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Title: The Relational Conception of Wellbeing as a Catalyst for the Ecosocial Transition

Year: 2017

Version:

Please cite the original version:

Helne, T., & Hirvilammi, T. (2017). The Relational Conception of Wellbeing as a Catalyst for the Ecosocial Transition. In A.-L. Matthies, & K. Närhi (Eds.), *The Ecosocial Transition of Societies : The Contribution of Social Work and Social Policy* (pp. 36-53). Routledge. Routledge Advances in Social Work.

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Tuula Helne & Tuuli Hirvilammi:

The Relational Conception of Wellbeing as a Catalyst for the Ecosocial Transition

1. Introduction

Doubly exposed to mounting ecological havoc and social insecurity, our societies face what could be characterized as the paradox of progress: the harder unlimited progress has been pursued, the more destruction has followed. The great legitimizing idea of this chase of the Holy Grail is to enable a more prosperous life. To some extent, and particularly regarding material wealth, the goal has been achieved – for some. However, this does not mean that wellbeing for all is now accomplished. Instead, exponential economic growth has led our civilization to its breaking point. Ours is a world of a warming climate, acid oceans, polluted rivers, disappearing tropical forests, species on the verge of extinction, expanding slums, hunger, and untold human and animal suffering. The current technocratic and growth-oriented culture is also alienating, commodifying and detrimental to social relationships.

How did humanity arrive in this situation? An important explanation lies in the confusion between economic prosperity and wellbeing. This befuddlement has legitimized relentless economic growth which has, however, proved to be both unjust and ecologically disastrous. In this article we claim that we need a more sustainable conception of wellbeing to make the ecosocial transition possible.

At present, the concept of wellbeing is discussed in many fields, also in relation to sustainability (e.g., Gasper 2004, Kjell 2011, Armitage et al. 2012, Gough 2014, Hämäläinen and Michaelson 2014). The need to elaborate the conception of wellbeing concerns social work, too. Even though the concept is ubiquitous in this field, its meaning is blurry. Social work thus requires a robust concept of wellbeing and the incorporation of this concept into its practices. (Gamble 2012.) A sustainable understanding of wellbeing could then become an integral tool in social work's mission to 'promote social change and development, social cohesion, and the empowerment and liberation of people' and to engage 'people and structures to address life challenges and enhance wellbeing' (IFSW 2014).

Our claim about the importance of elaborating the concept of wellbeing is based on the view that the language we use, the stories we tell ourselves and the concepts and metaphors we live by have an enormous effect on our behaviour, and that they consequently constitute considerable transformative power (e.g., Lakoff and Johnson 2003). On the background of this view are social theories that emphasize the importance of symbolic structures and discursive practices (e.g., Berger and Luckmann 1966). Concepts do not merely exist, they *do* things and shape the world. In other words, concepts – including wellbeing – are a dynamic force that is deeply entwined with our practices. The latter are sets of routinized performances consisting of both bodily and mental activities, and ways of desiring certain things and understanding the world, including objects, humans and oneself (Reckwitz 2002). Practices hence encompass both doings and sayings (see Warde 2005: 134). They are linked to human needs (or wants), and they can be either sustainable or unsustainable. Ethical problems can therefore be seen as a question of creating and taking care of our routines, and as a question of the good life as it is expressed in our bodily and mental activities (Reckwitz 2002: 259).

In its strong sense, sustainability requires at least the following conditions: a dematerialization of the economy, a fair distribution of wealth and a new vision of human and planetary well-being (Peeters 2012: 290). In this chapter, we concentrate on the third condition. It is strongly related to the human–nature relationship and the human self-image, because what humankind is facing today is not merely a social and economic crisis which threatens wellbeing but a crisis of our sense of humanity, how we understand our place in the world, and how we put this understanding into practice (see also Ehrenfeld 2008: 58). All these aspects need re-examination. We contend that this process of examination means abandoning our current mental models and replacing them with a relational paradigm that is built on the acknowledgement of human dependency on the vitality of the ecosystems (see Hirvilammi and Helne 2014). The ecosocial transition thus equals a paradigm shift (see Ehrenfeld 2008: 66). This is a shift requiring a tremendous amount of transformative ‘ecosocial work’, in which social work could take a part.

In what follows, we reflect upon how a more sustainable conceptualization of wellbeing based on the relational paradigm could contribute to the ecosocial transition, social policy and social work. We first offer an alternative to the predominant conception of human, *homo economicus*. Second, we explain why a sustainable conceptualization of wellbeing should be needs-based. Third, we outline how the conceptualization of wellbeing we propose could function as the bedrock of social work and as a catalyst for the ecosocial transition. To conclude, we summarize the benefits of the proposed conceptualization and briefly discuss the role of social workers in the ecosocial transition.

