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Balancing needs: young unemployed Finnish adults' discourse on well-being and its relation to the sustainability transformation

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ABSTRACT

Meeting human needs while respecting ecological limits is one of the daunting tasks of the sustainability transformation. To succeed in it, it is vital to discuss, to reconstruct, and to deconstruct the dominant discourse on well-being. How young people understand well-being is a particularly important issue since they are the prospective harbingers of change. However, the public discourse on youth is often problem-oriented, especially regarding youth not in employment or education. In this article, the gaze is directed at one such group. Group-interview data of young unemployed Finnish adults are analyzed to explore how they conceptualize well-being and how this understanding relates to the sustainability transformation. We interpret the data with the help of a need-based theory of sustainable, multidimensional, and relational well-being (the Having-Doing-Loving-Being framework). The study demonstrates that the young adults' discourse is compatible with the framework, and differs distinctly from the prevailing policy discourse on well-being by giving far less weight to monetary aspects, and by its emphasis on meaningfulness, ethical activities, and connectedness with nature. The article concludes with implications for the sustainability transformation regarding consumption, employment policies, social and health services, biodiversity and conservation, positive sustainability, and the theory of sustainable well-being.

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Introduction

Never before in human history has the hazard of anthropogenic ecological annihilation loomed closer. The climate crisis is intensifying, ecological overshoot continues to grow, biodiversity loss accelerates, plastic waste continues to accumulate, and so forth (e.g., Bradshaw et al. 2021). Yet in the public and policy discourse, attention is often focused on other issues, such as the so-called youth problem. In the hegemonic European policy discourse, increasing attention has been paid to the category of young people described as “not in education, employment, or training” (NEET) (e.g., Holte 2018). These individuals are mainly represented as a risk or at risk (see, e.g., Follesø 2015), and it is therefore deemed necessary to “activate” them to secure their entrance into the labor market. The aim of activating and integrating these young people into the consumerist work society is taken for granted without considering whether all jobs and employment possibilities are beneficial for either their well-being or ecological sustainability. A major motive behind this hegemonic discourse is securing economic growth—or nowadays, “sustainable and inclusive growth”—despite the fact that economic growth (with or

without a modifier) has solved neither ecological nor social problems; in fact, quite the contrary holds true (e.g., Cetin and Bakirtas 2020; Hickel and Kallis 2020). Yet in the dominant policy discourse, economic growth is considered indispensable for augmenting well-being (e.g., Finnish Government 2019, 14; Llena Nozal, Martin, and Murtin 2019), the rationale for this being linked to a materialistic understanding of well-being.

The accumulated ecological problems do not bode well for the future of humanity, and no one faces this dismal prospect as palpably as the younger generations. It is thus no wonder that young adults experience climate and eco-anxiety (Nairn 2019; Pihkala 2020; Wu, Snell, and Samji 2020), which diminishes their well-being and may raise doubts about the hegemonic economy-oriented discourse on well-being. However, what well-being means for young adults is seldom discussed in the context of sustainability transformation. What would a “good life” mean for young people on the threshold of their adult and working life? Finding an answer to this question is essential because how well-being is constructed and pursued—on both the personal and societal levels—always has ecological and societal impacts: it can either mitigate or fuel the ecological

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crisis, and it can either keep us on the current rocky road or open a pathway to a better future. Due to the transformative power of language, the deconstruction of well-being may in fact be a decisive step in the cultural transformation toward sustainability (e.g., Brown and Vergragt 2016).

In this article, we study young unemployed Finnish adults' discourse on well-being and its relation to the sustainability transformation. We analyze group interview data collected among young adults (aged 20–29) taking part in activation programs in Finland in 2016 (see also Helne and Hirvilammi 2021; Hirvilammi et al. 2019). The purpose of our study is to explore how this subgroup of young unemployed adults conceptualizes well-being and to interpret their responses with the help of our framework of sustainable and relational well-being, which we have thus far discussed on a mainly theoretical level (Helne 2019, 2021; Helne and Hirvilammi 2015, 2017, 2019; Hirvilammi and Helne 2014). The theory comprises a multidimensional framework that identifies four dimensions of well-being: Having, Doing, Loving, and Being (HDLB).

When it comes to the prospects of sustainability transformation, our interviewees who officially belong to the NEET category form a particularly interesting group since they are usually represented through their deficits rather than their potential. They are, consequently, portrayed as marginalized persons likely to engage in risky behavior rather than noteworthy political actors (see, e.g., Thompson 2011; Yates and Payne 2006). Consequently, they are not the most obvious group of young people expected to lead the way in the sustainability transformation (e.g., Brown and Vergragt 2016, 313). On the contrary, discussions of the agency of youth at the margins have mainly focused on analyzing the factors that hinder their attachment to education and working life (Rikala 2020, 3). To direct attention to the agency of young unemployed adults, we shift the focus from their problems to their notions of attaining well-being.

