



Living Care-Fully: The Potential for an Ethics of Care in Livelihoods Approaches

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Summary. — This article explores the potential contribution of a feminist ethics of care to livelihoods approaches. Current critiques argue that considerations of material outcomes have been prioritized at the expense of social well-being. I argue that autonomy and independence frame our current approaches to understanding how people support themselves. This has obscured the interdependent and contingent nature of connections that found our social lives and reduced social connections to an instrumental role. The potential for taking a care-full approach to livelihoods is examined through the unfolding negotiations of livelihood strategies between an elderly woman and her daughter-in-law in rural northern Ghana.

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1. INTRODUCTION

In this article I draw on a feminist ethics of care to consider how a perspective oriented toward the connections and relations between people has the potential to change our approach to studying livelihood strategies. Livelihoods are studied by a range of scholars who tend to focus on the documentation of activities and resources that support individuals and their dependents, or the “capabilities, assets (stores, resources, claims and access) and activities required for a means of living” (Chambers & Conway, 1992, p. 6). Within livelihood studies, emphasis tends to be on the material outcomes of these activities, and on the various strategies entailed in securing a livelihood. While providing important insights into the complexity of making a living in a diversity of contexts, these studies, even when the highly social nature of the strategies is acknowledged, tend not to investigate the quality and character of the relational and interdependent nature of livelihood strategies. Thus, extant studies have tended to miss the complex webs of caring in which people seek to secure their livelihoods. I build on recent critiques of livelihoods approaches that seek to rectify the pervasive focus on material outcomes that has marginalized social life to an instrumental position within livelihood strategies. I further argue that livelihoods have also been influenced by concepts of individual autonomy and independence resulting in analyses that prioritize the pursuit of self-interests. As a result, interdependency and the contingencies associated with interdependent living and caring for one another have been overlooked in livelihood studies. In this article I ask what a *care-full* approach to livelihoods could look like and how taking such an approach, one that accords interdependence a central place, could change the ways in which we understand people and their strategies for making a living. Drawing on qualitative research conducted in a rural village in Ghana’s Northern Region, I recount the story of an elderly woman and her daughter-in-law to illustrate how these women have negotiated livelihood strategies that are interdependent. This story exemplifies that interdependency is a contingent arrangement, despite relationships being defined through formal cultural expectations of responsibility and obligation. These two women’s relationships, and thus their

livelihoods, are built through negotiations that shift as circumstances change.

In social science, considerations of an ethics of care arose as part of broader feminist criticism of masculinist understandings of moral reasoning, often unproblematically assumed to be at work in societies around the globe (Gilligan, 1982; Held, 1993; Noddings, 1986; Tronto, 1993). By raising the issue of care, critics sought to challenge the assumed autonomy of individual subjects. Privileging the twin concepts of autonomy and independence failed to account for the deeply relational nature of everyday experiences. Feminist theories of care have pressed for a re-valuing of the many responsibilities and relationships shaping an individual’s life, stressing the importance of contingencies, rather than rules, that influence not only moral reasoning (Gilligan, 1982), but the practices of everyday life (Tronto, 1993). An ethics of care directs our attention to care values and practices of support and care, practices that sometimes indeed enable a sense of independence, but do not take such a state as a starting point. The intentions and practices of caring and being cared for permeate and sustain our lives. Livelihood studies, however, have tended to overlook the interconnectedness of people’s lives, and how caring—both as an activity and a value—is an important component of those lives. In order to capture interdependencies, we need to understand how people are interconnected. I draw on feminist ethics of care to provide a deeply relational ontology from which to critique livelihoods analysis. An ethics of care allows the conceptual space to open

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up what it means to make a living, incorporating values and work of care, as well as carelessness, in the decision-making and practices of everyday life. We can identify interpersonal relationships and subsequently explore how these relationships impinge upon the construction of livelihood strategies—not only how relationships are instrumental to fulfilling one's own needs, but how our own needs and the needs of others are inextricably embedded together in complex negotiations of our strategies.

In the first section of the paper, I build on recent critical work which questions the overwhelming focus on material outcomes while marginalizing social well-being in livelihoods analyses. Toward building an argument for a relational ontology, I explore the ways in which livelihoods analyses have approached social relations and social connectedness, including in the discussion a consideration of social capital and social networks, the household as the scale of analysis, and gender and intra-household dynamics. In the second section, I introduce feminist ethics of care, upon which I draw as a foundation for a relational ontology that conceptualizes social relationships as human connectedness rooted in interdependence and contingencies. The third section is a case study from Northern Region, Ghana, which considers shifting circumstances and strategies of an elderly woman and her daughter-in-law, in order to understand how their livelihoods are interdependent. This case study is drawn from both individual and focus group interviews and participant observation conducted between November 2011 and June 2012. I close with a discussion of this case study, and reflect on the potential of taking a care-full approach to livelihoods. An ethics of care, I argue, can productively reorient the focus of the frameworks used to study livelihood strategies. There is the potential to add new complexity to livelihood studies and better reflect what it means to make a living in particular places.