The theoretical moorings of this article are manifold. Our home ground is social policy – especially its ecosocial school of thought (e.g., Fitzpatrick 2011) – and wellbeing research, Erik Allardt’s (e.g., 1976) needs-based approach in particular. In addition, we align ourselves with ecosocial approaches to social work (e.g., Gray et al. 2013, Dominelli 2012, Coates 2003, Närhi and Matthies 2001). We have also been inspired by Arne Næss’s (e.g., 1995) ecosophy and the humanistic psychology of Abraham Maslow (e.g., 2011). We share the ideas of a strong and transformationalist framework of sustainability (see Clifton 2010, (see Matthies, Chapter 2 in this book) as well as those of the topical degrowth literature (e.g., Jackson 2009, Heinberg 2011, D’Alisa et al. 2015, see also Elsen, Chapter 4 in this book). Both frameworks promote fundamental socio-economic system change, the dissociation of the ideas of wellbeing and growth, and the satisfaction of human needs with fewer material resources than today.

2. Being Human: A Relational View

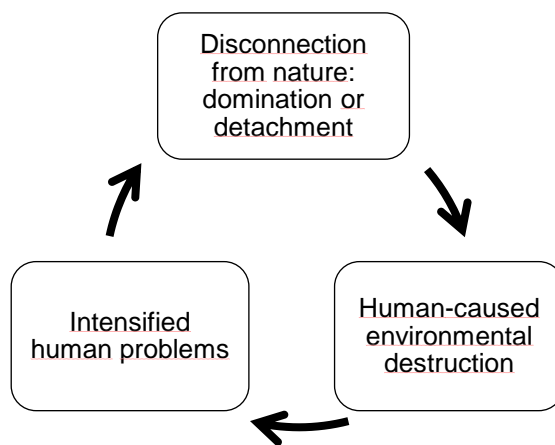
To be human is to rule the world. This is the underlying tenet with which humans have legitimized the appropriation of natural resources and the exploitation and enslavement of other species (see e.g., Piatek 2008). The tenet can be seen as part of an anthropocentric, optimistic, modernist and profoundly unecological paradigm of human exemptionalism which assumes that the exceptional characteristics of our species exempt us from ecological principles and from environmental influences (Catton and Dunlap 1980: 25). The paradigm consists of several basic assumptions (see Hirvilammi and Helne 2014). The most fundamental of them is the deeply rooted impression that humans are separate from nature, which makes the domination of nature seem justified. The advancement of technology has, in turn, made this supremacy possible, allowing humans to push the natural boundaries and stretch the strands of the relational web (Keough 2008: 73).

The devastating repercussions of humankind’s activities raise doubts about the appropriateness of the previous assumptions concerning the relationship between humans and nature (e.g., Oldfield et al. 2013). In this light, the claim that sustainability is primarily a human problem and secondarily an environmental one seems legitimate: if we are incapable of addressing the unsustainability of the

human self-image, we cannot tackle the other aspects of sustainability. The ecosocial transition thus poses the radical challenge of finding our way back to our human and natural roots from which we have become separated. (Ehrenfeld 2008: 55, 97.)

The current economization of societies can be traced to the exemptionalist assumption of human separateness: when human actions are not seen in the net of ecological interdependency, it is possible to detach economy and society from nature. We then come to live in a society inhabited by *homo economicus*, a self-reliant being keen to maximize his or her own utility. This creature is not a human ‘being’ in its literal sense. Instead, we face a human wanting, getting, and having: a person eating the cake, and wanting to have it, too, and insatiably asking for more slices. This glutton is quite oblivious of planetary boundaries and the consequences of overstepping them – the vicious circle human exemptionalism sets in motion (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Cycle of Disconnection (Norton 2012)



Living one’s life as *homo economicus* entails a limited perspective of the relationality of human life. The construct misses out the fundamental significance of relationships for human beings: the relation with oneself; the relation with other living beings, present and future; and the relation with nature (see Gergen 2009, Becker 2006). These relations are extremely important in the context of sustainability and in social work and social policy whose leeway is currently being narrowed by the tendency to regard humans as mere producers and consumers.

