

# Multi-Domain Subjective Wellbeing of Two Canadian First Nations Communities

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**Summary.** — This exploratory study analyzed the subjective wellbeing of people living on reserves in two Canadian First Nations communities. Community members themselves identified key domains of wellbeing and contributing factors, and helped specify models linking overall wellbeing, domains' satisfactions and contributing factors. Households' data collected through a structured questionnaire were used to estimate wellbeing models. The social, cultural, and land use (SCLU) domain was found to be the most important contributor to wellbeing, and SCLU factors contributed to all other domains—Education, Employment, Income, Health, and Housing—satisfactions. The study opens new paths for exploring the local meaning of wellbeing.  
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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Studies on the wellbeing of Aboriginal peoples have demonstrated substantial disparities between the wellbeing of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples of Canada (Salée, Newhouse, & Levesque, 2006). A multitude of macro-level factors, such as colonization, the residential school system, and infringement on land rights, have been identified as the leading causes for the plight of the Aboriginal peoples of Canada (King, Smith, & Gracey, 2009; Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples [RCAP], 1996). Without doubt, these macro-level factors have had adverse impacts on Aboriginal peoples' wellbeing. Similar to the Aboriginal notions of resilience (Kirmayer, Dandeneau, Marshall, Phillips, & Williamson, 2011) and "caring for country" (Burgess, Berry, Gunthorpe, & Bailie, 2008), Aboriginal notions of wellbeing also reflect their diverse cultures. While there are some common elements to Canadian Aboriginal cultures and worldviews, a wide variation exists in cultural identity and social contexts across different Aboriginal groups in Canada (Ledogar & Fleming, 2008). Hence, micro-level studies that can effectively address communities' needs are required to complement studies on macro-level factors that affect wellbeing (Reading, Kmetc, & Gideon, 2007; Romanow, 2002).

The Canadian constitution recognizes three major groups of Aboriginal people—Indians, commonly referred to as "First Nations", Métis, and Inuit. First Nations and Inuit are indigenous people of North America. The Métis are descendants of First Nations' people and Europeans. First Nations<sup>1</sup> historically lived below the Arctic region from the Atlantic to the Pacific while Inuit inhabited the Arctic region.<sup>2</sup> Out of the 851,560 First Nations' people, 637,660 (74.9%) were Registered Indians, and nearly one-half (49.3%) of them lived on Indian reserves<sup>3</sup> (Statistics Canada, 2013a). There are 617 First Nations communities which represent more than 50 cultural groups (Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development Canada [AANDC], 2013; Statistics Canada, 2013b). Each of these groups has their own culture—ways of living that include the food, language, and beliefs about the world around them. Furthermore, these cultures are largely influenced by their

natural environments (AANDC, 2013). The largest segment of the population of First Nations is Registered Indians living on reserves and this category of Canadian Aboriginal peoples is the focus of our study. From now on, we refer to this category as On-Reserve First Nations (ORFN) peoples.

The most common and dominant measures of ORFN peoples' wellbeing focus on the material aspects of their lives such as income, unemployment, and poverty (Michalski, 2001; Zagon, 2001) or include broader composite measures such as the Community Well-Being (CWB) index which encompasses income, education, and housing conditions. However, the use of such measures to evaluate ORFN peoples' wellbeing is subject to the problem of "category fallacy"—the uncritical imposition of constructs developed in one culture on another culture (Kleinman, 1977). As a consequence, these measures ignore the most common and predominant First Nations' cultural notion of a person's connections to the land and the environment (Kirmayer, 2007; Tanner, 2004) as well as other cultural and social perspectives of these people on the antecedents and characteristics of their wellbeing.<sup>4</sup> Evidence suggests that those First Nations' communities that are firmly grounded in their culture and secure in the legitimacy of their traditions and social institutions are happier (Adelson, 2000) and economically more successful (Cornell & Kalt, 2003). Hence, an assessment of ORFN peoples' wellbeing is incomplete without incorporating the traditional wisdom of these people about the land, land use activities, and their social and cultural activities.

The critical role of connections to the land and social, cultural, and land use activities in promoting the wellbeing of First Nations, as well as other Aboriginal groups, has been documented by many authors including Kelm (1998),

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Kirmayer, Simpson, and Cargo (2003), and Reading, Marsden, Link, Kurbanova, and Kelly (2008). However, we could not find any empirical study on ORFN peoples' wellbeing that incorporates social, cultural, and land use dimensions.<sup>5</sup> Our research aims to begin filling this gap.

The concept of wellbeing has been examined from diverse perspectives by philosophers, psychologists, economists, and other social scientists (Gasper, 2004; Layard, 2010). Early philosophers such as Aristotle and his followers focused on well-living (Ryan & Deci, 2001, cited from Oishi, 2010, p. 37) while hedonists and utilitarian theorists looked at well-feeling (or pleasure) (Gasper, 2004; van Praag & Frijters, 1999). Other students of wellbeing focused on the satisfaction of desires, wishes, and goals (Crisp, 2001; Griffin, 1986) and the subjective evaluation of life as a whole (Diener, Sapyta, & Suh, 1998; Diener, Suh, Lucas, & Smith, 1999). Given the diversity of concepts related to wellbeing, a consensus on the measurement of wellbeing is a challenging task. Currently the most commonly used measure of wellbeing (especially by economists) is income or Gross Domestic Product (GDP)/capita. This measure, however, has been criticized for ignoring other important aspects of life (Gasper, 2004). In response, a variety of methods of wellbeing measurement have been proposed encompassing additional dimensions (Summer, 2006) and the need for multidimensionality of wellbeing is increasingly being acknowledged (McGillivray, 2007).

