgensen, & Kalt, p.59).
- *Well-being*
 - United Nations’ Human Development Index (HDI)
 - Sen and Capabilities Approach
 - This study expands the definition of well-being



Background and Significance

- Why Governance?
 - American Indians/Alaska Natives Tribes as Sovereign
 - Present day conditions regarding governance in Alaska
 - Governance decisions impact everyday life
- Why Well-Being?
 - Tribal communities experiencing many challenges
 - Well-being as an understudied area
 - Strengths-perspective

Background and Significance

- Why examine the relationship between the two concepts?
 - Hypothesis: Governance, especially over land and natural resources, is tied to well-being





Community-Based Participatory Research

- Community Based Participatory Research (CBPR) is a research approach conducted as an equal partnership between community members, organizational representatives, and researchers (Israel et al., 2010; Mohatt et al., 2004).
- Given this definition, CBPR in Alaska means:
 - Engaging Tribal citizens from the beginning of any research project and at every phase
 - Following appropriate ethical protocols
 - Responding to community requests for appropriate research

Engaging Tribal citizens from the beginning of any research project and at every phase

- Conducted a small pilot study
- Used every opportunity to better understand community issues and strengths
- Frequent visits to research site
- Build rapport





Following Ethical Protocols

- Formal
 - Honoring and respecting tribal governments, even when there is no formal Institutional Review Board established.
 - Elder permission.
 - Responding to individual and community requests.
- Informal
 - Consulting formal and informal leaders (e.g. elders) in the community on a face-to-face basis, explaining research, gathering ideas, and receiving feedback.
 - Respecting cultural protocols.
 - Responding to requests to engage in community activities.



Responding to community requests for appropriate research

- Being transparent
- Being open to feedback
- Visiting with diverse members of each community
- Adjusting questions throughout initial phases of research
- Use every opportunity as a learning experience
- Listening to the voice of both formal and informal leaders



Research Questions

- 1) What does well-being mean to tribal members?
- 2) What does governance mean to tribal members?
- 3) In what ways do tribal members participate in governance?
- 4) What aspects of well-being are most important?
- 5) What aspects of governance are most important?
- 6) Does a tribal member's participation in governance affect individual well-being?
- 7) Does a tribal member's participation in governance affect community well-being?
- 8) What are the formal and informal governance structures in tribal communities?



Theory

Institutional Theory

Institutions as the “rules of the game”, shaping human interaction

Theory of Common Pool Resources

Ostrom and collective management of common-pool resources (CPRs) that ensures their long-term viability

Participatory Development theory

A participatory development approach advocates that local people be intimately involved in decisions that impact them

Capabilities Approach

Well-being as substantive freedoms-the capabilities to choose a life one has reason to value



Methods

- **Case Studies**
 - Interviews
 - Direct & Participant-Observations
 - Institutional Analysis, including viewing archival records
 - Photos