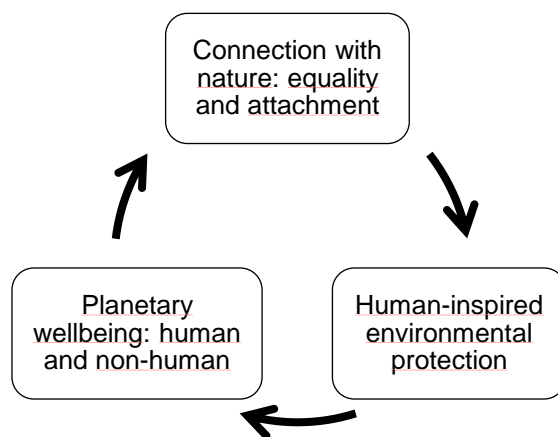
If taken seriously, sustainability requires a shift in the understanding of humanity’s place on the planet. This, in turn, requires that we have to include more relationships in our self-image. It has been suggested that the narrow concept of *homo economicus* should be replaced by the concept of *homo ecologicus* as a new philosophical basis for action (Becker 2006). The concept unavoidably brings to mind Arne Næss’s concept of the ecological self, which implies that we are ‘in, and of, Nature from the very beginning of our selves’. While admitting the importance of society and human relationships, Næss wishes to accentuate that our self is much richer in its constitutive relationships. The notion of the ecological self entails an identification with others and nature, thus widening and deepening our self and increasing the meaning of life. (Næss 1995.)

Homo ecologicus and the ecological self are illuminating concepts. We would, nevertheless, like to introduce the concept of *homo iunctus* (the connected man), which corresponds more accurately to the idea of relationality. We would, moreover, like to speak of the ‘relational self’ rather than the ecological self, because the latter notion may lead to the underestimation of interpersonal relations

that are an important constituent of our being (see Ketokivi 2010). The idea of relationality and the relational paradigm are neither anthropocentric nor biocentric (see also Ehrenfeld 2008: 57). Because materials and energy constantly flow between humans and nature – the human metabolism included – it is impossible to draw a clear line between the two (Giddings et al. 2002, Haila 2009). Relationality is thus all about interconnectedness and interdependence. The relational conception of humans changes the idea of individual wellbeing: it is actually no longer individual but dependent on the quality of the relationships that humans have with each other and with nature.

The conception of the relational self has important implications for sustainability: when other beings are a part of us, we feel as responsible for their wellbeing as for our own. The way we see our relatedness (or un-relatedness) in the world thus directly affects the domains of our responsibilities: caring for the environment is a function of our sense of interdependency. This sense also affects the scope of the quest for wellbeing: it can vary from narrow economic and material self-interest to planetary concerns. By reconnecting ourselves with nature, planetary wellbeing could be possible (see Figure 2).

Figure 2. Cycle of Connection (Norton 2012)



3. The Sustainability of a Needs-based Conceptualization of Wellbeing

Quite often when politicians and the media employ the word ‘wellbeing’¹, they are actually talking about ‘well-having’ (see Hopwood et al. 2005, Gough et al. 2007: 5). Moreover, wellbeing and standard of living or growth of the GDP are erroneously used as synonyms. This not only legitimizes the unending pursuit of economic growth but also makes a detour, because additions to wellbeing are sought as a by-product of gains in income. The ambiguity begins already in the highly influential Brundtland report which, despite its iconic needs-based definition of sustainable development, does not discuss what needs are or what their relation to wellbeing is (WCED 1987: 43, Gough 2014: 4).

¹ Some writers make a distinction between ‘welfare’ and ‘wellbeing’, saying the former refers to social protection in the form of state benefits (‘doing well’), and the latter to individual experiences (‘being well’). Wellbeing and welfare are, however, interdependent: the provision of social welfare is the context and condition for individual wellbeing. In other words, being well and doing well are ‘different aspects of an integrated understanding of the relationship between the individual and the social’. (Taylor 2011: 779–792.) This co-dependency is also the reason why we use only one word for wellbeing. (Another reason is that in many languages, including our own, one word is all there is.)

Instead, the fulfilment of needs as material necessities is associated with economic growth (Rauschmayer et al. 2011). The report, for example states that '[m]any essential human needs can be met only through goods and services provided by industry', which means that wellbeing is linked with a 'continuing flow of wealth from industry' (WCED 1987: 16). To reach sustainability, it is clearly necessary to take a leap to the direct pursuit of wellbeing (see Stutz 2006) and to adopt a broader sense of human needs.

What kind of conceptualization of wellbeing, then, could be put up as the signpost for the road to sustainability? What kind of wellbeing should social work promote? We believe that the conceptualization should rest on a wide, relational understanding of humanity that reconnects humans with nature, each other and themselves, and that it should be grounded in need theories.

