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11

Being in "right relationships" when co-creating youth well-being and social justice

Exploring and sparking a relational shift

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Introduction

The practical approaches to pursuing youth well-being and social justice are evolving, with distinct approaches such as co-creation gaining traction in the public sector (Ansell & Torfing, 2021; Henson, 2019). However, there is also a critique arguing the need for radical attention to more relational approaches advocating for relational welfare, which focuses on the relationships between youth and the welfare state, as well as on the well-being of the ecosystem as an interdependent living system (Cottam, 2018; Helne & Hirvilammi, 2015; Heimburg & Ness, 2021). Relational welfare is then described as a radical change in which relational bonds should serve as a starting point for promoting health and well-being (Cottam, 2018). Consequently, a transformative change in youth well-being is bound by relationships, and these relationships are the core of the fluid and dynamic process of co-creating well-being. As stressed by Heimburg and Ness (2021), a significant body of research supports this notion, suggesting that loving and supportive relationships are the most vital of all social determinants for achieving health and well-being (Antonovsky, 1987; Ersoy, 2017; Prilleltensky, 2005). In addition, the quality of relationships between public service users and public servants (i.e., in therapy or in kindergarten or other school settings) tends to be the most important factor for successful outcomes such as learning and well-being (Davidson, 2011; Lund & Winslade, 2018).

A relational shift also stretches beyond our human relations, as stressed by Helne and Hirvilammi (2015). Sustainability and well-being can in fact be seen as twin concepts, as human well-being is enabled by the health of the ecosystems in which we participate. The present ecological crisis and the well-being crisis are strongly associated with (or even caused by) the human exceptionalism paradigm, in which nature is considered predominantly as a resource basis for human consumption. The relational paradigm then takes into account and respects both the social bonds between individuals and the relationship between humans and nature (see, for example, Gergen, 2009).

The concept of "right relationships" central to many Indigenous cultures might be an inspiration and appropriate term for this ideal of relating. It is a mode of being that is grounded in Indigenous ontologies characterised by relationality and reciprocity among both human and non-human relatives

(Gram-Hanssen et al., 2022). But what exactly does "right relationships" mean when co-creating youth well-being, and how might we design, facilitate it, and cultivate it in practice?

The purpose of this chapter is to explore how a relational perspective on well-being and welfare can enrich the understanding of, and reveal new potentials for improving, youth involvement.

Positionality

The pre-understandings and situated knowledge of researchers always affect the research process. Therefore, as researchers, we need to "locate ourselves in our work and reflect on how our location influences the questions we ask, how we conduct our research, and how we write our research" (England, 1994, p. 251).

As our research interest is well-being and social justice, we seek to understand the event in connection to the larger transformative change for humanity now being called for (Ripple et al., 2021). In short, the current and severe situation can be understood as a result of a certain kind of relationship between humans and Earth, characterised by domination, exploitation, and a shortsighted focus on growth. We hence agree with Whyte (2020) that underlying the ecological tipping points of biodiversity loss and climate change is a relational tipping point. In recognising that, it becomes critical to enable a relational shift for our youth now to enable experiences of being in the "right relationships". We believe that allowing our youth to experience and model reciprocal collaborations will be key to imagining and realising decolonial ways of being and generating the equitable and sustainable transformations now needed in society. Using the words of Eisler and Fry (2019), the higher purpose of this study and chapter is to facilitate a relational shift from relationships of domination to relationships of partnership and a more equitable, caring, and sustainable partnership future.

Generative questions

Several of the authors of this paper are active as researchers, facilitators, and teachers connected to the change approach of appreciative inquiry. It

is an approach that acknowledges the power of questions as fundamental (Cooperrider et al., 2008). When Bushe (2013) discussed generative questions in relation to appreciative inquiry, he found that the generativity of the questions increases if: 1) they are surprising; 2) they touch people's heart and spirit; 3) talking about and listening to these stories will build relationships; and 4) the questions force us to look at reality a little differently. In living those insights, you will see that this chapter ends not only with conclusions, but with questions.

Previous research – relationships and the social in focus

The definition of well-being and social justice, and the "social" aspect, is often taken for granted in welfare professions. An aspect pointed out in previous discussions is that "social" (for example, in social work) is not something self-evident and constant. Rather, "social" consists of relationships and associations existing in concrete practices (Hanssen et al., 2015, building on Bruno Latour's definition of "social") or, as Johan Asplund (1987) would say, the social is not "within" an individual, but outside and between individuals. Asplund uses the concept of social responsiveness (in Swedish, *social responsivitet*), which he argues to be the elementary form of being a human in a society. As human beings, we live in the presence of other human beings, and we are constantly involved in an interplay between various stimuli and responses. It is in the interaction with others that we construct our identities on both an abstract and a concrete level (see Jenkins, 2014). In this sense, "social" indicates collectivity, giving expression to shared meaning and reflecting yourself in others.