The article is structured as follows. In the next section, we expound on the HDLB framework and its theoretical underpinnings in the context of transdisciplinary research on sustainable well-being. In the third section, we describe our data and analytical approach. In the fourth section and its subsections, we present our findings on each dimension of well-being with a view to sustainability. We conclude with the implications of the analysis for the sustainability transformation.

Research on sustainable well-being and the Having-Doing-Loving-Being framework

The research literature on well-being is voluminous as well as diverse (see, e.g., Gasper 2004, 2007).

Until recently, there has, nonetheless, been a serious lacuna, namely the interconnection between well-being and nature. Recent years have, however, seen the blossoming of the field of sustainable well-being, which connects research on well-being, nature, and sustainability (e.g., Kjell 2011; McGregor 2014). A large part of this effort is closely related to need-based theories of well-being (e.g., Koch, Buch-Hansen, and Fritz 2017; Lamb and Steinberger 2017; Rauschmayer and Omann 2015), the best known of which are the theories of Maslow ([1954] 1970, [1971] 1993), Max-Neef (1992), and Doyal and Gough (1991). The work of Max-Neef and Doyal and Gough has been of particular interest in recent discussions in the context of sustainability, consumption, and well-being (e.g., Brand-Correa et al. 2020; Büchs and Koch 2017; Gough 2017; Guillen-Royo 2016; Guillen-Royo, Guardiola, and Garcia-Quero 2017; O'Neill et al. 2018).

Our research has contributed to this field by introducing the need-based HDLB framework of sustainable and relational well-being. We are much indebted to the well-being theory of the sociologist Erik Allardt, in which he summarized the “central necessary conditions of human development and existence” with the “catchwords” Having, Loving, and Being (Allardt 1993, 89). Allardt discusses Doing as part of Being, but we have given Doing full status as the fourth dimension of well-being.

We originally began developing the HDLB framework based on Allardt's theory without reference to Max-Neef's (1992) work. However, the HDLB categories resemble Max-Neef's “needs according to existential categories,” namely Having, Doing, Being, and Interacting. Our framework differs from his human-needs matrix by its simplicity: we have four need categories, whereas beside the four existential categories Max-Neef's matrix includes nine “needs according to axiological categories” (subsistence, protection, affection, understanding, participation, leisure, creation, identity, and freedom). Compared to this listing, we believe that the HDLB framework offers a more manageable research setting and allows for greater freedom of interpretation. It is also easy to disseminate the gist of the framework to politicians, the media, and the general public, which may be propitious to advancing the sustainability transformation.

Traditionally, need theories have not paid much attention to nature (e.g., Doyal and Gough 1991; Lederer 1980). However, as in other theories of sustainable well-being, a central trait of the HDLB framework is its strong emphasis on the dependency of human well-being on nature. The framework's inalienable foundation is the ecosystemic embeddedness of human well-being and respect for nature's

intrinsic value. It endorses the idea of “well-being in coexistence,” that is, “human life quality with respect for all life of other actors, species and systems over time” (Bonnedahl and Heikkurinen 2019, 5). Even though other research on sustainable well-being underlines the nature-dependency of need satisfaction, no other theory has, as far as we know, rooted the different dimensions of well-being in their ecological foundation. The ecosystemic embeddedness of the HDLB approach and the concomitant attention given to the relationship between humans and other species also differentiates this theory from other relational theories of well-being in which relationality usually covers only human-to-human relationships (e.g., Atkinson 2013; Cottam 2011; White 2017).¹

The ecosystemic embeddedness of well-being means that the need category of *Having*—the need for subsistence—is perceived as dependent on the material resources provided by ecosystems. This brings in the element of sufficiency: well-being requires that the need of Having is adequately met. In Fromm’s terms ([1976] 2011, 69–70), the need for “existential having” is then satisfied. Above that point, the satisfaction of material needs becomes superfluous, or excessive Having. In other words, when well-being and sustainability are connected, there is a limit to Having. These lower and upper limits of Having come close to the idea of “sustainable consumption corridors” (Di Giulio and Fuchs 2014). They are defined by minimum standards that allow every individual to live a good life and maximum standards for any individual’s use of resources. Notably, the focus is not primarily on consumer goods but on the needs to which those goods are linked (Di Giulio and Fuchs 2014; Gough 2020; Guillen-Royo 2020). Likewise, in the HDLB framework, the upper limit of Having not only refers to environmental limits but is also need-based: there is only a certain amount of material goods any individual truly needs. Here the distinction between needs and wants becomes pivotal (see, e.g., Doyal and Gough 1984; Helne and Hirvilammi 2019). Needs are innate, whereas wants are externally imposed.² Not satisfying one’s wants causes no harm, unless feeling frustrated can be counted as such, whereas serious harm follows if one cannot gratify one’s needs (Doyal and Gough 1991, 42). Needs are also satiable, whereas human wants are endless (e.g., Gough 2017, 46).