There are many variations to need theories. In short, they share the idea that wellbeing is always related to the fulfilment of essential human needs. Needs are typically seen as innate and universal (Ryan and Sapp 2007). There are both material and less tangible needs, as well as intrapersonal and interpersonal needs. To say that something is needed implies an end that is considered good. (Allardt and Uusitalo 1972.) Not actualizing needs may for this reason cause serious harm (Doyal and Gough 1991: 42).

How needs are realized has inevitable social and ecological consequences. There is hence an increasing awareness of the importance of a more thorough understanding of needs in the sustainability context (Rauschmayer et al. 2011, Gough 2014). We, too, claim that a needs-based conceptualization of wellbeing is central for sustainability and the ecosocial transition for the following reasons:

First, need theories emphasize our neediness and dependency. Neediness is a quality that does not really fit into the human exemptionalism paradigm. It is, nevertheless, a fact of life that humans are always dependent on other humans and the surrounding world. There is nothing negative about this. As John O'Neill maintains, 'there is hubris in the failure to acknowledge our dependence on natural processes'. In this light, the concept of needs is useful in drawing attention to the vulnerability that is constitutive of all life forms – and the natural starting point for social work. Acknowledging this dependency is also critical for the basic concerns with sustainability. (O'Neill 2011: 38, 39.)

Need theories have been criticized for not recognizing human agency and autonomy and for representing humans as passive respondents to needs calling for satisfaction (e.g., Sen 2013). However, although needs are based on biological and genetic factors, there is no reason for seeing needs as mere stimuli leading to predestined behaviour, and need theories do not rule out the fact that human beings are active agents (O'Neill 2011). It is, on the contrary, our very neediness that makes us active. Abraham Maslow, maybe the most influential theorist of human needs and motivation, sees the actualization of needs as the goal of human action and as an important positive motive of our behaviour (Maslow 1943, Maslow 2011: 29, 33). The notion of agency is consequently the basis for genuine individual wellbeing (Taylor 2011). Comprehension of this active quality of realizing needs is essential for the conceptualization of wellbeing we present in the next section.

We share the belief that the most promising approaches to wellbeing are action-oriented and focus on connecting underlying human needs to current problems and possibilities (Dodds 1997). It is crucial to emphasize the positive potential of human beings – a perspective present in the research on human capabilities (e.g., Sen 1999), but sometimes neglected in the needs-based wellbeing research. Attention is then paid to what people lack (deprivation), rather than to how they could actualize their potentials and capacities. For this reason, it is important to bear in mind the twofold character of needs as deprivation and as potential (Max-Neef et al. 1991), i.e. the distinction between deficiency needs

and growth needs (Maslow 2011: 30). The fulfilment of deficiency needs is also an active undertaking, as in the case of a poor peasant tilling the soil for survival.

Second, need theories help us to see that the actualization of needs is both a social and an ecological issue. Even though needs are linked to individual psychological and spiritual wellbeing, the way they are realized is a thoroughly social issue. Individual and social wellbeing are mutually dependent, and states of wellbeing (or illbeing) are continually produced in the interplay between social, political, economic and cultural processes. Wellbeing should therefore be seen as a relational and dynamic process and in relation to development as ‘good change’. (Gough et al. 2007: 5, 15–16.) In this relational view, the key issue is which types of practices, policies, and institutions are constitutive of which kinds of wellbeing (see Taylor 2011). The issue of wellbeing hence becomes an ecosocial question of structuring our social and economic institutions sustainably (see also Dodds, 1997.) Wellbeing will then truly be seen as a function of the whole system (see O’Hara and Lyon 2014: 114).

Conceiving wellbeing as the relational fulfilment of needs captures the nature and seriousness of the ethical obligations we owe to the current and the future generations, as well as to the non-human world (see O’Neill 2011, Gough 2014). Understanding the social–ecological dependency of the realization of needs also gives due credit to politics. There is no escaping the importance of the political nature of wellbeing: in the pursuit of sustainability, politics, needs and wellbeing converge (see Max-Neef et al. 1991).

When speaking about the political nature of actualizing needs, it is important to make one conceptual clarification. There is a fundamental difference between needs and the satisfiers of those needs. Universal need theories state that basic needs are the same in all cultures and in all times. What changes over time and through cultures are the ways of meeting them. (Max-Neef et al. 1991.) For this reason, politics cannot change our needs, but it can change how needs are actualized: whether sustainably or by squandering natural resources and polluting the planet. For instance the need for belonging can be actualized by going on a shopping spree together or by community gardening.