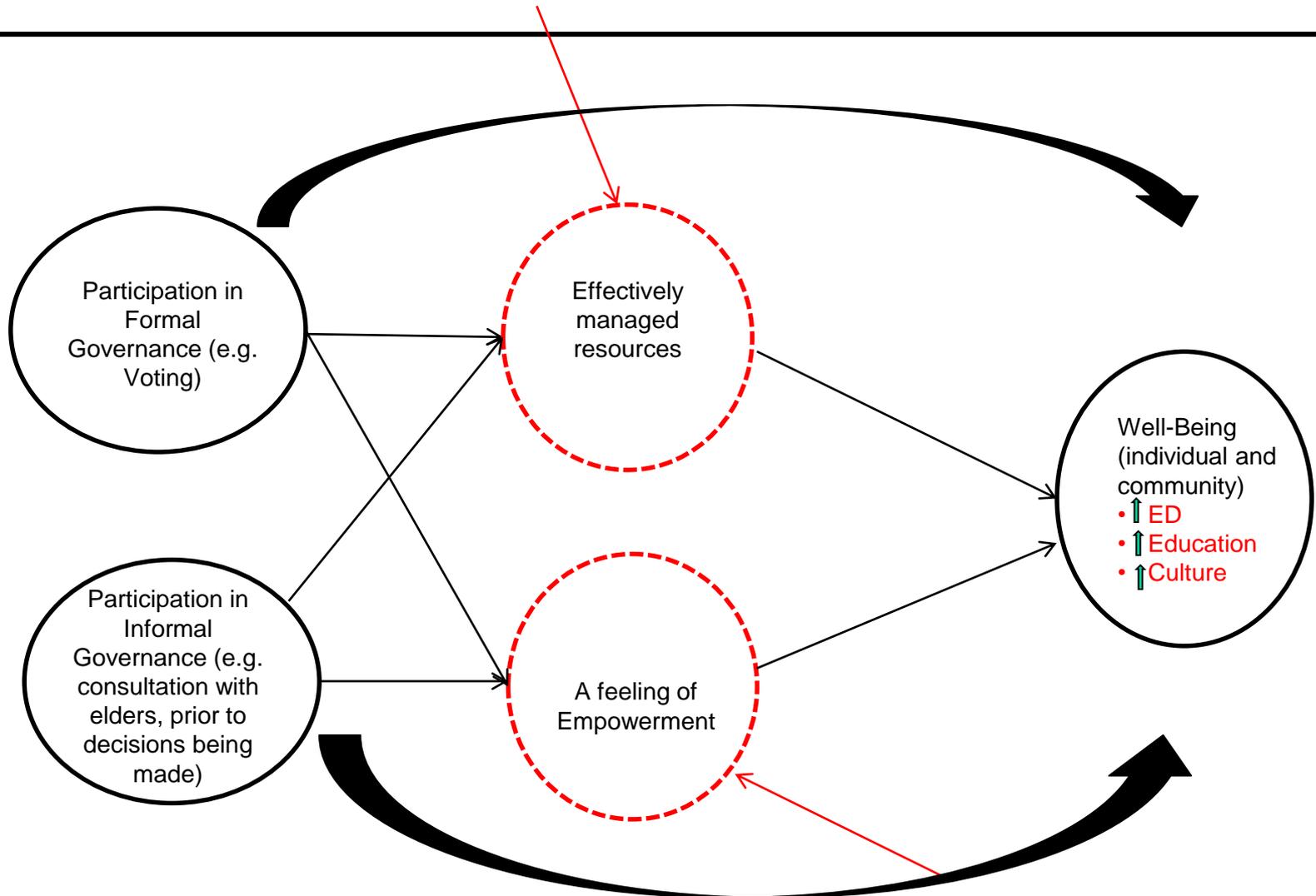
Sample

- For Case Studies:
 - 3 Communities
 - 6-8 interview participants in each of the communities
 - 3-4 participants with vast involvement in formal governance (present or past) leaders and 3-4 leaders with less or no involvement in formal governance

Meaning of Governance



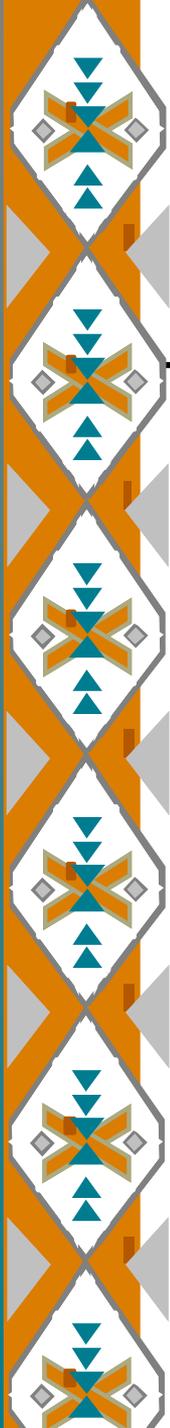
Theoretical Statement





Instruments

- Case Study Instrument(s)
 - Semi-Structured Interview Guide
 - Conceptual definitions of governance and well-being
 - Perceived relationship between governance and well-being
 - Perceived relationship between traditional hunting, fishing and gathering and well-being
 - Perceptions of formal and informal governance structures
 - Observation Sheet



Preliminary Findings

- Gwich'in and Koyukon definitions of well-being differ than mainstream, empirical definitions of well-being:
 - Well-being, both for individuals and for their community, entailed being involved in community, being “on the land”, practicing traditions, sobriety, and coming together as families and community members
 - Well-being meant having Native food to eat and sharing that food with others.
 - Well-being meant that children had all of their needs met
- Participation in governance, both informally and formally, and decision-making allowed tribal members to feel empowered, heard, and thus an overall feeling of well-being:
 - Elders especially stressed the importance of needing to pass on their knowledge of land, its use and care, their involvement in early land claims issues, to the younger generation, so they could protect land and place.



