Thank you for inviting me and to all of you for dropping in. My name is Margo and in my position I have the privilege of time to answer big questions with messy, complicated answers. During my talk, if you have questions that would clarify for you what I'm saying, please interrupt me. If you have a curiosity about this which applies just to you in particular that isn't for group ears, my contact information is here and will also be on the last slide.

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Show of hands:

Do you consider yourself a "researcher"?

I'd like to see a show of hands: how many of you consider yourself a researcher?

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Show of hands:

Have you coded qualitative data or developed a codebook for coding qualitative data before?

Again, show of hands, how many of you have coded qualitative data or developed a codebook for coding qualitative data before?

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Before we hop on in, please let me know if there are topics I don't plan to cover that you want to hear about. I'll be quiet for a minute while you put your amendments in the chat box or unmute yourselves.

Thank you!

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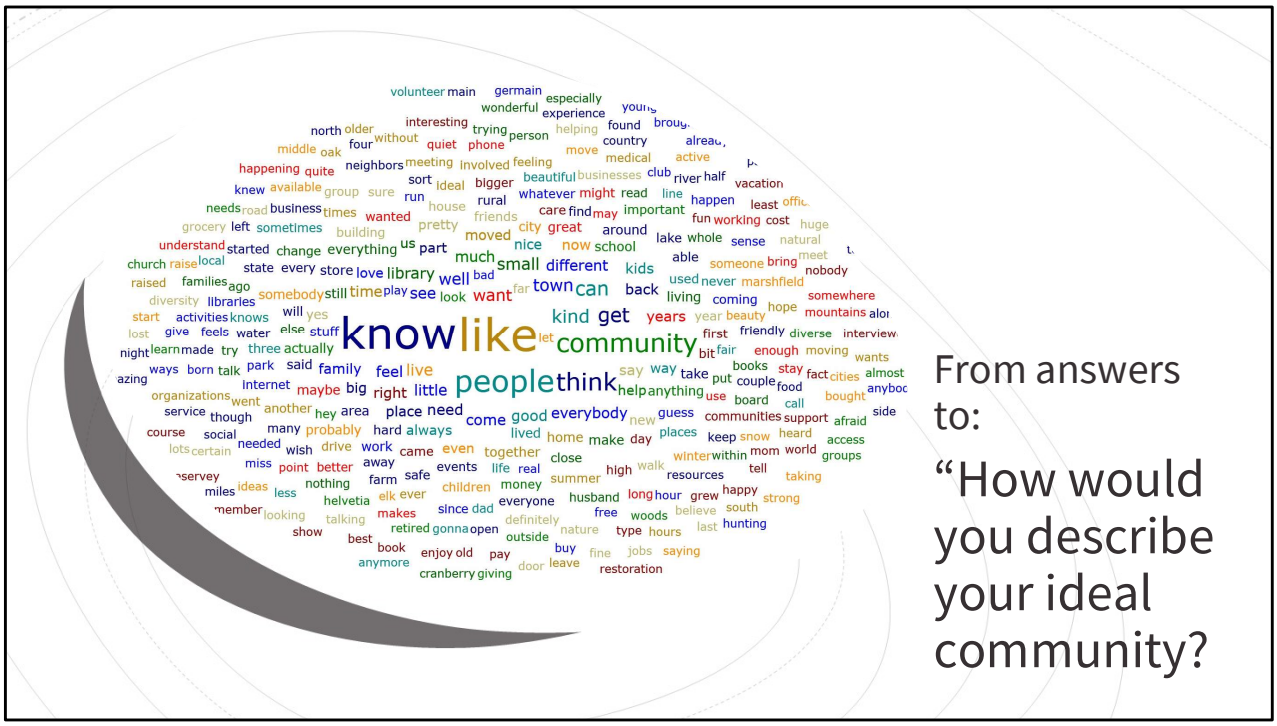

Social wellbeing, when we get past the unfamiliar language, is this really viscerally understandable concept. It is, as Scott, Rowe, and Pollack put it, a measure of what makes “the good life”. And although economists, sociologists, planners, and policy makers have been building and testing frameworks and indices for measuring what defines wellbeing accurately – for the individual as well as for the community – what we each think of as the good life will be nuanced and varied. Our individual definitions will be full of elements from our personal stories which both enriches and complicates measurement.

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> “Not a single community I serve would be better off without its public library.”
>
> - Eli Guinnee

I’m from NY and once, during a state-wide conversation amongst our 23 public library system directors about what defines a public library my colleague and partner said “Not a single ommunity I serve would be better off without its public library.” I’m skeptical of bold claims, so I asked, is it true? How can we know?

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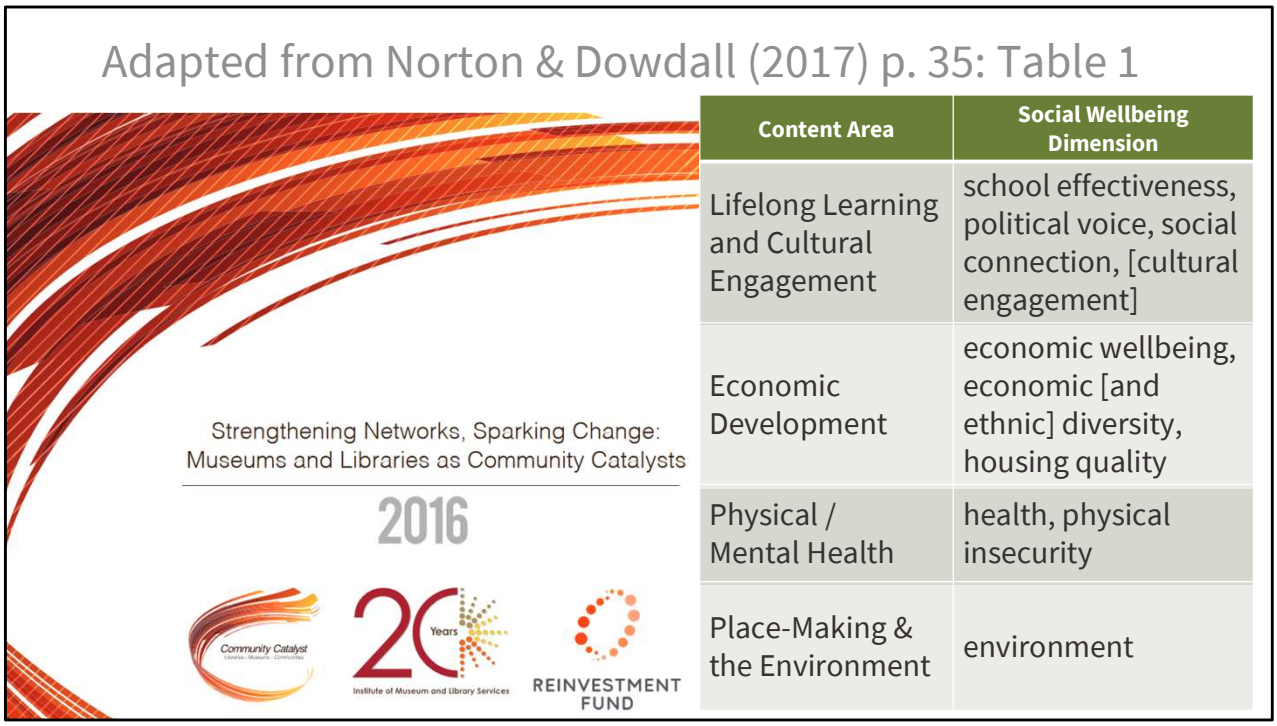

And then, in 2017 IMLS released their first Community Catalyst report. Written by Michael Norton and Emily Dowdall of the Reinvestment Fund, it revolutionized my thinking on what is possible in the would of public library service assessment. What if we could capture, measure, and prove, that having a local public library improves our lives.

