



Analysis

Shifting Priorities in Degrowth Research: An Argument for the Centrality of Human Needs[☆]Max Koch^{a,*}, Hubert Buch-Hansen^b, Martin Fritz^c^a Lund University, Socialhögskolan, Sweden^b Copenhagen Business School, Department of Business and Politics, Denmark^c University of Bielefeld, Faculty of Sociology, Germany

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ABSTRACT

We present an argument for the deprioritization of subjective well-being and a prioritization of human needs within degrowth research. First, we discuss empirical evidence, methodological problems and theoretical shortcomings of subjective well-being concepts. While data for one country over time suggest a flattening of the happiness curve relative to GDP growth, cross country comparisons reveal that the richest and most environmentally unsustainable countries are also the 'happiest'. Methodologically, we point to the issue of adaptability. A limitation in the use of 'positional goods' is unlikely to be accompanied by short-term increases in subjective well-being. Theoretically, we question 'happiness', where it helps promote growth and disguise structural relationships of inequality. Secondly, we sketch out an alternative degrowth research agenda oriented at the satisfaction of human needs. Here, Doyal and Gough's theory of human needs is especially useful due to its systematic account of environmental limits and the 'policy-auditing' approach that follows from it. Finally, we illustrate such a needs-based research agenda at the example of food by reviewing recent research on the environmental impacts of different diets and kinds of food production and on how these forms compare in terms of scale and land-use.

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1. Introduction

Economic growth is neither socially inclusive nor ecologically sustainable. While in the rich countries the unequal distribution of wealth has reached the levels of the nineteenth century (Piketty, 2014), the Earth's carrying capacity is being exceeded in relation to at least three planetary boundaries: climate change, the nitrogen cycle and biodiversity loss (Rockström et al., 2009). The corollary is that economy and society and the associated production and consumption norms can no longer be considered as a system operating in a theoretical vacuum. Significant theoretical and empirical efforts have been made to demonstrate how socially inclusive development could evolve within ecological limits and beyond growth (Daly, 1991; D'Alisa et al., 2014; Koch and Mont, 2016). An increasing number of researchers and activists call for a transition to a global steady-state economy (Koch, 2015)

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that would function within ecological boundaries. Although degrowth scholars generally accept that economic development in some form is required in the global South, the conventional development path – as in the North – is not advocated.

Less consensual, however, are estimations about how enjoyable or painful such a journey towards global environmental sustainability would be for the citizens of the rich countries. A particularly controversial topic is the issue of happiness or subjective well-being vis-à-vis objective welfare indicators. While a majority of degrowth scholars (e.g. Sekulova, 2014) appears to be confident that the transition to a global SSE would be accompanied by increases in both objective and subjective well-being scores, others are more careful (O'Neill, 2015; Fritz and Koch, 2016) and open up for the possibility that subjective well-being scores in the rich countries may (temporarily) go down if production and consumption patterns were to be brought in line with ecological limits. Judging by the historical genesis of 'degrowth' definitions the former position appears to have prevailed: In the declaration of the 2008 degrowth conference in Paris, degrowth was defined as a 'voluntary transition towards a just, participatory, and ecologically sustainable society', while the 'objectives' were 'to meet basic human needs and ensure a high quality of life ...' (Research and Degrowth, 2010: 523). While this original definition highlighted the centrality of human needs and did not presuppose a simultaneous rise in subjective well-being along the way, an often-cited passage by Schneider et al. (2010:

512) is much more straightforward. Here, 'degrowth' is understood to be, among other things, 'an equitable downscaling of production that increases human well-being and enhances ecological conditions at the local and global level, in the short and long term.' The latter definition also seems to have been behind the invitation text to the 2016 degrowth conference in Budapest, where 'degrowth' was defined as a 'downscaling of production and consumption that increases human well-being and enhances ecological conditions and equity on the planet'.

The question arises whether the degrowth research community should endorse this downscaling of production and consumption only if it at the same time increases or at least maintains well-being including in the short term. In this paper, we offer an argument for a return to the original Paris definition or, in other words, for a deprioritization of subjective well-being and, at the same time, a prioritization of human needs in degrowth research. It is structured as follows: The point of departure of the paper is existing empirical evidence on subjective well-being relative to scale and GDP/capita. We consider here both analyses of countries over time and cross-country comparisons. This is followed by a discussion of some methodological issues and theoretical shortcomings concerning the use of subjective well-being scores. These are the background for our plea for the centrality of objective welfare measures and, particularly, human needs within degrowth research. The next section identifies basic and intermediate human needs using the terminology offered by Doyal and Gough (1991) and outlines how this can be applied within the degrowth research agenda. Finally, we illustrate our argument for the centrality of human needs at the example of nutrition and argue that a needs-oriented degrowth agenda would be oriented at issues such as the following: What are the environmental impacts of different kinds of food production (conventional versus organic farming methods)? How do the different forms of production compare in terms of scale and the agricultural land-use required to feed all people? Do such scenarios suggest particular diets (e.g. vegetarian) over others (e.g. omnivorous ones)?