The collective experience is central to Karl Mannheim's theory of generations (Mannheim, 1927/1952). Mannheim argues that cohorts of young individuals who grow up in the same socio-historical context create a collective consciousness, and thus a collective identity such as a generation. Mannheim implies that youths are more oriented toward recognising and reflecting on present social structures in which they can recognise their generation's pro-

blems. Following this argument, it is today widely accepted (or rather, taken for granted) that a young generation is coupled with social change. Often, young people's attitudes, behaviour, and lifestyles are ascribed to, and interpreted within, discourses of modernization or predictions of the future (see White, 2013). Following the relational perspective in which the aspect of social responsiveness is central, we would argue that relations between generations should be in focus as generations are interdependent. Also, young generations are not simply created because young cohorts recognise themselves as a generation by sharing collective experiences. The collective experiences are interrelated with economic, political, and other structural circumstances through which cohort-based organisations of society are mediated (Mizen, 2004). Thus, intergenerational equity should be regarded as a sociopolitical construct (Walker, 1993). The relational perspective recognises intergenerational relations in co-existence rather than seeing each generation as a fixed category to which certain attributes, rights, or restraints are ascribed. Young people are not future citizens: they are present here and now and should be able to influence society.

Relationships as the fourth R of relational welfare

Relational welfare is described as a radical change in which relational bonds between human beings should serve as a starting point for promoting well-being in the twenty-first century (Cottam, 2018). Welfare then becomes essentially co-created (Osborne et al., 2016). Social justice and well-being for all as public values are then understood as created in the nexus between actors in complex, adaptive systems (Keshavarz Mohammadi, 2019; Von Heimburg & Cluley, 2021). Consequently, how we see such systems must also be revisited in a reimagination of welfare creation. Such a reimagining is elaborated by Heimburg and Ness (2021). In doing so, they present a framework for developing a relational approach to welfare, as seen in Table 11.1 and elaborated below.

Table 11.1

Key concepts of relational welfare related to the R of relationships

Relationships
1. Act as the starting point, driving force and outcome of transformative processes that make participation easy, intuitive and natural.
2. Support shared visions of justice through relational meaning-making processes.
3. Nurtured by acts of empathy, kindness and relational responsibility in community life, public services, and policy processes.
4. Facilitate joint action through coordinated, boundary-spanning, and collaborative networks (relational coordination).
5. Enhance a valued social role for all citizens through processes of relating to others and participating in community life, taking actions to accumulate capabilities with others in their community and beyond.

Source: Heimburg and Ness (2021, Table III, p.649).

The framework stresses, for example, that relational responsibility is fuelled by empathy and kindness and the notion that people are commonly motivated to engage when they become aware of the values at stake and how they can contribute (Heimburg et al., 2022).

It also highlights that relationships facilitate joint action through coordinated, boundary-spanning, and collaborative networks (relational coordination). Such boundary-spanning capacities and relational coordination between relevant and affected actors can enable actors and stakeholders to consider what is needed for co-creation to become successful through joint community action (Bolton et al., 2021; Heimburg et al., 2022). Making co-creation processes meaningful and motivating are important elements to build trust, sensemaking, and generativity. This implies searching for pathways to identify, connect, and mobilise local resources in people, places, institutions, and organisations and for crowdsourcing ideas and willingness to participate and contribute (Russell, 2020).

Relationships also enhance a valued social role for all citizens through processes of relating to others and participating in community life, taking actions to accumulate capabilities with others in their community and beyond. This means creating fair conditions for developing capabilities for well-

being. Ultimately, such processes connect to people's opportunities to matter. Mattering involves psychological experiences of feeling valued and adding value to self, others, work, and society (Prilleltensky et al., 2023). However, mattering and co-creation are situated processes (Jensen & Thomassen, 2021; Prilleltensky & Prilleltensky, 2022) that need to be tailored and co-crafted by the participating actors themselves.

Finally, this involves radical attention to a relational epistemology that perceives public value as co-created through relational meaning-making processes that are highly dependent on human relationships, social interaction, and the wider context (Gergen, 2009). Co-creating shared visions of justice and social roles with actors in society in ways that are socially just is bound up within a broader ecology affecting meaning-making processes and processes of relating to others (Bateson, 1972).