The table on the slide lists out ten social wellbeing dimensions on the right which were refined by Stern, Goldstein, and Haag in their paper: Culture as a Dimension of Social Wellbeing which Norton and Dowdall then used in their work to develop this list of four content areas on the left. By content area they mean content of our work, as public librarians.

There are two things about this that I find particularly useful to us. First, here is a bridge between outcomes we want and kinds of work we're already engaged in – it seems purpose made for assessment! And next, I notice that at least part of the thinking and work of creating this bridge is both work that librarians do – categorization, theming, finding the common and disparate threads; and work we should become more familiar with as we learn to do action research in our own communities.

We used this list of four areas of work to help frame our own understanding of service and social wellbeing life long Learning and Cultural Engagement, Economic Development, Physical / Mental Health, and Place-making and the Environment.

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And so we ask:

Are public libraries a component of social wellbeing in resource poor geographies?

If so, what practices do they employ?

So there already exists this excellent research into the relationship between social wellbeing and museums and public librarians. And Reinvestment Fund, with other partners, are working through a study of how this really works in detail across the nation. But in their work, as in conversations about dynamic, innovative, and impactful library service, rural and especially rural remote libraries aren't discussed. Here is our research question – we reinforce this position of lack, of poverty even in our question.

Are p…..

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Project Outcomes:

"...the resources developed for rural librarians will allow them to make decisions based on information and data, rather than assumptions..."

- quantitative and qualitative data sets publicly available
- resources for action based on those data

Those of you on the call who have engaged with assessment thinking know that just asking the question wouldn't be enough to guide the design and implementation of a three year national research and resources development project. We knew that we wanted these outcomes and outputs listed here. [read]

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We want to celebrate, respectfully translate the work of our rural library partners in order to assist other libraries that want to improve social wellbeing outcomes. They each bring unique strengths and value in the face of unique challenges.

Eli Guinnee

New Mexico State Library (NM)

Hope Decker

Pioneer Library System (NY)

And we also took the time as a research team, Eli Guinnee, Hope Decker and I to clarify our purpose in doing this research. [Read purpose at top]

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“… each person is an end and not a means…”

Nussbaum, 2011. From Creating Capabilities discussing Rawls inclusion of Kantian ethical ideas. The theme is repeated throughout the book as a central benefit of the Capabilities Approach developed by Amartya Sen and restructured for policy decision making by Martha Nussbaum.

This brings me to a thinking and practice thread which runs through my work that this research has helped me refine and clarify: respect for the human dignity and value of each individual is proved across all layers of work, not just in our stated goals or intended outcomes.

As this is a webinar designed for practitioner researchers like Hope, Eli, and I, I’m going to take a minute to explain what I mean by that previous statement first in terms of research and then in terms of translating research into practice before moving on to our methodologies and findings.

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El Pueblo de Abiquiu Library and Cultural Center.

Residents and board members preparing for Fiesta. Photo courtesy of El Pueblo de Abiquiu Library and Cultural Center.

First, valuing individual subjects in our data gathering design is done through how we approach consent, interviews, and weighting quantitative against qualitative data.

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Engaged Consent:

1. Describe research, show recording device, and answer questions.
2. Ask permission to turn on recorder.
3. Describe consent & anonymity options.
4. Provide consent form and ask if the participant has any questions.
5. Provide all the information necessary for participant to follow-up or change their mind about permissions.

Really valuable in the shaping of our methodology and ethical approach was an MITx class called Lean Research Skills for Conducting Interviews. If any of you are interested in supplementing your RIPLS experience with a free short course in qualitative research, I highly recommend it.

Remember our research purpose that we create useful resources and our principal that each individual has value. That means that our consent process gave control over how the interview content would be used to the interview subject. We asked permission to record. At the end of the interview, subjects reviewed and signed a form, choosing what level of anonymity they preferred. And then were given info on the project in print, their interview number, and our card so that they had full freedom to change their consent if they wished in the future.

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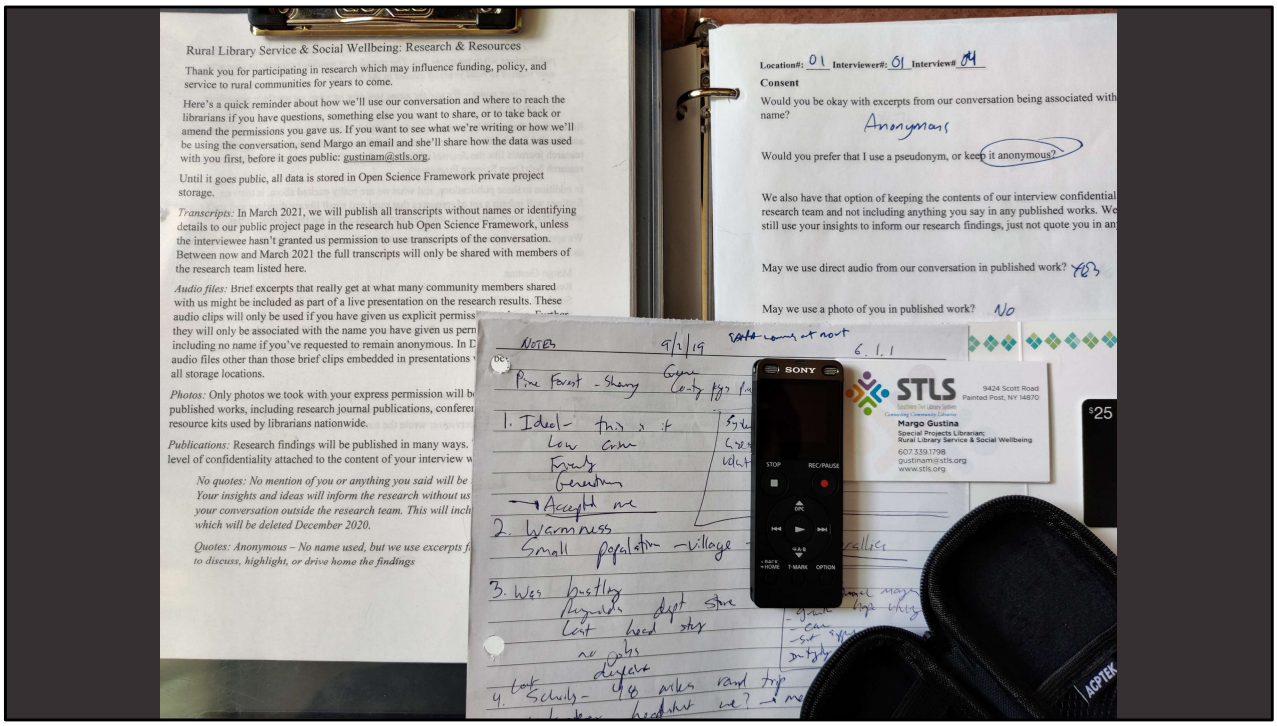

What is useful to the interview subject about participating in this interview or focus group? As people who love libraries who serve people who find libraries valuable enough that they use them, we sometimes take for granted that anything we perceive as beneficial to the library will be understood to be beneficial to the community. I don't think those assumptions hold, either in fact or in perception – especially among non-users.

Our average individual interview length was 18 minutes. And 60 for groups. Most subjects left saying things like "We're done already?" and "That was fun!"

We are aware of the extractive histories in locations we visited. One community that required community-wide anonymity described it as an endless succession of expert outsiders who would tell residents what they should do, and then could move elsewhere when things didn't work out as planned.

And so the responsibility falls to the researcher to design for respect rather than extraction. As a researcher, you are often the primary beneficiary of the research. How can you hold yourself accountable to the community you studied? In part, this might happen in making sure your research products are freely available in the study community.