The emergent methods of multidimensional wellbeing measurement can be grouped into: (i) objective indicators to complement, supplement or replace GDP such as the Physical Quality of Life Index and the Human Development Index; and (ii) subjective measures such as self-reported life satisfaction, usually called subjective wellbeing (Conceição & Bandura, 2008). Arguably, in the light of their strong relations with the land and their environment and unique cultural perspectives on wellbeing which are difficult to articulate and represent through objective measures and deductive methodologies, the measurement of ORFN peoples' wellbeing through even a wide spectrum of objective indicators may not yield a valid representation of their wellbeing. Furthermore, such measurements made by external agents without significant inputs from the ORFN people to the methodology and the process of measurement may not resonate well with their cultural perspectives and are less likely to be perceived by them as legitimate. For these reasons, we have focused in this study on the measurement of subjective wellbeing of ORFN people.

Subjective wellbeing has two components (Diener, 1984)—(i) an affective component consisting of momentary emotional states and instantaneous feelings, and (ii) a cognitive component or an ex-post, retrospective assessment of the quality of the life as a whole (Sumner, 1996) commonly called "life satisfaction" (Andrews & Withey, 1976), reflecting individuals' perceived distance from their aspirations. In this paper, we focus on the cognitive component of subjective wellbeing.

Assessment of subjective wellbeing may be based on a holistic concept of satisfaction with life (Blanchflower & Oswald, 2004; Clark, Frijters, & Shields, 2008; Deaton, 2008; Helliwell & Putnam, 2004; Kapteyn, Smith, & van Soest, 2010) or may be decomposed to satisfaction with important domains of life (O'Connell, Skevington, & Saxena, 2003; Skevington, Lotfy, & O'Connell, 2004). Satisfaction in each domain is viewed as reflecting the extent to which objective outcomes in that domain match the respondents' goals or needs (Campbell, 1981; Cummins, 1998; Headey, Holmstrom, & Wearing, 1984; van Praag & Ferrer-I-Carbonell, 2004). Cummins (1996) identified 173 different terms used to describe domains of life satisfaction, but suggested that all these terms

can be grouped into seven domains: material, health, productivity, intimacy, safety, community, and emotional domains. Six or seven similar domains have also been suggested by many other authors including Argyle (2001), Headey and Wearing (1992), Skevington, Sartorius, and Amir (2004), and van Praag and Ferrer-I-Carbonell (2004). However, the relationship between domain satisfaction and overall satisfaction or wellbeing continues to be a rather neglected aspect of research (Easterlin & Sawangfa, 2007; Fischer, 2009). Most research has focused on either the identification of determinants of different domains' satisfaction (examples include Ateca-Amestoya, Serrano-del-Rosalá, & Vera-Toscano, 2008; Nielsen & Smyth, 2008) or the impact of domain/life satisfaction on outcomes (e.g., Rode, Rehg, Near, & Underhill, 2007). One exception to these studies is van Praag and Ferrer-I-Carbonell (2004); in this study the authors examined the contributions of domain's satisfaction variables to overall satisfaction, yet even this study has not explored the possibilities of linkages between different domains. In addition, all the above studies are based on data from non-Aboriginal people from the developed world. Our study seeks to contribute to a better understanding of the subjective wellbeing of ORFN people. In particular it provides preliminary evidence about the perceived key life domains of ORFN people, the factors that drive satisfaction with each life domain, the interrelationships between satisfaction with different life domains, and the relationships between domains' satisfaction and the overall satisfaction with life.

In our assessment of ORFN peoples' wellbeing, two methodological issues need to be addressed: the identification of the relevant domains that capture more fully the critical life domains of these peoples, and the use of an appropriate modeling technique to capture the complex structure of ORFN peoples' wellbeing. The first issue was addressed by the identification of the domains of wellbeing by ORFN peoples themselves and not by the researchers and this resulted in the identification and inclusion of a new domain related to social, cultural, and land use activities of ORFN peoples. The second issue was dealt with by the use of path analysis instead of multivariate regression analysis to allow for the simultaneous exploration of one-way as well as two-way relationships between different components of the system of relationships between life domains and overall wellbeing.

This paper is a part of a larger project on the assessment of subjective wellbeing of ORFN peoples in Canada. Specifically the project has focused on the following: (1) investigation of the social and cultural determinants of satisfaction with the health domain; (2) an assessment of multi-domain wellbeing, its determinants, and analysis of inter-domain linkages; (3) the valuation of the contributions of land use activities and other ecological services provided by the forest. The results of the study of social and cultural determinants of health have been presented in Kant, Vertinsky, Zheng, and Smith (2013). The current paper builds on Kant *et al.* (2013), extending the analysis to all other key domains of life and the factors that influence them. Specifically, this paper presents: (i) specific features of methodology grounded in ORFN peoples; (ii) new analyses of data obtained during the process of model development from the First Nations involved in the articulation of the conceptual model; (iii) a discussion of the insights derived from these data; (iv) the results of the multi-domain model estimation; (v) a comprehensive analysis of the factors influencing each domain and its linkages to other domains; and (vi) a comparison of the contributions of social, cultural, and land use activities to each of the domains of wellbeing. The study is exploratory in nature, and is based on data

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