2. ARE LIVELIHOODS CARE-LESS?

Livelihoods approaches are one of the various approaches applied to understand the ways in which people support themselves and others. The appeal of livelihoods approaches lay in part in their broad scope. They encompass not only income-generating and subsistence practices, but also account for larger social and environmental contexts. Livelihoods approaches emerged in the early 1980s out of a tradition of highly localized and in-depth understandings of how people make a living in particular places, a tradition that included, among others, household economics and gender analyses, political ecology, sustainability science, and agro-ecosystem studies (Scoones, 2009). They grew to prominence in the 1990s in reaction to staunchly economic macro-level approaches and the dominance of income-based poverty and employment-focused development policies that often failed to account for social and political complexity in rural development work (Chambers, 1995; Chambers & Conway, 1992; Ellis, 1998; Scoones, 2009). Livelihood approaches also gained some acceptance in prominent institutions, including the World Bank, (Fine, 1999; Scoones, 2009) and by the late 1990s, sustainable livelihood approaches were promoted by the UK-based Department for International Development and the Institute of Development Studies. The popularity and institutionalization of the approaches led to the development of livelihoods approaches as a standardized, comparative approach in rural development.

The adoption and development of livelihoods approaches within these prominent institutions required effective dialog

between economists and the ecological and anthropological work they relied upon. Livelihoods approaches applied the language of institutional economics, and livelihoods came to be understood in terms of assets, reduced to a five-part framework of 'capitals'; social and material life were partitioned into natural, physical, human, financial, and social capitals (Bebbington, 1999; DFID, 1999). Access to these assets was regarded as critical. Livelihoods approaches proposed that various institutions—social systems and structures that define and delimit behavioral expectations—mediated access. For example, and somewhat awkwardly, social life found itself expressed in two ways; first as social capital (see below) and second as the social context in which livelihood strategies are negotiated. The social dimensions of life, instead of embedded within livelihood strategies, were reduced to an instrumental role in accessing assets.

There is a growing recognition of the need for a new orientation to livelihoods approaches, where the social is not seen as a merely peripheral concern, but where complex socio-economic practices lie at the very heart of livelihoods strategies. It has been argued that there is a need for a critical injection focused on knowledge, scale, politics, and dynamics if the approaches are to remain relevant to questions of rural development (DeHaan & Zoomers, 2005; Scoones, 2009). Most significant here, is the recognition that there has been a cost to the economic-orientation in livelihoods approaches. Livelihoods analyses have largely been reduced to economic decision-making, with material outcomes being accorded primary importance and social life relegated to an instrumental position (Carr, 2013; Jakimow, 2013; Scoones, 2009). In what follows, I discuss where and how social and material well-being have been incorporated or marginalized in livelihoods approaches.

Contemporary work has criticized livelihoods analyses for establishing an instrumental approach wherein the actors are positioned as rational decision-makers (DeHaan & Zoomers, 2005) whose economic well-being and social well-being are dissociated from one another. These critiques demonstrate that a rationalist approach overlooks the complex social influences that shape livelihood opportunities and outcomes. Jakimow (2012, 2013) and Carr (2013) are noteworthy because they offer alternative theoretical approaches—'serious games' and intimate government, respectively—that give equal consideration to how material and social concerns affect livelihood strategies. Carr (2013) argues that despite livelihoods approaches' acknowledgment that both social and material goals factor into the negotiation of livelihood strategies, there has been little effort toward systematizing an approach that studies the convergence of these goals. Carr (2013) puts forth an approach—based on the concept of intimate government—where livelihoods are seen as a form of government. Livelihoods are thereby the efforts to influence the practices of individuals or larger social units toward meeting outcomes that may be in flux or contradictory. This allows the researcher to focus on the negotiations of social and material well-being without unduly privileging material well-being in an individual's strategies. Revisiting earlier work that considered the competing interests of men and women within a household (Carr, 2005), Carr argues that this approach will allow us to understand decision making that seeks to satisfy social needs that may not support positive material outcomes. Through the lens prominent in livelihood analysis, such behavior appears "illogical" (2013, p. 102) albeit as social processes with non-material yet essential outcomes that contribute to decision-making with respect to people's livelihood strategies. Carr demonstrates how livelihood strategies of men and

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