Suffice it to say that how you disseminate your findings is a display of who you value and

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to what extent. Further, those potential audiences that deserve your consideration are your interview subjects, so designing products which address what they shared with you directly back to them.

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I will not make an argument here for either quantitative or qualitative data or methods being better. I see value in collecting the best data for the questions you wish to answer in the most respectful way possible. A part of that, though, will be trusting qualitative data when it runs counter to quantitative data. And using that disagreement as a fruitful space for inquiry.

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“… each person is an end and not a means…”

Nussbaum, 2011. From Creating Capabilities discussing Rawls inclusion of Kantian ethical ideas. The theme is repeated throughout the book as a central benefit of the Capabilities Approach developed by Amartya Sen and restructured for policy decision making by Martha Nussbaum.

After interviewing over 200 residents in rural remote locations across the US, and coding the resulting 114 recorded and transcribed interviews, we found that any treatment of social wellbeing that does not, as Martha Nussbaum posits, agree with Immanuel Kant on this point, will not be complete.

Really unpacking what it means to believe that social wellbeing needs to be understood on the individual level to understand whether social wellbeing is a general condition in a community immediately complicates measurement. Aggregating and counting is information, maybe even useful information. It is not, however, the only information that matters. Because often overall counts and averages make invisible those whose experiences are not in line with the average. It might be said that is in our outliers and margins, the truth of our service is seen.

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Yes, public libraries are a component of social wellbeing in resource poor geographies.

So, our findings indicate that yes, public libraries are a component of social wellbeing in resource poor geographies. We can say this with a good deal of confidence for a few reasons.

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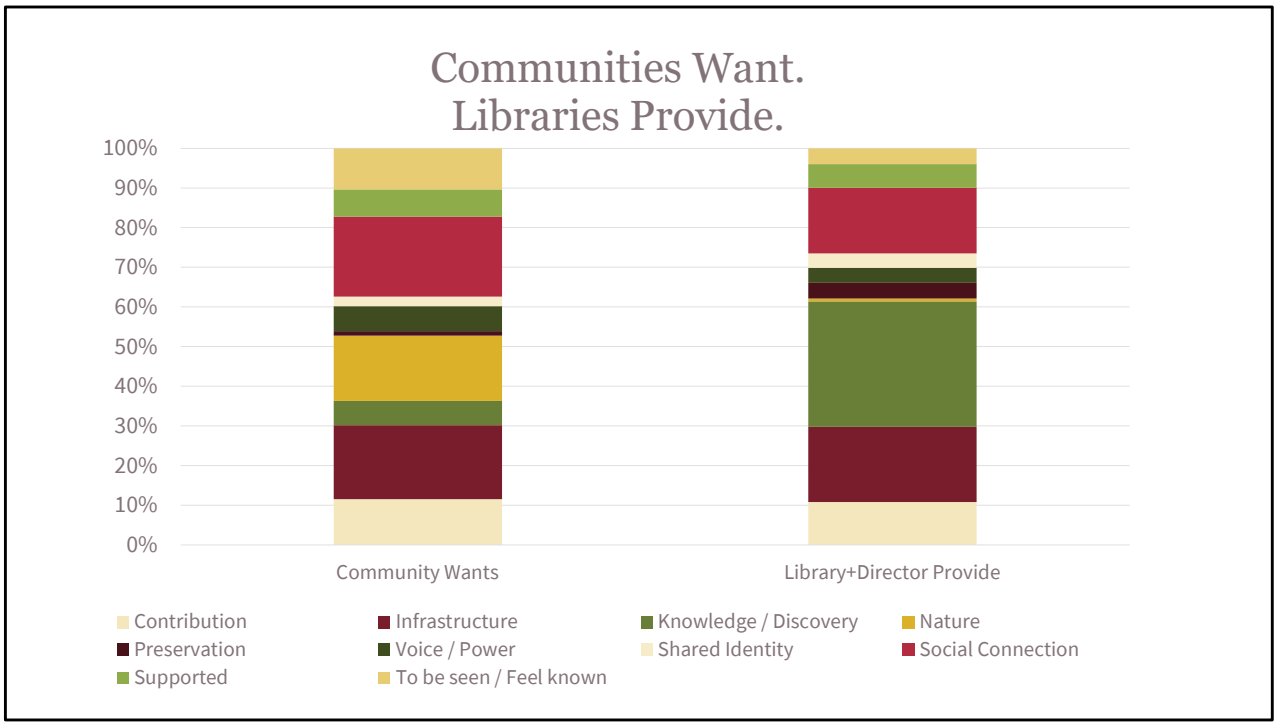

Coding community resident descriptions of their ideal community and their descriptions of the services they receive through the library and library staff are well aligned. We infer from this that the local public library facilitates social wellbeing as described by residents.

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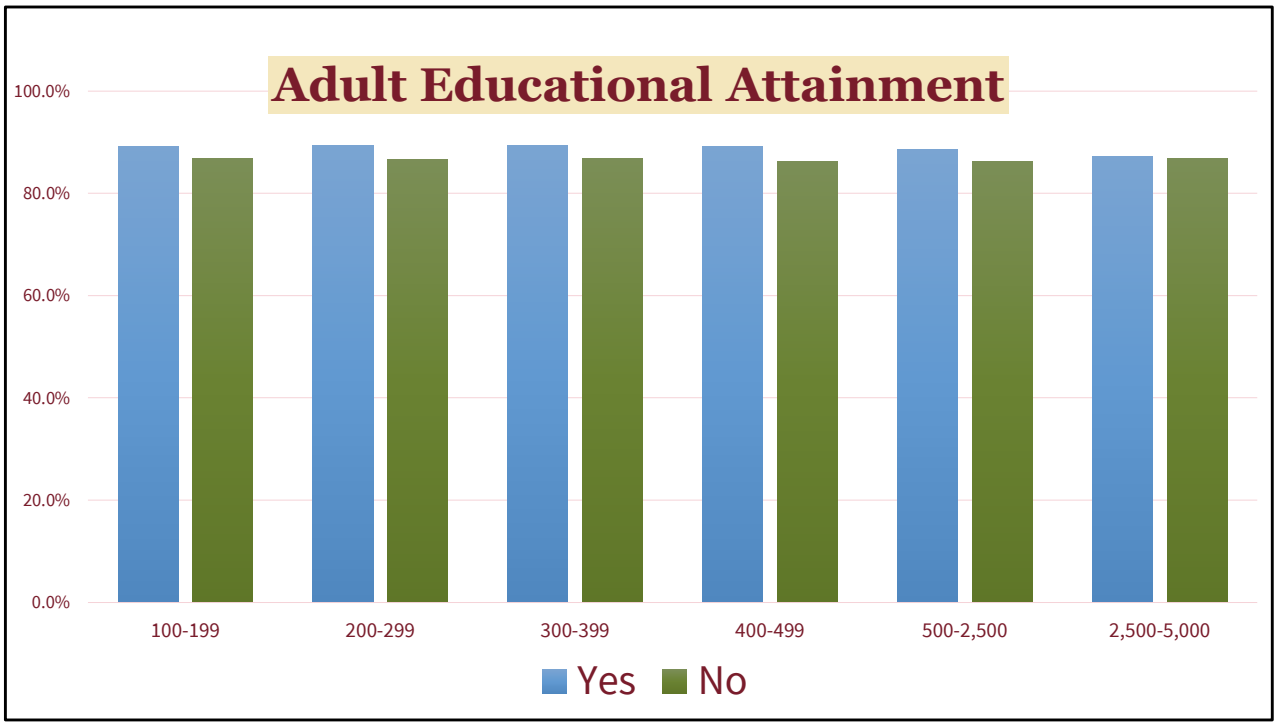

Quantitative analysis at the zip code level using publicly available social wellbeing indicator, of which local Adult Educational Attainment of HS diploma or more for individuals aged 18 and over is just 1 of over a dozen explored, showed a slight correlation between the existence of a library in town and percentage of locals who graduated high school in the nation's smallest communities.