Third, need theories emphasize the difference between needs and wants. The precondition of the ecosocial transition is that humans begin to steer their action by their needs and not their wants. This entails a big conceptual shift, which is abandoning the dominant language of wants and preferences in favour of needs. The former are what *homo economicus* so desperately wishes to satisfy, whereas – at least ideally – *homo iunctus*, a being more in touch with oneself, aims at actualizing his or her needs. The language of needs hence applies to the human being as a whole, going beyond the conventional economic rationale (Max-Neef et al. 1991: 23). We trust this makes the shift from wants to needs a possible one.

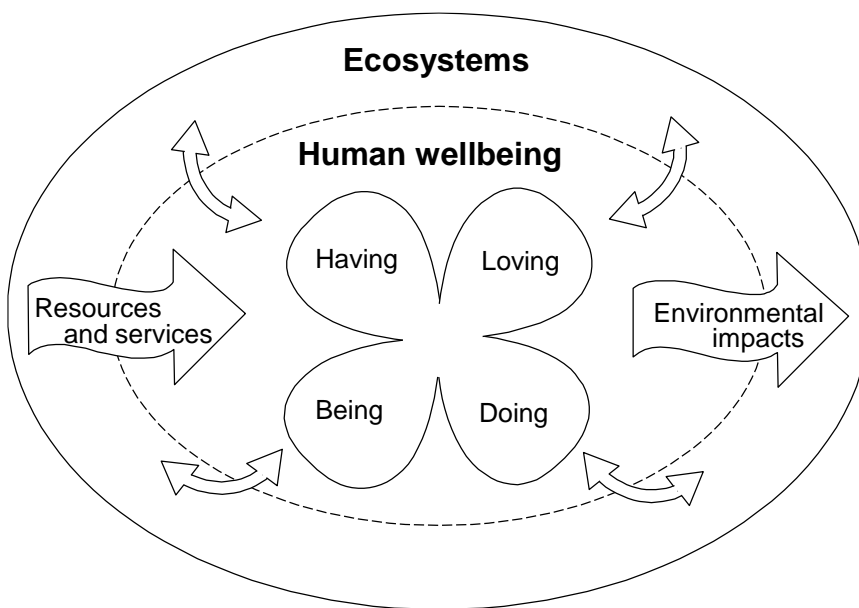
4. The Relational Conception of Wellbeing and Its Role in the Ecosocial Transition

Currently, most wellbeing and need theories are anthropocentrically biased, and dependency of human activities on the ecosystem has not been truly realized. It is therefore important to revise the theories of wellbeing so that they are solidly grounded in the human–nature relationship and in an understanding of the biophysical limits of human action. Social work may be less biased, since it has for some decades already operated within a theoretical framework of person-in-environment (Norton 2012). However, this has usually been understood in a limited sense addressing the social, political, and economic environments, with little emphasis on the natural environment (e.g., Gray and Coates 2012). A key aspect of the transformative change needed in social work is accordingly the expansion of the person-in-environment framework to incorporate ecological concerns (e.g., Besthorn 2012). A less anthropocentric view of social work places social work in a relationship with the natural world –

or rather, fosters the understanding that there is no separate nature that social work should take into account in its interventions, as it is itself a part of nature (Närhi and Matthies 2015).

In the relational view we propose, human wellbeing is nested within ecosystems (see Figure 1). This means that human wellbeing is reliant on the resources and services provided by ecosystems and that human activities have an impact on them. Relationality also means that human wellbeing is perceived as a whole formed by interrelated dimensions.

Figure 1. The Relational View of Wellbeing (Helne and Hirvilammi 2015)



We owe our conceptualization of wellbeing to Erik Allardt (1976: 230–231), who in his needs-based wellbeing theory classifies needs into three groups on the basis of how they are satisfied – whether by material resources, by how people relate to each other, or by what an individual is and what he or she does in relation to society. He summarises these ‘central necessary conditions of human development and existence’ with the catchwords Having, Loving and Being (Allardt 1993: 89). We have complemented these categories with the catchword Doing. Allardt (1993) himself discusses Doing as a part of Being, but we see Doing as a fourth dimension of wellbeing, because the quality of human activities is a significant factor in both wellbeing and sustainability. We regard these four categories of needs – Having, Doing, Loving and Being – as the most fundamental dimensions of human wellbeing.