Since ours is a theory of sustainable well-being, the need category of *Doing* refers to meaningful activities that are not detrimental to one’s natural or social environment. Defining Doing as a need category stems from the Aristotelian tradition in which well-being (*eudaimonia*) is “activity [emphasis

added] in accordance with virtue;” moreover, virtuous activities are not understood by Aristotle as dull duties but as deeply gratifying (Aristotle [384–322] 2016, 20–21, 166).

Again, due to the ecosystemic embeddedness of the HDLB approach, the need category of *Loving* differs from the most common ways of defining relationships pertinent to well-being by including relations not only with other humans but also with other species, with nature, and even with future generations. Loving also includes the relationship with oneself, because one can hardly engage in a balanced relationship with others unless one first has achieved that goal with oneself.

Finally, the category of *Being* encompasses physical and mental health and self-actualization. In its broadest sense, Being is a mode of existence involving presence, oneness, imaginativeness, growth, self-knowledge, and freedom to be oneself, among other somewhat ineffable experiences (see Fromm [1976] 2011, 139–140).

Besides ecosystemic rootedness, another significant manifestation of the relationality of the HDLB framework is that the dimensions of well-being are treated as an interrelated whole, whereby well-being manifests itself as a balanced relationship between the actualization of the four categories of need. The dimensions also overlap, and many activities simultaneously fulfill several needs; to use Max-Neef’s (1992) term, they are synergic satisfiers of needs. From this perspective, the HDLB approach highlights both the indispensability of balancing all dimensions and the potential tensions that can arise when striving to meet them.

Context, data, and methods

Our data were gathered in late 2016 in six group interviews with young adults participating in activation programs run by public or non-profit organizations.³ The interviews took place in five cities in Finland (and also the young people were city dwellers). The overall context of our analysis is the Finnish welfare state with its comprehensive social security system.

Since the interviews were part of an earlier research project with a focus on unemployment and ecosocial innovations (e.g., Stamm et al. 2020), the activation programs chosen were oriented toward promoting sustainability. For example, one group interview took place at a social foundation involved in material recycling. Even though the degree of voluntariness of taking part in a particular program varied (so the young people may or may not have been ecologically oriented), choosing these programs

may have increased the occurrence of environmental concerns in the data.

A total of 29 young adults between 20 and 29 years of age were interviewed; 11 were male and 18 were female. All participants lived in a precarious financial situation and semi-financial independence from their families. Some had earlier been employed in full-time jobs, but most had only limited experience of part-time, temporary, or seasonal work. The interviewees' educational background varied from elementary school graduation to vocational schooling and, in one case, university studies. Most were unmarried, and only one respondent reported being a parent. The majority lived alone, with one participant residing with his parents. Since the interviewees took part in activation programs for young unemployed adults, their sources of income consisted of social benefits (different combinations of labor-market subsidy, basic unemployment allowance, social assistance, and housing allowance). The number of participants in each group varied from 2 to 8, and the length of the interviews ranged from 65 minutes to 2 hours and 22 minutes. The interviews were recorded and transcribed. In total, the interview data contains 171 pages of transcript material that was coded manually.

In addition to open questions, the interview protocol contained 14 statements related to youth unemployment, work orientation, the relationship between happiness and income level, nature's role in well-being, and the social security system. The statements were used as a discussion stimulus, or "provocative thesis" (Flick 2006, 195), to encourage the participants to exchange ideas on different prevailing discourses. For the purposes of this article, we concentrate largely on the data from those parts of the group discussions that were kindled by open questions on well-being, or were inspired by the following statements: "The higher the standard of living one has, the happier one is;" "Work is an essential and important part of life;" "The economy is primary for well-being because everything depends on having money;" and "Nature is the foundation of human well-being because without it people cannot survive."

Our analysis was premised on relational and critical constructionism (e.g., Burr 2000; Hosking 2011). Both approaches emphasize that there are several competing systems of meaning in society, which puts the question of power and discursive power struggles on the agenda. Since we were interested in meanings and discursive struggles, our lens for reading the data was critical discourse analysis (e.g., Fairclough 2010). In line with relational ontology, instead of analyzing individual attitudes, we were interested in exploring shared meanings and how

the speakers' utterances related to public discourses (see Wetherell 2001, 15, 17). We understood regularities in the data as interpretative repertoires: "internally consistent, bounded language units" (Wetherell and Potter 1988, 172).

With regard to the discourse on well-being, the analysis proceeded so that we extracted all statements that had to do with well-being and then classified them according to the four dimensions of well-being. After this, we analyzed how the young adults constructed the meaning of well-being on each dimension to determine the kinds of interpretative repertoires that could be found on each of them. In the next section, we present our findings with respect to how their discourse might favor the sustainability transformation.

The meanings of well-being

Multidimensionality

In the HDLB approach, well-being is defined holistically and multidimensionally, and this was also the case with the young adults' discourse. Since meaning-making in group discussions is collective, the list of dimensions was often constructed collectively and cumulatively, as in the following extract:

Interviewer: So, what do you think well-being or the good life consists of?