We haven't had the time yet to explore something Michael Norton mentioned to me when I called him asking what I should make of such a small difference. He mentioned change over time as a possible area of inquiry that could show us a quantitative view – maybe two rural communities with similar histories of extraction, consolidation, and decline when viewed over time might reveal part of the library's function in filling gaps and holding a kind of stasis. We'll get to it soon! If the US Census Bureau is able to give us a hand.

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> “I know when I first came here 40 years ago the playground equipment, for example, was a broken swing set and a tractor tire set in the ground. There seemed to be very little for children in this area compared to now. And this is to the point of the importance of a library. We have story hour for the kids. And the kids can get together with other kids which was very difficult when I first moved here. And the playground was built by volunteer labor by the parents of kids who come to this story-hour. The community has been catalyzed by the library in many ways.”
>
> [Quote ID: 484:5]

Finally, we are confident because narratives of community life told by residents were fully intertwined with the local library as an anchor institution, catalyst of collective action, and facilitator of individual access to both the wider world and the community itself. All ideas the IMLS Community Catalyst Initiative and the Norton/Dowdall report put forward, we found consistent evidence of in every town we visited.

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And so we ask:

If so, what practices do they employ?

You can see that it is only with the entire plurality of data that we feel some confidence in our claim. Statistics and economics people are fond of saying “All models are wrong, but some are useful” (George Box, maybe). No single data source we used could give us a complete picture and the codebook and understandings I’m about to share aren’t end points. Rather, they are to enrich our understanding of how social wellbeing is achieved in rural communities, and the role of rural libraries we observed.

So then, what informs our research based products that move us toward practices which aide positive social wellbeing outcomes? Let’s talk about how we break down and organize interview transcripts so that we can see practices.

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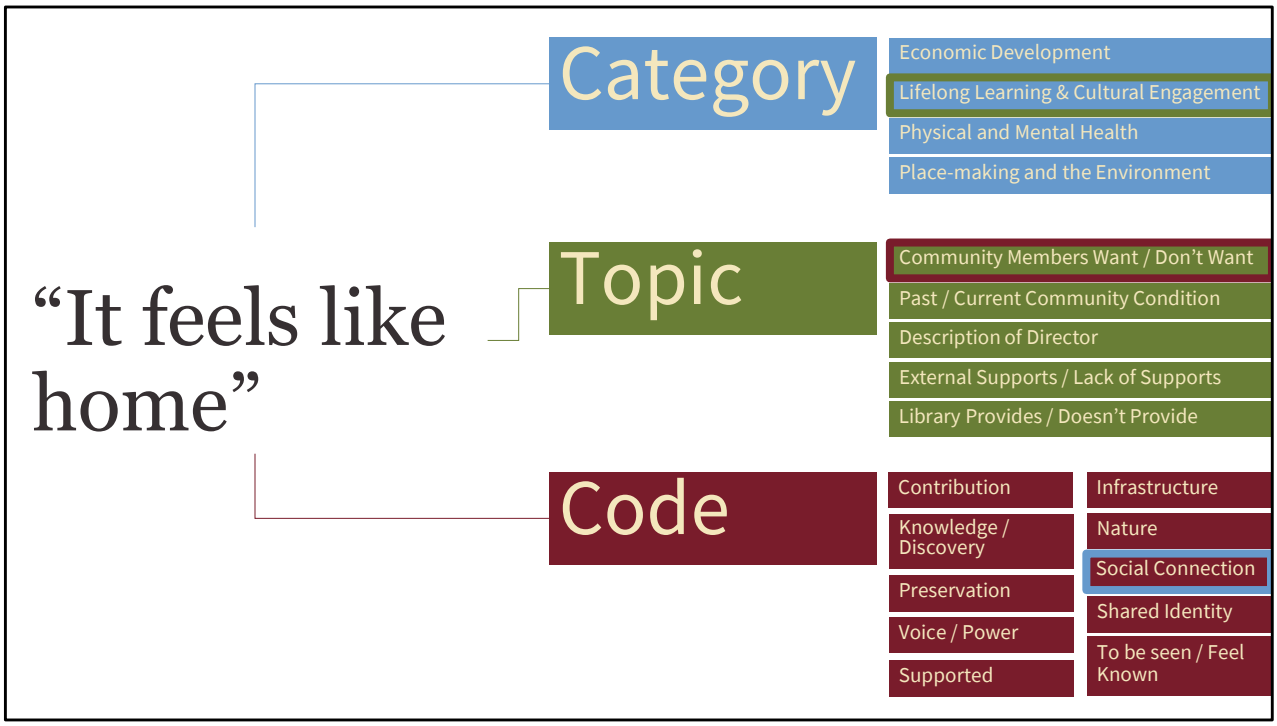

Qualitative data can be analyzed in a variety of ways. Very briefly, when I say qualitative data, I'm talking about the information we gather from interviews and surveys, often using subjects' own words. And when I say code, I'm generally talking about a text-based tag one applies to excerpts from the subjects' actual words. So with our 114 interviews, as we coded our data, we had a resulting 2,662 excerpts to which we applied codes.

Also, generally speaking, researchers will sometimes choose a coding framework to use – a set of pre-defined words they'll connect text to. Or they'll allow for emergent coding which simply means the development of codes as you read transcripts or theme out what you hear.

Before I go further into what we did and why we stand by our evidence, I want to call out similarities between coding and theming or categorizing when facilitating group work or discussions. If you've done that, you've done the thinking and initial actions required when doing emergent coding. See!? You have coded!

On the slide you see a quote from Jerianne Davis, Helvetia Public Library's Director in her answer to what her ideal community would feel like. On the right there are three sets of tags we used to describe what is happening in the interview. For instance, with Jerianne's quote, we gave it Lifelong Learning & Cultural Engagement, Community Members Want / Don't Want, and Social Connection. Ok, let's get into each of these sets.

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Social Wellbeing Categories

Category of Work	Social Wellbeing Dimensions with context specific indicators
Economic Development	Economic wellbeing, economic diversity, housing quality, affordability, **barter & sharing economy**
Lifelong Learning & Cultural Engagement	Educational attainment, school effectiveness, political voice, social connection
Physical & Mental Health	Health, mortality, physical in/security, rates of disability, **descriptions of human isolation, depression, "the blues"**
Place-making & the Environment	Existence of **and access to** common green space, air/water quality, commute time & **quality** for work/leisure/medical/social services, occupancy

We used Norton & Dowdalls 4 content areas or areas of work – we called them Categories of Work – but they are the what Norton and Dowdall saw public libraries engage with which facilitated social wellbeing.

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Topic Descriptors

Descriptor	Definition
Community members want / don't want	Resident describes ideal community, valued relationships, resources, and features of life that are desirable.
Description of past / current condition	Resident describes community change or current condition - generally in terms of perceived objective reality, not subjective desirability.
Description of the director	All comments and stories about the library director, former library director, or key library staff.
External supports	External-to-the-library supports for library service and community public goods.
Library provides / doesn't provide	Comments specifically about library service as distinguished from other community organizations or the library director

Before we even got to the community interviews we surveyed our subjects ad conducted 30-60 minute long phone interviews with 21 rural library directors. Through that we knew that generally the topics we were interested in an that our interview questions would bring up were these. We coded with these terms, but because we knew we would early in our design our interview questions were structured to get in answers on this content.