The four dimensions of wellbeing are interdependent, interrelated and interactive. With the exception of the need to remain alive, there is no fixed order of precedence in the actualization of needs. (Max-Neef et al. 1991, Max-Neef 2010, see also Ryan and Sapp 2007.) Applied to the multidimensional conceptualization of wellbeing, this means that the dimensions depict the totality that is necessary for actualizing human wellbeing. In other words, wellbeing manifests itself as a balanced relationship between the realization of all these needs on the different dimensions. This means that even if somebody ‘scores’ high on the dimension of Having, for example, it does not necessarily imply that the person is, on the whole, doing well. Splitting these dimensions is thus an analytic convenience.

In real life, the dimensions overlap, and many human activities fulfil several needs simultaneously. If somebody builds a house, for example, he or she may be actualizing his or her need for shelter (Having), the human need to be active (Doing), the need to provide for one's family (Loving), and the need to be creative and find a meaning in life (Being.) In slightly different words, for instance meaningful Doing can translate into Being, or Being finds its expression in Loving.

In the rest of this section, the focus is on the different dimensions of wellbeing and their transformative potential in the context of social work². To go back to what was discussed in the introduction, we argue that changes in practices – in this context the routine ways needs are actualized – are a key factor in the search for sustainability. The conceptualization we have presented could build the bedrock for social work and function as a catalyst for the ecosocial transition, because it provides guidelines for practices that may enhance sustainable wellbeing. We outline some social work practices for actualizing the needs of social work clients which could eventually contribute to the ecosocial transition of society. Given the scope of this text, the discussion remains tentative.

Having. The dimension of Having refers to actualizing needs through material resources provided by ecosystems. The needs of Having are met when people have an adequate standard of living and can get along in everyday life. Social work practices have traditionally aimed at providing sustenance for the underprivileged members of society, and this task will remain important. However, in society at large the planetary limits to Having have not been taken seriously enough, and additions to wellbeing have been sought by having more. This emphasis on material possessions is often felt bitterly in the lives of those who lack them. In a consumerist culture, relative deprivation causes social and mental problems, whereas in a culture where sufficiency is valued, the experiences of deprivation diminish. The social shift towards limiting unnecessary consumption and switching to sustainable and ethical consumption could come as a relief for those who already live frugally. Since natural resource consumption and carbon emissions are smaller in low-income households than in higher income groups, low-income households might even be seen as the forerunners of a sustainable way of living (see e.g., Lettenmeier et al. 2012).

The ecosocial transition is about changing the unviable sustenance practices through which humanity is enmeshed in the dynamics of the natural world (Haila 2009: 168, 172). Minimizing harmful environmental impacts is an essential part of this transition. Social workers could engage in this effort, and support practices that make it possible for people to live like ecosystems: taking little of their surroundings and putting back little as waste, recycling almost all materials, and living frugally in using energy and materials (Ehrenfeld 2008: 9, 105). Concrete ecosocial practices might, among other things, include energy saving advice and facilitating neighbourhood flea markets or organic food co-operatives. Structural changes are even more important. Social workers could promote structural changes towards more sustainable living environments by providing knowledge to politicians or planners about the everyday lives of their clients.

Doing. How to actualize the needs of Doing – how to do the right thing – is vital for both human wellbeing and sustainability. Different activities can either enhance sustainable wellbeing or be destructive for the persons themselves, other people, and the planet. For this reason, awareness of the impact of human actions is a key requirement for sustainable wellbeing. The dimension of Doing stresses the importance of human agency and the potential for individual and social transformation. As a competent and reflexive agent, a person is able to take responsibility and alter his or her routine practices (e.g., Sen 1999), making human agency our greatest asset in the ecosocial transition (see Davidson 2010: 1143).

² We have outlined a sketch of ecosocial policy practices in another article (Hirvilammi and Helne 2014).

In social work, clients are conceived as active agents in their own lives. Active participation increases wellbeing. It is clear, then, that social work practices should strive to empower people and support this agency, especially when the structures are unequal or unsustainable. One concrete way to do this is to question the present welfare to work policies and activation measures. Humans need to be engaged in meaningful activities, but not all work is beneficial to nature or to the people doing this work, and some jobs are downright harmful. Therefore, social work could support the various sustainable ways of actualizing the needs for Doing that social work clients are already involved in (by, for instance, being active members in civil society organisations). Basic income would provide useful support for these diverse and responsible ‘doings’.

Moreover, it is important to pay attention to routines and their impacts. In the context of the ecosocial transition, social workers face the challenge to examine their established professional practices, and to ask themselves if they should engage in social work in hitherto unknown ways, developing new professional ecosocial practices (see Powers, Chapter 18 in this book).