Vilja⁴: Well, good health, keeping oneself in shape (*Being*), friends and family (*Loving*), and ...

Joni: Self-esteem (*Being*).

Ville: Living the life you want to live (*Being*).

Anni: Meaningful activities (*Doing*).

Sini: And a proper balance between work and fun. You can't live so that one or the other is absent (*Doing/Being*).

The construction of well-being in group interviews reflects the participants' shared values. Given the hegemonic economy-oriented and materialistic discourse on well-being, it is noteworthy how the young adults replied when asked to describe the good life and what contributes to well-being. The discussion often began with dimensions other than Having. The next interviewee made her process of meaning-making explicit:

Katja: First, I thought I'd mention things like having a roof over your head, food, clothes to wear, and being able to wash yourself (*Having*)... But one has to have a way to express oneself and one's feelings, also one's bad feelings, to other people. We are, after all, partly social animals, and it's good to have people with whom you can share things (*Being, Loving*).

In the next utterance, the material constituents of well-being are also not the first things mentioned:

Interviewer: What is the good life?

Juha: It's having at least a certain number of people who care for you and whom you care for in your life. Being at peace, without conflicts (*Loving*)... Also, physical and psychological health. Psychological health is actually more important, because it's not as bad if your leg hurts as when something's wrong here [points at his head] (*Being*). So that's one thing. Of course, an apartment where you feel comfortable and like living in... So that's about it. And maybe some kind of source of stable income. I don't know. Good food and things like that (*Having*).

The interviewees appear united in their construction of the multidimensional and relational features of well-being. Well-being is a whole in which all dimensions play a role. This was particularly conspicuous when the respondents deliberated on the role of work (*Doing*) in their lives. They wished that they could find a job that provided the possibility of self-realization (*Being*), was ethical, and benefited others (*Loving*). In addition, they wished that their future job could guarantee a sufficient income to support themselves and their potential families, including pets (*Having*). Maria's definition summarizes all this: to her, well-being means "living the life you want to live." Clearly, well-being for these young people differs significantly from being a pawn of other people's wishes or consumerist forces.

Having: moderation will do

The interviewees mainly lived on social benefits, the level for which they considered to be too low. They struggled to make ends meet. The fact that most respondents emphasized that they only hoped for a moderate disposable income and expressed no wish of getting rich might therefore come as a surprise. This finding, however, matches the Aristotelian underpinning of the HDLB framework in which a moderate standard of living and a moderate income are viewed as a sufficient condition of well-being.

Naturally, the interviewees spoke of the material satisfiers of Having (food, a decent amount of money, a place to live, and so forth) as conditions of well-being. Without them, life would be hard:

Tiina: Not having money efficiently gnaws at your mental well-being and causes tremendous stress. You have to count every cent; you have 1 euro 50 cents in your bank account, and the rent is due. There's a feeling of semi-horror.

Interviewer: And that's stressful.

Tiina: Yes, the stress is terrible. I'm not saying, though, that everything depends on having money, but you need some kind of safety, a backup.

In these statements, the function of money is to guarantee basic security. A decent income is

essential for avoiding distress. The way Tiina describes the balance between the dimensions is noteworthy: the feeling of safety that money brings is a precondition of mental health. Existential Having is thus connected to the Being dimension of well-being.

Most of the interviewees worried about their financial predicament but added that the amount of money they would need to manage better is very reasonable. The young adults thus draw a line between existential and excessive Having. Both Tiina and Lauri, for example, talk about "basic things," and how getting the bills paid would suffice. Being able to do more is a "plus," an appealing option but not really necessary.

During the interviews, the participants discussed one of the controversial premises of the hegemonic economic discourse: "The higher the standard of living one has, the happier one is." The majority felt that happiness comes from within and "cannot be bought with money" (Saana). Money is necessary for survival but not for happiness:

Juha: A really high standard of living doesn't necessarily guarantee that you are going to be happy. You can have problems even then. As I said, money doesn't bring happiness. However, you are less pissed off. I mean, it's more annoying to be moneyless and sad than sad with money.

Even so, there is another side of the coin to being penniless. Emmi talks about how financial struggles can stimulate personal growth "in a good direction." She believes that had she not been forced to think about how to make ends meet, she might have remained in the "trap of taught values." The optimal situation for some young people would be to skip thinking about money, because "it is a really stupid thing" (Maiju), and simply to go on with their normal—and modest—life.

Even though the interviewees generally shared the view that having money makes life more care-free, they, perhaps surprisingly, also talked about the flipside of being rich. Not only poverty but also wealth can cause worries, such as how to preserve or increase one's assets. Rich people, too, have family issues, may be lonely, and face uncertainty about whether they are loved for themselves or their money. For example, Vilja remarks that a rich person can be lonely and isolated whereas a poor person can be happier if "surrounded by other people and community spirit." Excessive Having is thus seen as one potential obstacle to fulfilling the need of Loving. Moreover, the notion of "poor rich people" confirms that young adults do not see actualizing needs in the dimension of Having as a sufficient condition for well-being but hold that meeting other needs is (at least) equally necessary.