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Codes

Code	Definition	Code	Definition
Contribution	To give to others through skill/knowledge share, volunteerism, and philanthropy.	Voice / Power	Ability or lack thereof to enact independent choices about one's own future and the future of their community. Additionally, political voice can act on the community scale as a description of a community able to make change based on what the community wants for itself.
Infrastructure	Built structures within the physical world that support community and individual activity, including telecommunications, roadways, facilities, and the equipment required to use that infrastructure.	Shared Identity	A commonly held belief about the community, its geography, place in history, place in socio-political landscape, and/or cultural heritage - including when the community is not culturally or ethnically homogenous.
Knowledge / Discovery	Generation of skills, new ideas, concepts, and ways of being through individual or collective effort. Resources and experiences that provide a window to that which would have not been encountered without intentional intervention.	Supported	Belonging. Attachment to others outside of work and family which gives the individual physical, intellectual, and/or emotional space to interact with others in the community.
Nature	Land, bodies of water, networks of watersheds, geological formations, animals, and plantlife which are both managed and unmanaged.	Social Connection	Narrator describes: The experience of an individual, family, or organization when others without immediate material benefit act to benefit that individual, family and/or organization.
Preservation	ACTION. The capture, collection, and maintaining of culture, heritage, artifacts, language, stories, and histories of the multiplicity of cultures which exist in a place.	To be seen / feel known	The experience of an individual to be seen by others within the community, to feel known and to live without anonymity within the community.

What we didn't know was what the field interview answers would contain. These are the codes we needed to allow to surface on their own. We developed them while taking notes in the field, by defining them as we listened to each other's interviews. Through a process called inter-rater reliability. For details about that process, see the methods section of our primary paper.

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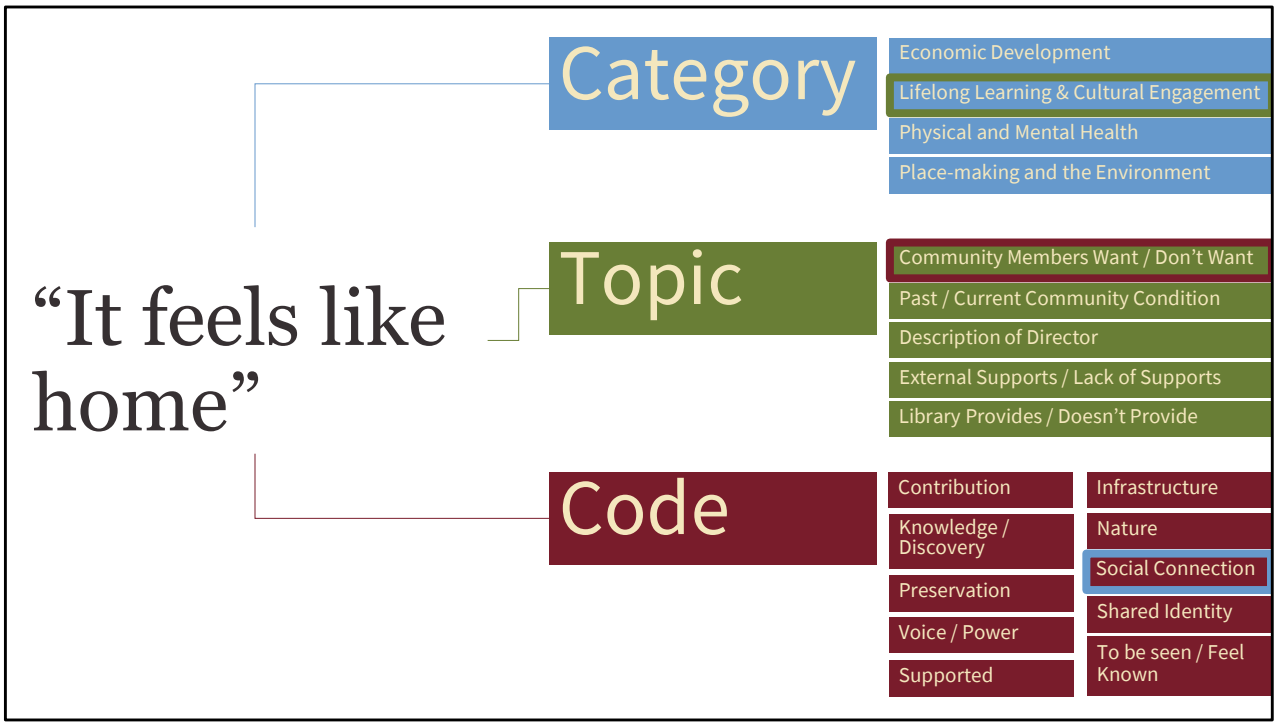

Each of those 2.400 some odd quotes have a tag from each of these sets. Working in a single community, all this could be managed through word documents, or paper with a highlighter and analyzed in Excel or by hand.
We used what is called a QDA (qualitative data analysis) software, to manage and explore our data.
What's great about using these three distinct sets of tags to describe what we heard is that we can limit our data to just look at certain dimensions.

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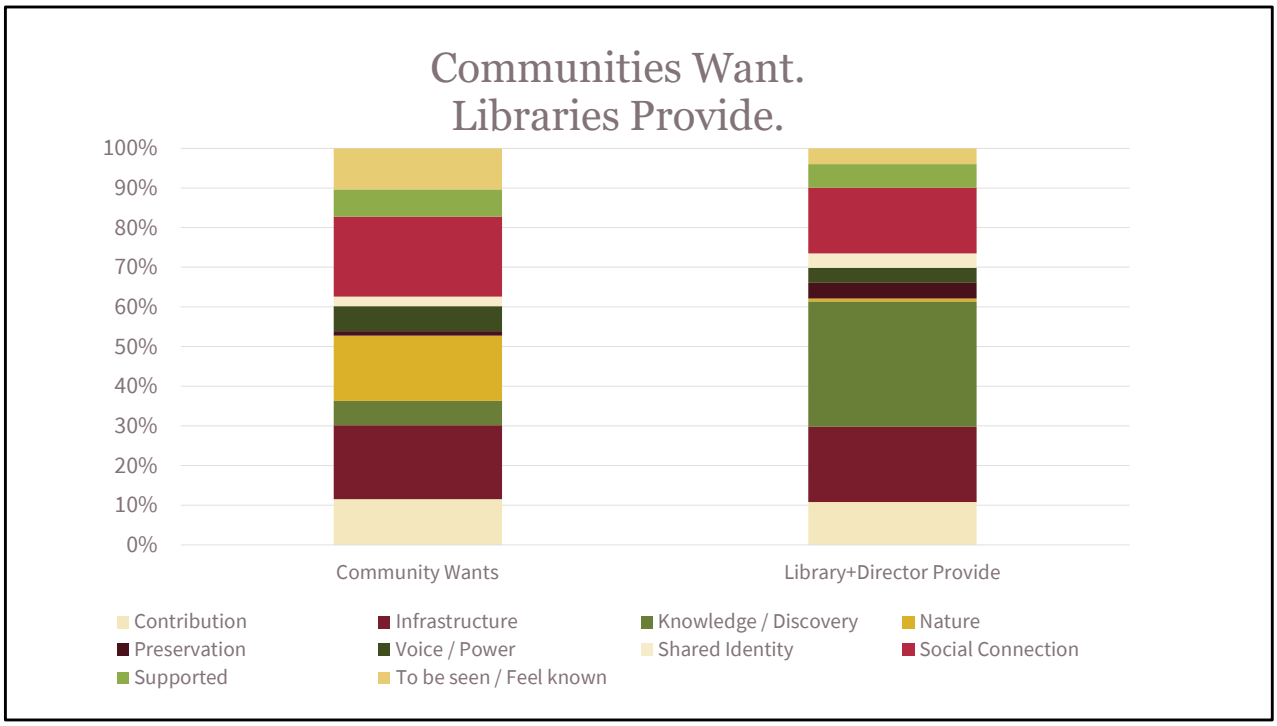

For instance, by limiting to just quotes where someone was talking about community residents want, we could see how our interview question:
How would you describe your ideal community
Which really encouraged people to speak from a place of deep values.

