

Everyday Patterns for Shifting Systems

Families and relationships as the unit of wellbeing

This piece shares exploratory work we have been doing into everyday patterns, and the role and power of re-patterning in systems change. In our [introduction](#) we shared seven patterns we have identified across our work and that of others that go some way to making visible active re-patterning for equity and powersharing. Here we examine the fifth one: **Whānau & relationships as the unit of wellbeing**.

To describe what is being re-orientated through this re-patterning we draw on eight different arenas of systems, and extend our visualisation of what is happening in systems as a living relationship between different interconnected parts.

This work was undertaken during a twelve month 'executive in residence' program at Griffith Centre for Systems Innovation (at that time, called The *Yunus Centre*). We appointed the TSI / Auckland Co-Design Lab teams as our 'executive in residence', and set about jointly exploring the question, 'what can we learn from the work in South and West Auckland that could offer potential insights into growing the systemic foundations for civic innovation?'

A note on language

This piece uses Māori and Samoan language and concepts:

Whānau - often translated as 'extended family', but its meaning is more complex. It includes physical, emotional and spiritual dimensions.

Aiga - family.

7 Emerging Patterns

signalling potentials for transformative systems & enabling wellbeing



Beyond Services

Moving beyond services as the first response of addressing needs, to a much broader ecology of support for wellbeing. This involves recognition and activation of natural and cultural networks and resources; and an activation of expertise and capital in different ways.



Starting Differently

How we start matters. If we are trying to achieve different kinds of outcomes, or bolder still, create change in a system we need to start differently. If our starting point looks like same as always, it's not going to take us to a different place.



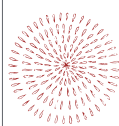
Diversifying Evidence & Value

Challenging evidence and indicators makes explicit the values and worldview underpinning them, and creates room for indicators and measures of success developed through different lenses, cultural perspectives and alongside whānau.



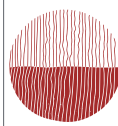
Collective action & ownership

Focusing on what it would take to initiate systemic and collective action and ownership for wellbeing outcomes - from people, families, communities, services, programs and policies. Wellbeing becomes the responsibility of the collective, rather than the individual.



Whānau & relationships as the unit of wellbeing

Working with, connecting to, recording, conceptualising people in relation to their wider context, relationships, whānau. This means seeing wellbeing from a family and intergenerational perspective not just an individual one.



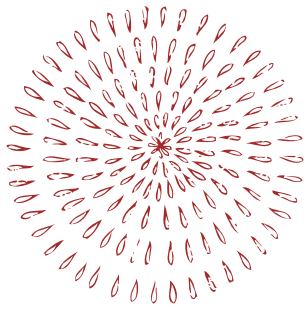
Connecting to place & being in place

Recognising and engaging the role of place and culture in creating and maintaining wellbeing, and potential of spaces in supporting the conditions for wellbeing, especially as places of healing and strengthening.



Right scale

Working within systems in ways that let us more fluidly move between big and wide and deep, understanding the connections between these and seeing them as equally important. This enables us to work across multiple levels at the same time



Families and relationships as the unit of wellbeing

Overview

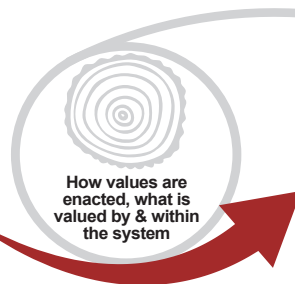
The ways in which government organises its services and supports, relates to people, and measures change, focuses on individuals as the core unit. This puts primacy on a particular individual and western view of both people and wellbeing. As a result people are seen as separate

to the relational context that is critical to human wellbeing.

This pattern is about working instead with family, or whānau as the unit of wellbeing. This concept is already integral to te ao Māori and other indigenous world views¹.