The fact that most of the respondents had no plans to make a fortune may be related to their less than rosy image of the lives of wealthy people and to the critical stance toward consumer capitalism that was conspicuous in the data. Tuomas, for example, is painfully aware of the footprints of consumption on our planet:

Every act of consumption leaves a trace. Everything you buy hurts someone. If you buy food, some animal's home has been trampled over to clear a field. And if you buy electronics, somebody has been digging for minerals with a gun pointing at his head.

The excerpt demonstrates the speaker's consciousness of the ramifications of the human pursuit of well-being: every form of material need satisfaction has ecological or social consequences—even the satisfaction of existential Having. This makes Tuomas feel guilty and worried, which creates a link between Having and Loving. For him, any act of buying is stressful, to the extent that he wonders whether he is “emotionally restricted.” This kind of self-doubt is possible only in a capitalist society and is an illuminating example of how consumerism can burden the mental health of sensitive persons (see, e.g., Kasser and Kanner 2004). A sensibility to the well-being effects of unsustainable and unethical production was also present when the interviewees expressed their concern about the t-shirts “made by a small child in China” (Ville) or about planned obsolescence, which “forces us to consume, though we otherwise would not want to” (Maiju).

Doing: meaningfulness and beneficence

Young adults are in a phase of life where they are looking for their place in society, and this is particularly true for those who are unemployed. In our data, there is no question of not wanting to work:

Emmi: I can't even imagine going on for a long time without having a job — or something like work, some kind of framework, structure, relationships, expectations, hopes, goals, all kinds of things I associate with working.

Working—if one is lucky to be in the right place—enriches social life, facilitates personal growth, and promotes mental health. As Juha puts it, “If one doesn't have a job, one can often become a little depressed, left alone with one's thoughts.” However, as with Emmi above, work is often understood in a broad sense: “work” need not be paid and can refer to any work-like activities.

In the young adults' discourse, work that feels meaningful and is consistent with one's personal values is highly appreciated. For instance, for Markus, “work *has to be* meaningful,” and Essi's

dream job is something in which she would “be able to spread well-being to other people as well.” The wish for self-realization was expressed by many of the respondents. For Joni, ideal work is “something that corresponds with your strengths and interests, and where you can actualize yourself.” When this is the case, one “forgets to watch the clock” (Markus), reaching flow—or, in HDLB terms—a mode of Being. Of course, a regular income is necessary, but again its role is not described as supreme: “I've come to the conclusion that it's more important that my work is consistent with my values, and that I could help other people” (Petra).

In the previous comments, and more widely in the data, the ethical dimension of Doing is evident. The young people want to benefit other people—but not those whose activities are deemed questionable:

Vilja: I don't shirk work, but I am really choosy in who I want to work for. I kind of wouldn't want to fatten anybody else's big pay packet anymore... I'd like to be useful to somebody, but certainly not to any capitalist prick.

Being useful is a wish that appears often in the young adults' speech. In Vilja's comment, the need to actualize the need of Doing in a meaningful way has a political tone, a sensitivity to the unequal features of capitalism. In general, young adults appear to be quite aware of where and for whom they want to work. They name occupations they would rather avoid because they are unethical: forestry, lobbying for oil companies, telemarketing, and advertising.

Having to work in a place that is contrary to one's values is considered harmful both personally and more broadly. There is a risk of “burnout” (Kaisa), or, as Emmi says, doing things “half-heartedly. And that doesn't do good for anybody, or anything.” In both comments, the connection between Doing and Being (in its health sense) is clear. Emmi appears to be arguing that the fate of having to do meaningless work reverberates out into society since it weakens the quality of work. This insight scarcely figures in the activation discourse in which any work—even work that is ecologically damaging—is seen as valuable for both individual and society (Stamm et al. 2020). The interviewees do not paint a very bright picture of how much enterprises or institutions actually care about sustainability or people's well-being:

Tuomas: I think that working life is very tightly connected to consumer society, partly because the idea of the consumer society is to produce much more than we need... It seems to me that we would not actually have to work nearly as much as we do to satisfy our needs... And considering the limited natural resources, I feel that the system is very unsustainable.

Tiina: People are like consumer goods to businesses; they whip them to work harder for maximum output. And after that, if you burn out, they're like, "Shoo, we don't want you here any longer."

The above comments describe a tension, or even conflict, between young people's and adult society's expectations and objectives, perhaps indicating the beginning of a power struggle whose outcome remains to be seen.

Despite the weight the interviewees accord to useful work, they offer a caveat that involves the balance of well-being:

Laura: Work is essential, yes, but not necessarily the most important thing. It is also a counterweight to free time and life outside work. A situation in which I'd be working all the time sounds awful... Even if it involved something really important, like nature or well-being, I wouldn't be able to do it.