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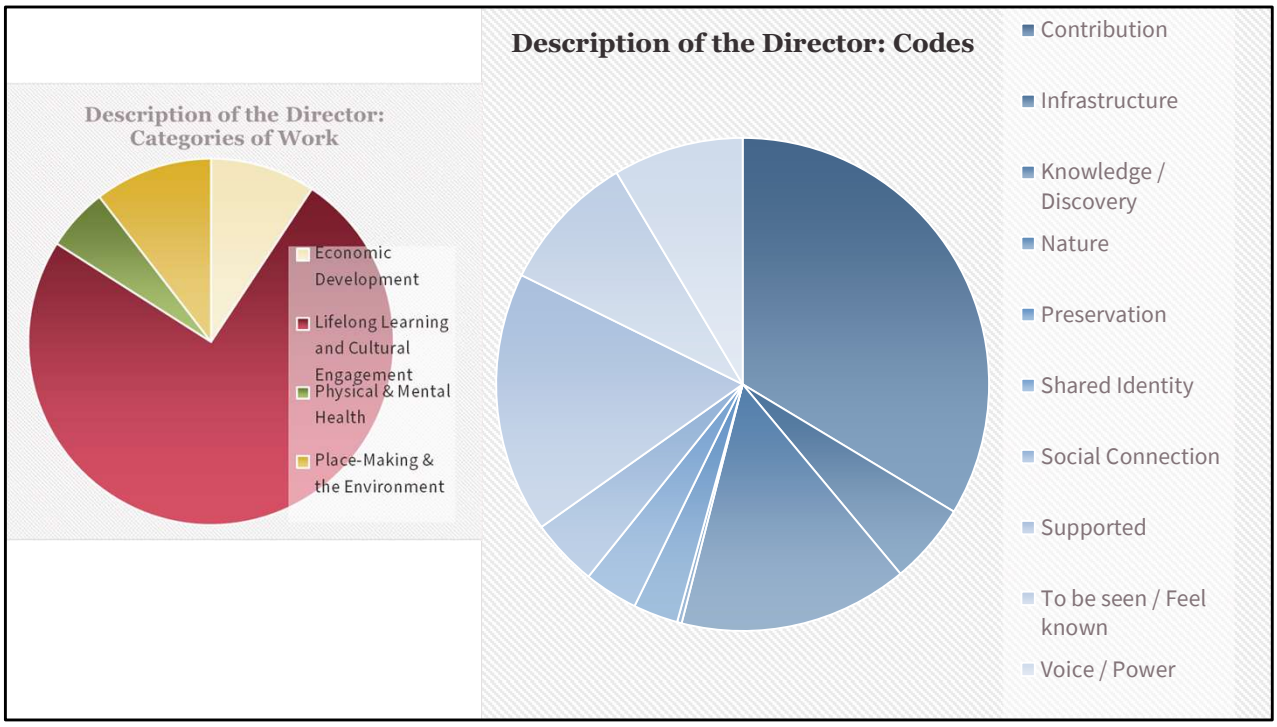

And when residents described directors and staff working in the library, this was the proportionality of categories of work described and the codes that emerged.

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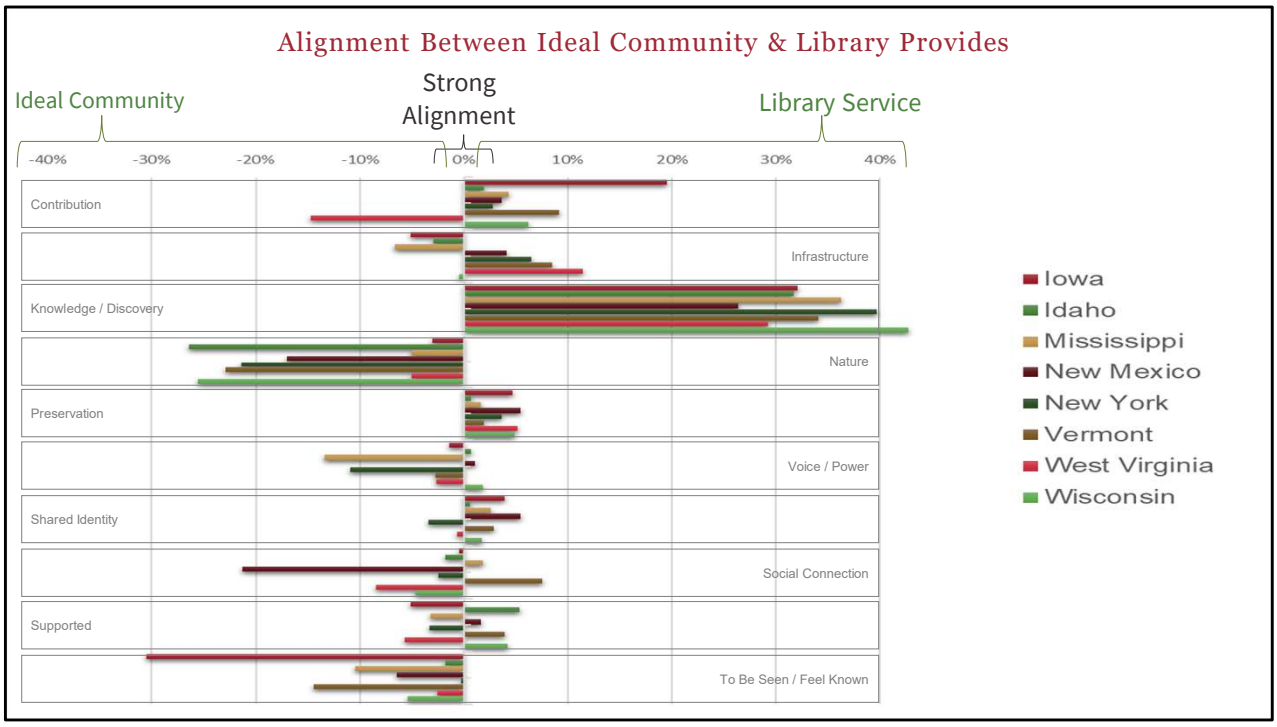

When we look by location, we see some interesting differences. And when we look at these frequencies next to how these same folks described library service and in terms of what the library and staff provide, we see the evidence of our primary finding – library service is well aligned to facilitating resident definitions of their ideal community.

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And so we ask:

If so, what practices do they employ?

We did all that sorting and looking to better answer the questions If so what practices do they employ.
Now, if we can see the “how” that is mightily important in facilitating social wellbeing outcomes, how do we help public libraries use these findings in a way that aligns with the dual maxims:
Each individual is an end, not a means. And that social wellbeing in a community is contextually defined.

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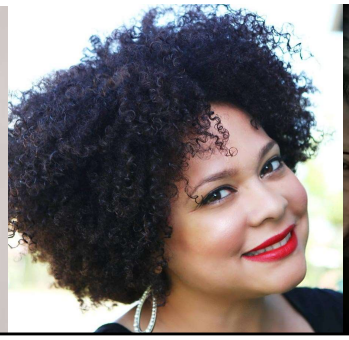
Advisors:
Rick Bonney
Bharat Mehra

Cynthia Nikitin
Madeline Peña
Merideth Wickham



Through partnerships! In work there are partners and advisors and also people who don't serve in any official capacity but are just there to talk through an idea:
Without Miriam Jorgensen's generosity we would never have arrived at our research question. We were too afraid to go that big and to be that ambitious without her encouragement. If you are a practitioner researcher having a supportive expert you can turn to can make all the difference.
Mike Norton from the Reinvestment Fund has suffered my questions, weird ideas, and interrogations for nearly two years with grace and generosity. His assistance and data leads have made this project significantly better.
And pictured at top is our own expert on call, Rick Bonney. All of these folks love libraries and I bet you have someone who can help you fill some skill gaps near you who also see the potential your institution is just now beginning to actualize.
We also have a board of advisors to keep us in line and cheerlead for us – we need all of it. From left, Bharat Mehra…

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But when it comes to creating resources out of the findings all the above people helped us arrive are our local library partners. They do much of the heavy lifting. In each of our 8 research locations it was the library director or manager who coordinated our visit and our interview schedule. In late winter they all read our reports from each of their communities and helped us check for relevance and accuracy.