FROM

Services and supports are designed, resourced and delivered to individuals, who may choose to discuss family or relationships but are not obligated to do so. Service systems are based on Western value systems where the individual is considered the primary unit of wellbeing and the key service recipient

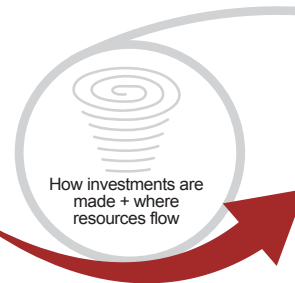


TO

Value is understood through a collective lens. Wellbeing is interpreted from a family and intergenerational perspective not just an individual one. Family is the beginning point and base unit of scale and engagement.

Fig 1. Four key systems shifts representing Families as the unit of wellbeing, Griffith Centre for Systems Innovation 2023.

Individual service users are the ultimate target of investment and service efficiency is measured on number of individuals seen and serviced. Value is determined by the progress of individuals through the service / support system. Multiple members of a family may be engaged in the service system in isolation but they are rarely connected together.



Resources and investments flow to families and wider support networks and flows across generations. Effectiveness of supports are relational and value is collectively framed by the wellbeing of the extended family not just by the wellbeing of an individual within the family.

The individual is the unit around which measurement is focused, and how success is defined in the change process. Individual progress is then aggregated towards population level outcomes.



Success is relational and outcomes are collective, framed around the wellbeing of the extended family and community. Outcomes are contextual, defined by the family unit, bespoke to that context and the dynamics within it. Success needs to account for intergenerational and relational wellbeing.

Wellbeing as a goal is interpreted on an individual or population level, with families being seen as a collection of individuals. Individual outcomes are understood on the basis of individual actions and choices.



Wellbeing as the goal is seen as holistic and multidimensional. Support systems understand dynamics and deal with messy edges and blurred shapes of families and relational connections. Individual outcomes are seen as dependent and interdependent on family history, culture and a network of relationships and influenced by family dynamics, roles and responsibilities.

1. For example, Whānau Ora in Aotearoa New Zealand is “a culturally-based, and whānau-centred approach to wellbeing focused on whānau (family group) as a whole” (see <https://whanauora.nz/about-us>)

This pattern is about exploring what it means to try and shift our current systems to recognise and engage in this way. On ways of working with, connecting to and 'seeing' people in relation to their wider context, relationships, families and whānau. As such the pattern focuses on recognising the significance of family as a core human and cultural unit and centralises the importance of relationships for wellbeing. Wellbeing is seen from a family and intergenerational perspective, not just through an individual lens.

Seeing the family as the beginning point or base unit of scale for wellbeing opens up new opportunities for thinking about about enabling wellbeing. Starting from this pattern means shifting systems structures, behaviours and values accordingly. Investment is directed differently when it is about family success not just individual success. The design and structure of support systems is also different. What support looks like and where it starts differ when the perspective is family-centred, aspirational, holistic and long-term. The starting point may well not be a service, and support is unlikely to start with issues as defined by service agencies or support packages.

The repercussions across the support system of working with families as the unit of scale is complex, just as families themselves are complex, dynamic systems. For example, if one member of a family gains employment, this may have a range of implications for a family as a system, (not automatically positive), as it impacts on power relationships, family dynamics, status, priorities, availability for other family responsibilities. The whole family is impacted.

Understanding wellbeing means understanding the implications of change for the whole living, dynamic, complex system. In understanding the connection of relationships to overall wellbeing, the right responses and supports have the potential for cumulation of collective wellbeing.