There is a limit to everything, even purposeful work. In Laura's statement, as in the HDLB framework, the good life is balanced. Other interviewees also express that they "need breaks from everything" (Aleksi). Sometimes these breaks, such as hiking alone for a fortnight—which is actually another form of Doing—give space for opening up to other people, "better balance" (Vilja), or the search for deeper meanings and values. Doing (or not Doing) thus merges with Loving and Being.

Loving: a two-way street

As John Donne wrote, "No man is an island, entire of itself." Our young interviewees were no exception. In their discourse, other people are construed as invaluable sources of well-being. The support of family and friends, whether through concrete financial help or mental support, is crucial for coping and well-being. The respondents also stressed the importance of networks and Facebook groups for recycling things, such as clothes and furniture, or buying food in larger quantities and sharing it: "I ask my friends to drop by and check out my extra stuff, and vice versa" (Emmi). This kind of mutual exchange of goods and services diminishes consumption, which bodes well for sustainability.

Animal companions also play a central role, particularly as they are "therapeutic for people with mental health problems and for all" (Lotta), and for "lonely people or people living alone" (Lauri). Some young people talked sadly about how their limited financial means prevented them from keeping a pet, while the most dedicated animal lovers cut down on their own expenses to feed their pets. The compassionate and benevolent characteristics of Loving were often expressed emphatically: "At least for me,

it brings well-being to see that other people feel good" (Annika).

However, other people can sometimes be a problem. This was, in fact, another way of speaking about Loving in the data. In this context, fellow humans who "offload their bad feelings on you" (Juuso) were depicted as obstacles to well-being. For good or ill, loving is relational, as is speaking. As Laura says, "excessive negativity" in social intercourse decreases the well-being of others; a remark well worth heeding.

Being: being fully human—in nature

In the HDLB framework, Being refers, simply put, to health and self-actualization. Maria's definition of well-being corresponds with this notion: for her, the good life means that "a person feels good, has zest for life, can go on, and lives for something." In the young adults' discourse, health is an integral part of well-being and is much more essential than money. For instance, Kaisa maintains that she would "trade working for health any day, to be unemployed and healthy... Losing your health is far worse than not having money."

As we wrote in the theory section above, Being involves presence, oneness, imaginativeness, growth, self-knowledge, and the freedom to be oneself. All these elements can be found in the data. The young adults talk about the significance of "self-esteem" (Joni), "goals and visions" (Anu), "seeing life's good things" (Annika), "peace" (Otto), "simplicity" (Maiju), avoiding hurrying and finding "empty space" (Emmi), and "being present in the moment" (Saana). Being is related to mindfulness, the promotion of which may lead to greater personal well-being and more sustainable ways of life (e.g., Ericson, Kjønstad, and Barstad 2014).

In the young adults' discourse, nature quite literally played a vital role in enabling the experiences cited above. The interviewees enumerated various well-being effects of nature in a way that corresponds to research results (e.g., Capaldi, Dopko, and Zelenski 2014): being in nature is found to be therapeutic, to boost mental health, to increase creativeness and openness, to reduce stress, and so forth. Nature connectedness also ameliorates the relationship one has with oneself. For these reasons, spending time in nature was spoken of as an inner need: "I get this visceral feeling that I must get out into nature" (Emmi). Going into nature is a "must" for Katja, too:

When you are in a forest, you realize how much it gives, how good it makes you feel... You must make sure to take the time to get there, because then you'll always remember that it brings well-being.

Even though the interviewees stressed the numerous beneficial effects of nature, we also found a strain of thought in which nature was much more than a resource. Many young adults perceived themselves as part of nature and sharply criticized the dualist view in which nature is represented as something external, as a mere “environment.” Anni places nature on a par with humans:

I see nature as the foundation of well-being: taking care of the environment, not polluting it, and trying to save natural resources is like a continuation of taking care of your own body. If we want to eat healthy, so why would we not treat the environment in a healthy way?

Anni refers to the fact that destroying nature ultimately causes problems for humans. Maiju remarks that medical waste released into waterways will eventually backfire by making people ill. When there is no dividing line between humans and nature, “things that harm yourself also harm the environment” (Joni). This interconnectedness comes to the fore in the next extract:

Juuso: If people lost their connection with nature, it would diminish their well-being, although actually one can't lose the connection, because we are a part of nature. Some just don't see it, and think they live in total separation from it and ...

Saana: Independently, in a way.

Juuso: Yes, and it will certainly cause ill-being and problems.

Both speakers share the view that being separated from nature is impossible. Being part of nature is as self-evident as the fact that “water is wet” (Ville). Nature is a precondition for human existence. Nevertheless, our societies have for centuries been based on a human exemptionalism paradigm (Catton and Dunlap 1980) in which the human species is seen as exempt from ecological constraints. Many young interviewees turned this hierarchy around, pointing out that while humans cannot survive without nature and being disconnected from nature is a risk to well-being, nature can do quite well—and even better—without human interference.