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And then, a certain portion of these busy, under compensated, dedicated individuals agreed to work with us on what we've been calling the Creation Team.
They approach the findings iteratively and from a position of personal passion. Then they examine project need.

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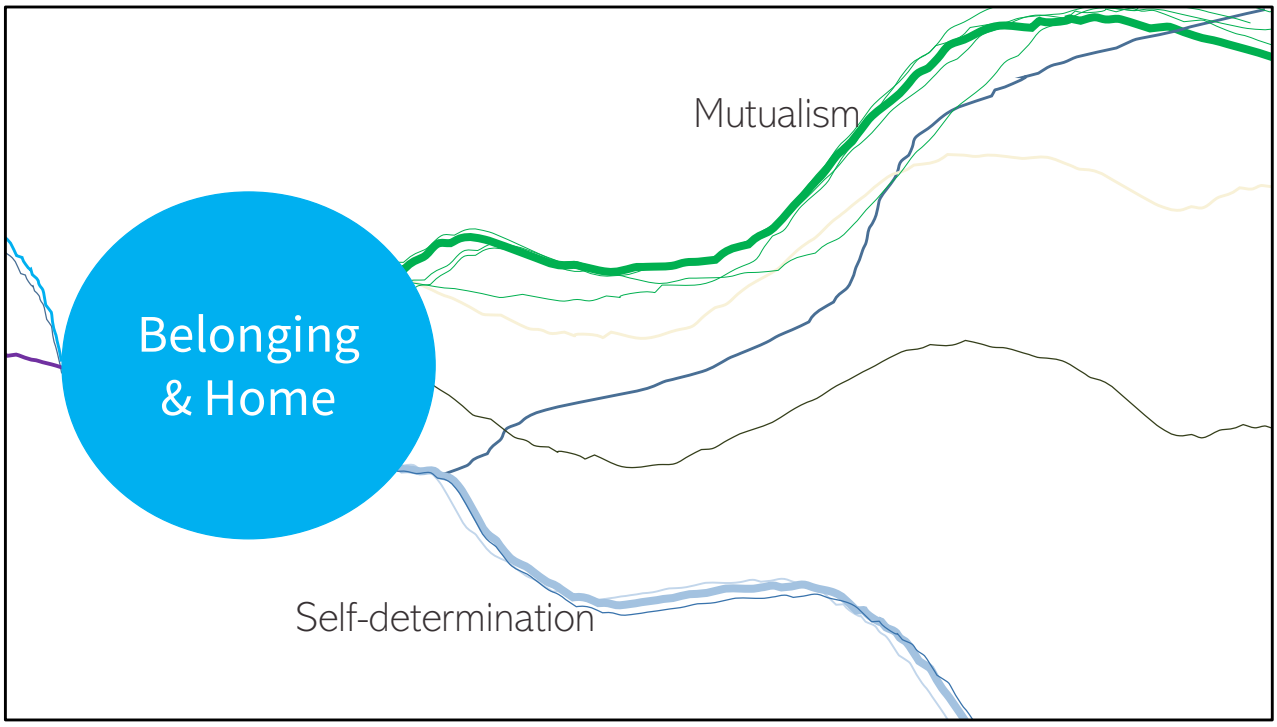

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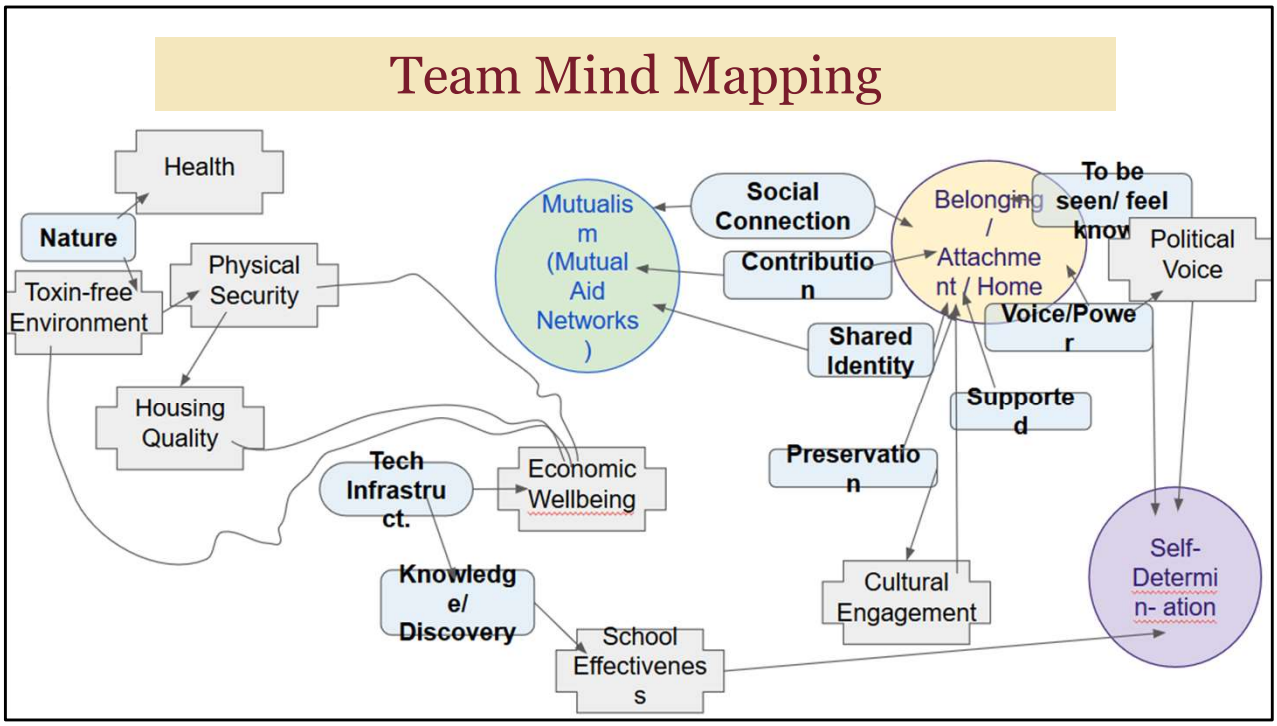

Pathways can also be viewed through the lens of social wellbeing dimensions and their relationship to the codes we developed to help us understand the elements of the good life as rural residents describe it. The Creation Team made a concept map to better understand how they saw the relationships between social wellbeing, codes, and the major pathways. At our most basic understanding, communities are complex. Even though we keep talking about social wellbeing indicators as measurable points, in our minds we have to hold a level of nuance that the data obfuscates.
Overall the researchers and creators find elements in these lists that they are personally passional about.