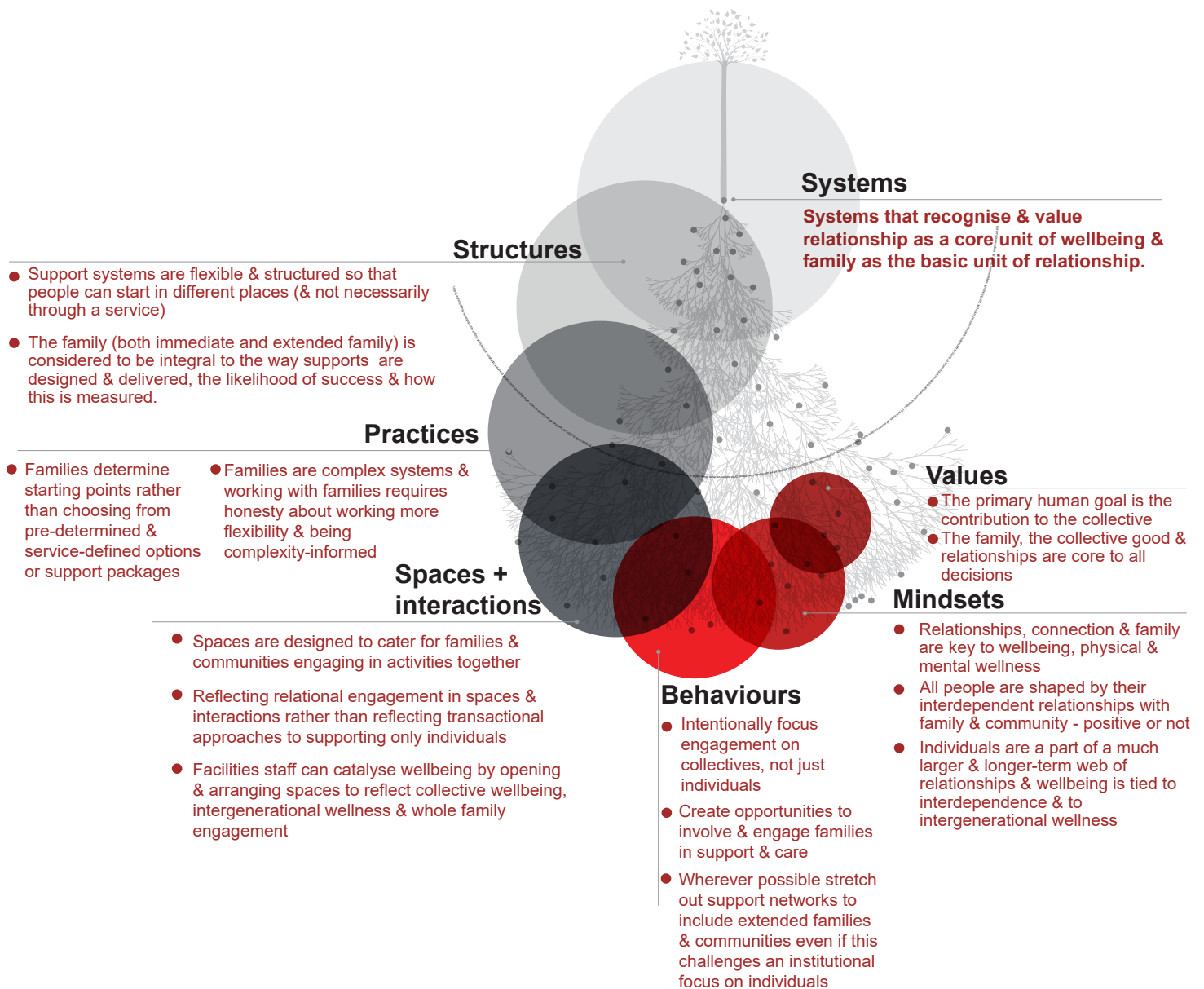
Starting with families as the unit of wellbeing and engagement requires much more nuanced and flexible ways of conceptualising how support is offered, how criteria for accessing such support is defined, and how success is determined.

Just counting outputs from services won't tell us whether overall families themselves are better off. Assumptions about what people "should" be doing to be productive or what is of most value i.e paid work over care, may be challenged when we understand the benefit of the whole. Or thinking about the benefits of intergenerational knowledge exchange and connection might trigger a re-prioritisation of approaches to training or support.