Discussion and conclusions

Echoing the HDLB framework, the young adults we studied construed well-being as a multidimensional and relational whole, in which the dimension of Having (the standard of living) was not weighed nearly as much as in the dominant policy discourse. Instead, they valued meaningful activities and relationships with other people, animals, and nature, as well as moments of presence. In what follows, we discuss what our findings of young adults' well-being discourse could signify for the sustainability

transformation. Discourses are related to action and have practical consequences (Wetherell and Potter 1988, 172). What could hearing these young people's voices indicate in terms of the transformation? We bring to the foreground six implications, including those for the theory of sustainable well-being.

Reducing consumption

When speaking of material well-being, the young adults referred mainly to existential Having and were critical of excessive Having. This may sound surprising in light of the limited financial means of the interviewees. However, research from Spain reports similar findings: in need-based workshops where most of the participants were unemployed, economic prosperity did not come up as the main topic of discussion (Guillen-Royo, Guardiola, and Garcia-Quero 2017). Also, the participants of need-based workshops organized in Sweden supported the sufficiency principle and understood the importance of limiting wants (Koch, Lindellee, and Olsson 2021).

The young adults' discourse on well-being in the Having dimension contained a sense of ecological limits and the consequent necessity of limiting one's consumption. It is notable that this was discussed as conducive to well-being rather than as a threat to it. This consciousness—and this conscience—about overconsumption might constitute one step to making “collective decisions to refrain from pursuing all that could be pursued” (Kallis 2017, 21) that degrowth researchers, among others, have called for.

The sufficiency perspective (or, in the HDLB terms, shifting the focus from excessive Having and increasing consumption to existential Having) challenges the current economic tendency in welfare discussions and the mainstream policy discourse that remains couched in a deprivation framework, despite the opulence of Western societies (Hämäläinen and Michaelson 2014). While there is no cause for romanticizing poverty, one can ponder whether the comparatively low importance attached to Having by the interviewees could be an indication of a shift toward a society that endorses thrift instead of “need satisfier escalation” (Brand-Correa et al. 2020). Many of our respondents constructed themselves as highly ethical and critical consumers and incisively criticized unsustainable production and consumption. If this kind of discourse spreads, the norms of consumerist society are also likely to change (see Spangenberg and Lorek 2019). Such a shift, in turn, might make acceptable ecosocial policies, such as taxing high-carbon luxuries, regulating advertising, or introducing a maximum income that

has long been regarded as politically unthinkable (Gough 2017; Hirvilammi and Helne 2014).

Promoting transformative employment policies

Finding work was important for the interviewees, but they also expressed a limit on how much time they are willing to dedicate to paid work in relation to other meaningful activities. Setting these limits is imperative to protect health and to balance all dimensions of well-being. Being unemployed and living on meager benefits is stressful, but so is work that clashes with one's values. In the spirit of degrowth research (e.g., Dietz and O'Neill 2013), the respondents endorsed a policy of shortened working hours.

The interviewees' discourse contradicts current employment policies with their narrow emphasis on paid work and the aim of turning young unemployed people into respectable consumer citizens rather than supporting their possibilities for self-realization and activities that advance sustainability (Helne and Hirvilammi 2021; Hirvilammi et al. 2019). This calls for transformative, more flexible employment policies that are better in line with the needs of young adults: rather than forcing them to actively seek any kind of available job, they should be allowed and encouraged to find work that is congruent with their values. This would require changes in the conditions of the social security system so that also young adults who are engaged in sustainable voluntary work or unpaid work in community economies would be entitled to unemployment benefits (Hirvilammi and Joutsenvirta 2020; Stamm et al. 2020).

Greener social and health services

The interviewees were fully aware of nature's therapeutic value. Spending time in nature was perceived as something that makes one more open, more capable of socializing with other people. This implies that activities in nature could facilitate the kind of conviviality that supports the sustainability transformation. The healing power of nature has also been recognized in the welfare states' social and health sector, where green care services have been found to have positive health-promoting effects (Steigen, Kogstad, and Hummelvoll 2016). The young adults' experiences, and our finding that for them, well-being included positive human-animal relationships, give additional support to sustainably enhancing well-being through various nature-based and animal-based interventions.

Biodiversity and conservation

Nature had unsurpassable meaning for our interviewees, and many of them acknowledged and emphatically defended its intrinsic value. This is promising in terms of safeguarding biodiversity and supporting policies that reduce the harmful environmental impacts of human behavior. Moreover, the respect, love, and even awe these young adults expressed for nature and other beings can be interpreted as a positive sign for conserving nature since research evidence indicates that biophilia, a general love for living things, and nature connectedness are positively correlated with environmentalism and pro-nature behavior (e.g., Martin et al. 2020; Saunders and Munro 2000).