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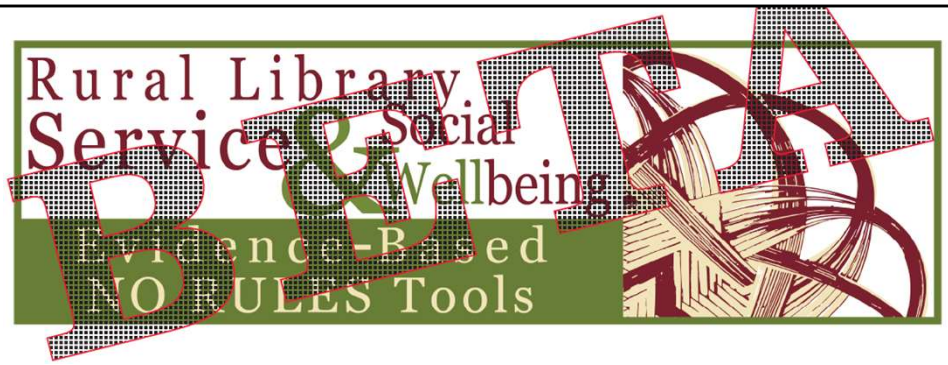

"Evidence-Based No Rules Tools" are not prescriptions for specific programs or services. They are a set of actions one can take to become awake to the uniqueness of their own community, and processes to utilize those unique qualities to improve local wellbeing."

Not all the topics the Evidence-Based No Rules tools have a direct line to the dimensions or codes. Some focus specifically on assisting the director in the capacity building and feeling supported. This is still evidence-based. We know from our interviews that rural librarianship is often isolating. Both because the job is typically only done by one person, but also because the profession overall skews urban in its discussions of impact, service outcomes, and assessment.

Nearly half of the library outlets in the US are considered rural. Depending on where you draw your cut off line, we could be talking about more than 7,000 rural library directors and managers. Not any single person on the creation team will be able to make something in the style or on the topic that suits all needs of this group of people. What we hope for is to capture the plurality of experience and approach to the research that exists in our case-study communities to improve usefulness of the products the team creates.

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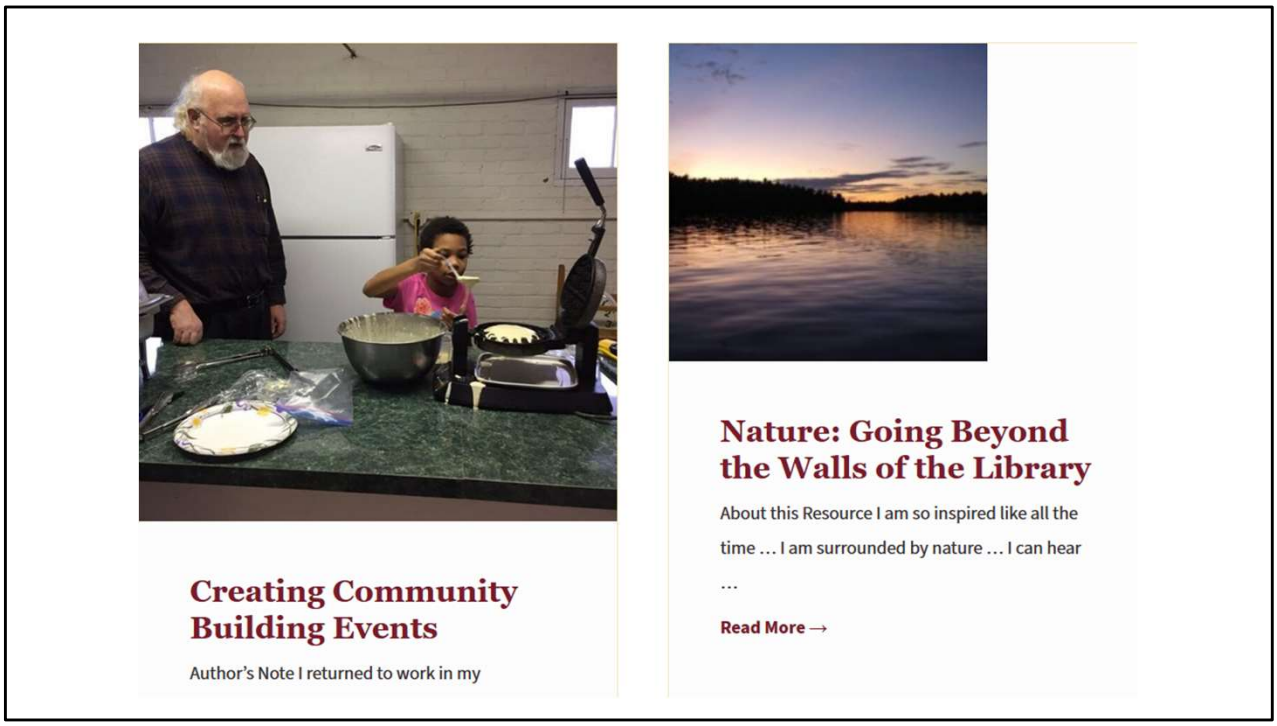

Which brings me to trust. What I'm about to say is both intuitive to recognize as true and also radical to implement. For our work, to make any of it true to the infinite complexity of communities and the individuals who reside in them, it must hold itself accountable to them. It must strive to bring forth that multiplicity of experience. Our purpose is to rise rural voices in the conversation of library service. If this chorus has many voices, listeners are more likely to find resonance with their own.
This manifests in the Creation Team because the research team believes their views, experiences, and creations are valid. We trust them as partners. We also don't know what they'll look like in the end. This is not a set of best practices. This is a set of ideas about approach themed around social wellbeing outcomes. And through you testing the tools and providing us with critical feedback (before September 15th!) they'll be able to get what they've produced closer to useful for the greatest number of people.

About the Creation team process:
Individual team members use Google Docs ad Slides to create first drafts of tools. They sketch out an idea, pull quotes from field data and talk about outcomes for both the tool to the user and to the community after. We all read and provide critical commentary. The author then makes revisions over a series of weeks, while also meeting as a team to talk about overall project direction, research findings, how the findings and tools relate to one another, and also, what we are missing in our current approach. Our aim right now

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maximize the diversity of both topics covered as well as approaches to creation with the view that it won't be until we hear from all of you that we discover which of these are actually useful, how, and why.

When this testing period ends, tool authors will take all the guidance they've received and re-create their work but improved for relevance and usefulness.
Then they'll work with our web developer partner to create an online experience that fits the authors' vision and is well situated within a drop-in learning and practice resource. We'll be working hard to have this online place complete and excellent by the new year.

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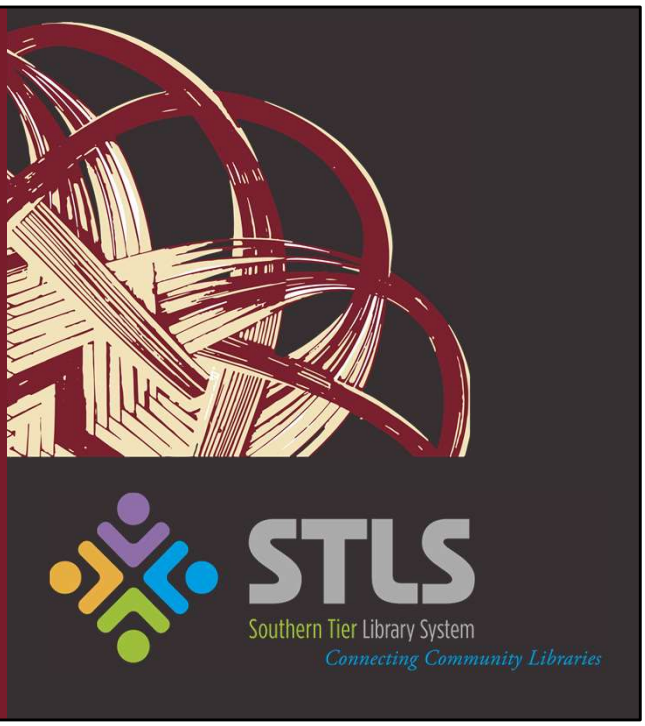

I know we've covered a lot of ground in the last 45 minutes. Before we end, I'd like you to have some set aside time to ask questions about anything that caught your attention.

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References in slide order

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