Loving. Sustainable wellbeing is relational by definition and depends on the quality of the interaction we have with each other and the natural world. The dominant idea of *homo economicus* hides from view a large area of care and dependence. Caring, however, is closely related to human needs and bears an enormous importance on the wellbeing of the individual, the community and the society as a whole – in total, on the wellbeing of the relational self. Loving and caring are powerful forces of action – forces also capable of inducing sustainability (see also Keough 2008). Care is consequently at the centre of the ecosocial transition and the new post-growth society.

Social work has a non-neglectable role in filling the current ‘deficiencies in compassion’ (Nussbaum 2010), because it can build networks and create places that bring people together. Community building increases the wellbeing of individuals, simultaneously enabling the ecosocial transition. Social workers engaged in local communities could form educational groups or support creating different forms of social economy, such as local currencies and time banks. Coalition building with transformative social movements is another fruitful practice for social work. (Peeters 2012; See Peeters, Chapter 5 in this book.)

Social relationships are vital for ensuring the needs for Loving, but let us not forget the importance of the natural environment and human–animal interaction. Loving includes the need to be in contact with nature and other species. This contact can be fortified by ecosocial practices and green care services, where the healing power of nature is appreciated. Social workers could, for instance, encourage their clients to take care of pets, to work in gardens or to wander in woods as coping mechanisms in hard times. Overall, social work has considerable opportunities for exploring the wellbeing benefits of human–nature interaction. (Norton 2012.) We believe that employing these practices could work as a catalyst for the ecosocial transition, because studies show that people’s experiences of the natural environment not only promote their wellbeing but also their pro-environmental orientations (Hinds and Sparks 2009). A close relationship with nature moreover fortifies our sense of the relational self, leading to a more sustainable way of life.

Being. The dimension of Being highlights that material needs are far less central to wellbeing than presumed in our ‘acquisitive society’ (Fromm 1997: 57). In the final analysis, the unsustainability of the current way of life can be explained by losing our rootedness, which actually means estrangement from Being. Ehrenfeld (2008: 52) has summarised the attributes of Being described by Maslow (2011). They include wholeness, perfection, completion, justice, aliveness, richness, simplicity, beauty, goodness, uniqueness, effortlessness, playfulness, truth, honesty, reality and self-sufficiency. Being can also be considered as one of the defining characteristics of health. (Maslow 2011: 129, 139.) How could these attributes be promoted in the context of social work?

Broadly taken, the words Being, Becoming and self-actualization are synonymous. Self-actualization refers to a person's ongoing development and growth toward a full functioning of all his or her capacities, full-humanness, wholeness of self and fulfilment of mission (Maslow 2011: 29, 45, 131.) The word *self-actualization* moreover highlights that Being is not a passive and vegetative state. On the contrary, people who are fully alive and awake are capable of engaging in concrete challenges (O'Hara and Lyon 2014: 112). The more awake and mindful individuals are, the less prone they are to habitual or 'automatic' functioning that may be harmful to themselves or the environment. Meditation and mindfulness training are useful techniques for promoting the ability to be present and aware of the consequences of one's action. Awareness may be especially valuable in facilitating the choice of behaviours that are consistent with one's needs and values. (Brown and Ryan 2003). There is growing evidence of the effectiveness of mindfulness and meditation in different contexts, such as improving psychosocial functioning and reducing drug use (e.g., Bowen et al. 2006). Mindfulness contributes to empowerment and increased awareness of one's habitual patterns and of one's environment, as well as an increased sense of connectedness with others, all of which can lead to both personal and social change (Hick and Furlotte 2009, Hick and Furlotte 2010). For these reasons, mindfulness is an important tool for social work. Social workers are already successfully using mindfulness in their practice. Its benefits occur on three levels: within the person; in micro-practice (direct interventions with individuals, families, groups and communities); and in mezzo- and macro-practice (community work and policy). (Hick 2009.)