Positive promotion of sustainability

Our interviewees did not speak of well-being merely as an individual matter. Instead, they emphasized other beings' well-being. This is consistent with research showing the powerful importance of benevolence on well-being (e.g., Martela and Ryan 2016), and a crucial point to bear in mind when looking for positive arguments for the changes in practices and behaviors that the sustainability transformation requires: reaching sustainability will enhance the well-being of all. The respondents also talked about the negative well-being effects of destructive speech. On a wider scale, one could conclude that to advance the sustainability transformation, a positive discourse is preferable to negative talk. This is also what the emerging field of "positive sustainability" proposes (Ronen and Kerret 2020).

Building the theory of sustainable well-being

Organizing and analyzing the data with the help of the HLDB framework proved to be straightforward. This is significant in the sense that it encourages the use of this approach in other studies as well.

Not only did the young adults share the HLDB framework's multidimensional conception of well-being, but their view on well-being was also largely eudaimonic, that is, related to virtuous activities, as in the HLDB framework and other research discussions on sustainable well-being (e.g., Koch, Buch-Hansen, and Fritz 2017; Lamb and Steinberger 2017). This does not mean, however, that the pleasure aspect of well-being, such as feeling good in nature, was unknown to them; one might speak of "hedonic eudaimonia" here (see Helne 2021).

Moreover, not only did the young adults construe well-being as a relational whole but, as in the HLDB framework, their understanding of well-being was relational or non-dual in the ecological sense: nature

was represented as the necessary precondition of human existence and well-being for both the individual and all humankind.

The young adults clearly differentiated existential from excessive Having, denouncing the latter. This gives support to distinguishing these two kinds of Having in the theory of sustainable well-being. Furthermore, money was delinked from happiness: a decent income was interpreted as a means to avoid stress rather than the road to happiness. The discourse on the potential well-being deficits of wealthy people was also in line with the HDLB framework and other need-based well-being theories: satisfying needs in one of the dimensions of well-being cannot compensate for deficiencies of well-being in its other dimensions.

To conclude, the well-balanced well-being discourse of young adults challenges the dominant non-balanced and economy-oriented well-being discourse. The striving of our respondents for a harmonious actualization of needs is worth taking heed of since how needs are weighted in society has direct psychological, social, and ecological impacts. The fact that the well-being discourse of these young adults is compatible with a multidimensional and need-based well-being theory can be construed as a signal of how the hegemonic discourse on well-being could begin to be deconstructed and reconstructed. However, we are fully aware of the small size of our sample, and we do not claim that all (Finnish) young (unemployed) adults share the discourse we studied. It remains an open question whether our interviewees will change their perceptions as they grow older, (possibly) find a permanent job, and have children. However, when it comes to their strong nature connectedness, once such a connection has formed, it is unlikely to weaken. We, therefore, assume that the pro-environmental attitudes of the respondents will probably remain the same (see, e.g., Martin et al. 2020; Zylstra et al. 2014).

In summary, for the young adults interviewed for our research, well-being is a process of balancing needs and a process of setting limits on how needs are actualized. The latter process is not the same as “self-limiting.” On the contrary, well-being was represented as a process of personal growth and self-realization through Loving, Doing, and Being. From the perspective of sustainability, this is good news. While the public discourse often paints a picture of young people (particularly unemployed youth) as a risk to themselves or society, we contend that the real risk or problem is our unsustainable society, and how at least some young people construe and try to attain well-being may well be a part of the solution.

Notes

1. A notable exception is Nussbaum's (2003) capability approach. Her list of ten central human capabilities includes “other species:” “being able to live with concern for and in relation to animals, plants, and the world of nature.”
2. Fromm ([1976] 2011, 69–70) distinguishes existential having from “characterological having,” by which he refers to socially determined “passionate drive to retain and keep.” We use perhaps a less equivocal concept, “excessive Having,” to capture this distinction.
3. These programs aim to improve the employability of people at risk of long-term unemployment. The Youth Guarantee, launched in 2013, obliges municipalities to provide a job, work trial, education, or rehabilitation to all young adults under 25 years after a period of three months unemployment (see <https://www.te-palvelut.fi/en/jobseekers/young-people/youth-guarantee>). The Constitution of Finland also guarantees everyone the right to basic subsistence in the event of unemployment. However, due to the activation paradigm and workfare policy in Nordic countries (e.g., Van Aerscht 2016), the eligibility rules for obtaining benefits are strict, particularly for those under 25 with no vocational skills, education beyond comprehensive school, or upper secondary school. If they do not apply for a place of study, turn down an offer of a place of study, or drop out of studies, they may lose their entitlement to unemployment benefits until further notice (<https://www.te-palvelut.fi/en/jobseekers/if-unemployed/unemployment-security/under-25years>; <https://www.kela.fi/web/en/eligibility-requirements-for-applicants-under-25-years>). A considerable proportion of Finnish young unemployed adults participates in these programs. According to a Finnish study conducted between 2005 and 2015, three out of four young people born in 1987 had at least once registered as an unemployed jobseeker, and almost 40% had been the subject of at least one activation measure (Sutela et al. 2018).
4. All the names of the interviewees are pseudonyms.

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