2. Subjective Well-Being as a Measure of Welfare and Degrowth

The development and optimization of objective and subjective measurements of well-being in the social sciences has proceeded in concurrent and occasionally conflictive ways. Both have, of course, their respective merits and justifications. The improvement of the objective quality of life such as the supply of clean water, sufficient housing or the access to medical care is widely accepted as foremost goals in research and public policy-making. However, precisely which objective living conditions are relevant and to what degree they should be improved are far from being self-evident. This is why happiness researchers (Layard, 2011) suggest paying more attention to individual satisfaction with objective conditions. The debate around the Easterlin paradox (Easterlin, 1974; Easterlin et al., 2010) indeed demonstrates that the consideration of objective factors only is not sufficient when evaluating the quality of life of social groups. A problem with this view is that subjective satisfaction and well-being is in part the result of psychological and social adaptation processes that interfere with the happiness or subjective well-being gains that may be achieved through economic development measured in GDP per capita. Yet such complex processes are difficult to measure in large-scale and quantitative studies and would require long-term panel studies which are very expensive and accordingly rare. The alternative is qualitative in-depth research of small groups. Such research designs are, however, not statistically representative for larger populations.

Since degrowth research intends to provide knowledge in relation to global and local levels it depends to some extent on quantitative data on both objective and subjective well-being. In relation to the latter it is important to distinguish between two perspectives

and measurements: individual-level data on subjective well-being of single countries over time and comparative country-level data on subjective well-being across countries. It seems that the majority of degrowth researchers have referred to and/or used data of the former kind (Alexander, 2012). Such data have repeatedly indicated that happiness and subjective well-being scores do not increase in parallel to GDP and income after rather modest levels. Indeed, in countries such as the USA happiness scores have remained at similar levels since the 1950s despite significant increases in GDP (Layard, 2011).² However, when interpreting these data, it is sometimes forgotten that while GDP can in principle increase infinitely, some of the rich countries (e.g. Denmark, where the cultural norm to present oneself as 'happy' is particularly pronounced) have already reached comparatively high subjective well-being scores on a scale of 1 to 10 so that even higher scores are difficult to achieve. When taking the latter perspective and comparing subjective well-being levels across countries, however, one arrives at a somewhat different picture. Taking a global perspective, O'Neill (2015: 1223), for example, observes a 'correlation between biophysical scale and human well-being. Countries with a large per capita footprint tend to score highly on life satisfaction ..., while countries with a small per capita footprint tend to score poorly.' And in a recent comparison of 138 countries, Fritz and Koch (2016: 44) demonstrate that subjective well-being scores correlate with GDP per capita. The richest countries, which are at the same time the most unsustainable ones, score the highest in terms of subjective well-being. Hence, two things appear to apply at the same time: while happiness and subjective well-being scores in the rich countries do not increase further with GDP over time, cross-country comparisons demonstrate that poorer countries score much lower in subjective well-being than richer ones. While this may, in relation to the poorer countries, be in line with Easterlin's original finding that happiness depends more on how one fares compared with others than on the absolute level of affluence (Easterlin, 1974), it is unclear how subjective well-being scores would develop in the rich countries during an economic contraction.

Taking a global perspective is plausible because major environmental issues such as climate change have a global dimension in that it does not matter from what locality on the planet greenhouse gases, for example, are emitted. Fritz and Koch (2016), who divided 138 countries in five groups according to GDP per capita ('poor', 'developing', 'emerging', 'rich' and 'overdeveloped' countries), further found that only the poorest countries can currently be seen as existing within environmental limits.³ The others would need to 'degrow' in terms of their matter and energy throughput (most of them significantly), if these limits are to be respected. Embarking on the degrowth trajectories needed to bring about a 'global steady-state economy' – a world economy that functions within environmental limits thereby avoiding catastrophic climate change and other environmental threats – is in itself an enormous challenge (Buch-Hansen, 2014; Fritz and Koch, 2014). It is aggravated by the fact that both objective and subjective quality of life indicators but also CO₂ emissions and ecological footprints have hitherto increased with GDP per capita. Given that the currently richest countries would need to make the biggest contribution en route to a global steady-state economy in a rather short period of time, we would not exclude by definition that subjective well-being scores in the rich countries may (temporarily) go down. From an ethical research

² Kahneman and Deaton (2010) distinguish between emotional wellbeing (also: affective wellbeing or hedonic wellbeing) and evaluative wellbeing (also: life satisfaction). While the former refers to the everyday feelings and emotions people experience (e.g. joy, sadness, stress etc.), the latter is concerned with peoples' general thoughts about their lives. The authors claim that this distinction becomes increasingly important in prioritizing policies relevant to subjective well-being.

³ This study was based on comparative aggregated country-level data that do not allow for the consideration of transnational inequality as emphasized in transnational class approaches.

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