This pattern is about more holistic ways of recognising wellbeing and of supporting it in relation to the broader dynamics and intergenerational obligations and relationships of families. In other words, the family (both immediate and extended family) is considered to be integral to the way supports are understood, the likelihood of success and how this is measured.

“Seeing the family as the beginning point or base unit of scale for wellbeing opens up new opportunities for thinking about about enabling wellbeing... Investment is directed differently when it is about family success not just individual success. The design and structure of support systems is also different.”

Embedding the Pattern: What might it take?



An example of 'Families as the Unit of Wellbeing' pattern in context

Uptempo: In this example 'aiga, families and their relationships are understood as the 'unit' of wellbeing, rather than individuals.

Uptempo is a Pacific prosperity initiative that works with families as a collective to lift employment and economic outcomes, rather than working with individual family members. The intent is to support Pacific employees to move into higher paying future orientated progression pathways, but the starting point is around the bigger picture and needs of the family as a whole, guided by the family's shared context, wellbeing goals, values and aspirations.

Understanding the influences around someone's employment journey (or health journey) as being connected to and interdependent of their family connects to a cultural paradigm of the communal and the collective. It allows the development of responses and supports that better account for the relational and cultural dynamics that are at play within families. This includes recognising that aspirations and definitions of success are held for the family as a whole, not just one individual, and that when power, income, relationships and responsibilities shift in a household or family the effects are much wider than just the person concerned.



Families and the Uptempo team know that when one part within a family changes there is a flow on effect. What looks like a positive financial move for an individual may create a range of tensions that the family needs to negotiate.

For example an increase in salary for one person may come with a range of additional responsibilities or obligations. The challenges that Pasific families face are compounded by the number of people experiencing it within the 'aiga' - that is, one person gets a great job and has to compensate for the 4 others in the home that are still engaged in low paid work. So, a collective perspective enables a better recognition of the actual starting point for aiga as well as the dynamics within.

Further complexity exists for Pacific employees who must effectively live in two worlds. When they are employed in non-indigenous contexts, the world of work based on western concepts of individual success, and the world of family culture may be very different. The expectations and values of those two worlds can be very

stressful to navigate, or even conflict with each other. Taking a family or 'aiga' approach to supporting career progression is more holistic and intergenerational and takes into account wider needs, implications and collective outcomes.

To take such an approach and understand family as the unit of wellbeing requires flexibility to engage, hear and pay attention to the whole family and where they are at, and understand that what is deemed a positive outcome is judged in the context of the whole, not as an individual issue or outcome. It requires employers to understand that a job for one person is important for and impacts the whole family.

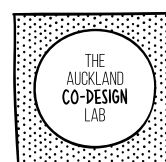
From a services and support perspective taking such an approach challenges ways in which funding is allocated and how data is collected about people and families. It asks the system to value and invest in what makes 'aiga' (families) successful rather than just one person successful.

Conclusion and what's next

Patterns help to make visible or describe the different ways of working that are important to getting different outcomes. It's easy for us to talk about how we think things should work and be different (e.g community-led, partnerships, powersharing). We are hopeful that by trying to go more deeply into the kinds of interconnected changes and patterns that these shifts represent we can make more visible some of the "how" of change. The seven patterns we identify, including *Families as the unit of Wellbeing*, are transitional patterns - starting points that reflect learning about ways of working that are more likely to create the possibility for different outcomes and greater equity.

Keep an eye out for our introduction to the next four patterns - and the eventual combined set. You can find patterns published so far [on our blog](#).

We'd love to know if you recognise these patterns, can see examples of these patterns in your work, or can help us to extend our understanding of these patterns. Equally we would love to work with others to identify additional transitional patterns that are helping to give further weak signals for systems change towards equity. You can reach out at gcsi@griffith.edu.au.



This is the fifth pattern in the series of seven identified in 'Everyday Patterns for Shifting Systems' written in partnership by the Griffith Centre for Systems Innovation (formerly The Yunus Centre), Griffith University; TSI and Auckland Co-Design Lab, 2023