Preliminary Findings

- Participation in governance did not always directly lead to well-being [for the individual] directly, but to other positive outcomes, such as protection of the land and its resources, which in turn led to well-being.
- Governance was demonstrated through everyday demonstrations of:
 - Caring for the land
 - Caring for animals
 - Looking after elders
 - Solving problems
 - Teaching children culture
 - Coming together in times of need
 - Coming together in times of celebrations
 - Enforcing local rules
- The ability to hunt, fish and practice a traditional lifestyle was absolutely essential and could not be separated from one's well-being.



Well-Being Is....

“Telling young people the right way to live”

“Just being part of the community and uh ensuring that um you know that the whole community is is being healthy, in some aspect, right? I mean all of this, our fishing, our hunting all that is our well-being, no matter what we do, that all comes into play”

“Well, our tribe has been together since how many thousands of years. They live together and work together with one heart and the other thing, they look after each other, almost everyday”

“I feel good when I go out for a walk, I am in the land, it makes me feel good just being out there”



Governance is....

“we make our own rules....policies...they don’t give us rules [they meaning the federal government]”

“Village governance is up close and personal...From what I see village governance is helping people maintain a healthy way of meeting their needs...water needs, electric needs and asking our input”

“our tribes having a lot of authority and power...and they work together”

“Being able to do things for ourselves”



Conclusions

- As Indigenous or Aboriginal peoples to our lands, we are in the best position to go about conducting research in our communities.
- Our research and practice should focus on strengths and what the client/participant sees as the best possible outcome.
- Involving our communities in the research and practice processes ensures that the research is not only desired, but necessary and findings/implementation sustainable.
- Sharing our research/giving back is important. Too much “bad” research has been conducted in our communities.
- Indigenous methodologies, such as listening to stories or “interviewing” and “observing”, are the best methods for conducting research in Indigenous communities.
- Our ideas are important, as Indigenous scholars, practitioners, health providers; they are not only important but absolutely necessary to help bring about research that not only addresses the many challenges our communities are facing, but acknowledges the many strengths that exist in our communities.



Conclusions

- We need to redefine and/or reframe concepts regularly used in our communities, so that they fit our context, have use in our communities, and aid us in tackling vexing issues (e.g. governance and well-being)
- We then need to take those “redefinitions” if you will and inform the literature.
- Our traditions help keep us healthy and well, they are not wrong.
- One’s well-being and community well-being cannot be separated from the well-being of the land and animals. They are interconnected.
- Despite colonization, genocide, removal of our children and taking of our lands, we still obtain strong cultural practices and norms [INSTITUTIONS] that shape everyday life and allow us to continue to be the strong people that we are today. These institutions are valid and important.
- We need to be proactive and in charge of leading discussions that will ultimately impact us (DO NOT WAIT FOR THE STATE OR FEDERAL GOVERNMENTS TO APPROACH US).

Mahsi' Choo (Thank-you)





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Questions to Guide Discussion

- How can we, as Indigenous scholars and allies, do a better job at engaging in research that recognizes the validity of less “formal” forms of “governance”?
- How can we educate formal institutions, such as large universities, on the importance of honoring tribal governments, even when they do not have their own IRB process?
- How can we as Indigenous nations work/deal with other governments in a way that allows for mutual respect and understanding to occur, but more importantly allows Indigenous nations to be self-governing?
- How can we educate/inform/communicate/collaborate with these other governmental entities in a way that helps them to understand our cultures, contexts, and customary laws?
- What are some ways we can measure well-being in our communities, when the definitions are not easily measurable constructs?



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