6. Conclusions

To sum up, the relational conceptualization of wellbeing has several advantages:

- 1) In using just four catchwords for the dimensions of wellbeing, the conceptualization is concise and skirts the historically most common criticism of needs-based theories, namely that there can be an unending list of potential needs (see Ryan and Sapp 2007). The conceptualization could therefore serve as a unifying framework that yet respects the diversity and complexity of wellbeing (see Gasper 2004).
- 2) Since Having, Doing, Loving and Being can be seen as the most fundamental dimensions of human wellbeing, we trust that the conceptualization appeals intuitively to many people and could be applied in everyday life and social work.
- 3) The idea of the relational self at the core of the proposed conceptualization highlights altruism, ties to other people and society, and the dependence of the individual's wellbeing on the society he or she lives in (Maslow 2011: 5, 122.) The conceptualization is an important reminder of the fact that humans derive satisfaction from securing the needs of others – including other species. This 'self-recognition' (Piatek 2008: 94) is a counterargument for the prevailing economist dogma of human selfishness, and the concern for others is pivotal for both sustainability endeavours and social work. Further, the stress on the societal preconditions of wellbeing as well as the acknowledgment of the vulnerability we all have in common emphasize the responsibility of the state in securing the wellbeing of its citizens.
- 4) Overemphasizing the needs of Having results in sacrificing other needs and threatening the realization of the needs of Having itself (see Max-Neef et al. 1991). The relational conceptualization challenges the focus on Having, improving the visibility of less tangible needs. Particularly the difference between the need categories of Having and Being is crucial. While the former is based on consuming things that are diminished by use, the latter grows by practice (Fromm 1997: 90). Realizing this equals realizing that a sustainable society is capable of providing even more wellbeing

than current societies (see also Spillemaeckers et al. 2011). Focusing on the three other dimensions of wellbeing may even be an antidote to consumerism (see Dodds 1997). The decreasing role of Having may remove the stigma branded on social work clients, and may be able to bring into light the sustainable practices they might already be engaged in.

5) Importantly, contrary to the current dogma the conceptualization illuminates that economic growth is not a precondition of wellbeing, since it highlights that income and material resources cannot act as a proxy for the other dimensions of wellbeing.

6) The current consumerist culture is burdened with alienation and unrest, because it is not compatible with multifaceted human needs (see Ryan and Sapp 2007). Once humans get more in touch with their various needs, the likelihood of alienation lessens – and the chances of protests against the dominant cultural forms increase. At the moment, the need of self-realization – the urge to make art or take care of homeless animals, for instance – is in conflict with the dominant norms of employment. When living according to these inner callings is seen as a justified part of realizing one's needs and even supported by basic income, a more sustainable society shimmers on the horizon.

7) The relational conceptualization is capable of integrating everyday life and wellbeing into a broad framework of sustainability (see Hämäläinen 2014: 23). We are confident that a needs-based approach could be a means of addressing sustainability in a more appealing, motivating and encompassing way than the habitual approach of segregating sustainability into three dimensions (ecological, social and economic) (see also Rauschmayer et al. 2011). Besides being unappealing, the division is non-relational (Helne and Hirvilammi 2015). Moreover, until now the policies of sustainable development have tended to circumvent the qualitative aspects of our existence, preferring quantifiable measures of system performance. The policies have, in other words, neglected the dynamic evolutionary and transformative drivers of sustainability: love, creativity and improvisation – in our terms Loving, Doing and Being. (See Keough 2008.)

In this chapter, we have reflected upon how a more sustainable conceptualization of wellbeing might contribute to the ecosocial transition, social policy and social work. We believe that the conceptualization could also serve as the template for the emerging disciplines of ecosocial policy and ecosocial work (see Norton 2012). At the same time, we suggest that it might be useful to see these disciplines as part of the emerging transdisciplinary sustainability science, and also regard them as transformative research (Matthies, Chapter 2 in this book; Elsen, Chapter 4 in this book).

Ecosocial policy, ecosocial work as well as sustainability science are built on the acknowledgement of the interdependency of the ecosystems and society. These disciplines are normative and intrinsically moral: they are sensitive to both human injustice and the vulnerability of the ecosystems. There is thus a sense of urgency to these disciplines, and a concomitant call for action. (See Ziegler and Ott 2011.) Indeed, never before have the interventions of the professionals in these fields been as pressing an imperative as today. However, if we are to become truly engaged in the ecosocial transition, we must leave the position of 'domesticated' professionals and instead adopt the role of transformational professionals, with a focus on social change. This, in turn, requires a willingness to engage in a profound process of social learning, and even a willingness to join social movements to reach political ends. (Peeters 2012.) An important part of this 'ecosocial work' is to constantly stir awareness about the widespread suffering in the world and to promote a sane conception of wellbeing in order to show that we have nothing to lose and everything to gain.

The ecology movement has been characterized as a resistance movement (Rodman 1980: 68). The same might be said about ecosocial work and sustainability science. Acting according to the prevalent norms grounded in the non-relational human exemptionalist paradigm is one of the root causes of

unsustainability (see Ehrenfeld 2008). We therefore conclude this chapter by daring you and ourselves to break these norms.

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