Being in right relationships

The concept of "right relationships" is at the core of Indigenous cultures. It is not simply the form of connection and association between people, but refers to a way of being in the world that stems from cultural understandings about creation and human purpose (Villegas, 2010). As stated by Gram-Hanssen et al. (2022), right relationships can be seen as "an obligation to live up to the responsibilities involved when taking part in a relationship–be it to other humans, other species, the land or the climate" (p. 678). Being in right relationships does imply more than just a practice of doing: it reaches into a way of being and an underlying mindset.

It can therefore be seen as related to the current initiative and framework of inner development goals (IDGs), stressing that we seem to lack the inner capacity to deal with our increasingly complex environment and the challenges connected to caring for and sustaining life on this planet (Jordan, 2021). The importance of shifting mindset further overlaps with the notion within dialogic organisation development concerning the vital importance of moving beyond merely applying dialogic practices to shifting the mindset (Bushe & Marshak, 2015). A similar shift has recently been referred to by Hutchins and Storm (2019) as a shift from a reductive machine logic to a living systems logic in relation to regenerative leadership.

Methods

This contribution is based on an exploratory qualitative study including eight interviews with politicians and civil servants in connection to the youth event called Democracy Day in a mid-sized municipality in Sweden (with approximately 100,000 inhabitants).

Democracy Day aims to gather young citizens, politicians, youth organisations, and civil servants for dialogue regarding young people's living conditions in the municipality. The dialogues are framed in relation to certain themes from a survey on local follow-up on youth engagement (*LUPP*). The *LUPP* is conducted every three years with young people in the eighth grade of secondary school and the second year of high school (https://www.mucf.se/uppdrag/ungdomsenkaten-lupp).

The specific issues discussed concern young people's safety; participation in society and politics; satisfaction with the school environment; leisure activities; experience of work; plans for the future; and physical and mental health.

The eight participants interviewed held leading positions, four as public servants within the administration, and the other four as politicians and chairmen on boards within the municipality. They all had experience of participating in various youth involvement activities, including Democracy Day. The interviews were conducted in Swedish by the first author in May 2021 using a semi-structured interview guide. The guide focused on exploring experiences, perceived value, concerns, and wishes for future development involving and co-creating with the young during the specific event of Democracy Day and in general.

Data analysis

The data analysis was conducted collaboratively by the first two authors, guided by Braun and Clarke's (2019, 2021) guidelines for using reflexive thematic analysis. Each stage of the coding and theme development process was documented using shared digital boards and memos, ensuring that the evolution of themes was clear and traceable. This helped to ensure research rigour and meant that the process and dependability were demonstrable.

The process began with familiarisation with the data by reading the full transcripts and listening to the sound files from the eight interviews several

times. During this stage, we ensured inaccuracies or ambiguities in the transcriptions were corrected and highlighted and extracted all text segments that we considered provided meaning and/or insights into a shared board. While doing so, we also made rough notes in connection to the extracted texts. The initial notes and codes were written on digital post-its attached to the texts. These codes were refined and added to as all the interviews were handled. Throughout this process, we were careful to share our two perspectives to notice and reflect on differences of perspective.

Once initial coding was complete, we looked for larger patterns across the dataset and grouped the codes into themes (Braun & Clarke, 2021). To allow a more inductive, data-driven approach, while recognising our role as researchers in the co-creation of themes, we tried not to let the coding and themes be steered by ideas, categories, or definitions from previous research (Braun & Clarke, 2013).

As the analysis progressed, it also became increasingly important for us to note and further elaborate on what was not said. Several of the emerging themes grew out of such notions, including curiosity about *what is going on here when it comes to relating to youth?* And, just as important, *what is not going on?*

The process of coding and developing themes was intended to include both descriptive and interpretive elements, using Braun and Clarke's (2013) definitions. The descriptive element aimed to represent what participants said, while the interpretive element drew on our subjectivity to consider less directly evident patterns, such as those that might be influenced by social context or culture.

In staying true to the material and the exploratory purpose of this study, the themes came to be formulated as questions rather than statements. These represent our interpretations and lines of curiosity based on the conducted interviews.

Results

The reflexive thematic analysis resulted in the creation of six themes, as presented below. The number of quotes shared has been limited due to the overall word limit for this chapter.

Relationships in focus or off the radar?

A first striking pattern is that the very phenomenon and concept of relationships is seldom mentioned or highlighted as central in any of the eight interviews. The word "relationships" is mentioned only twice in all the transcripts from the eight interviews, and then in the context of a lack: relationships with the young are not currently built over time, and when we see each other digitally rather than physically, it becomes harder to build relationships.

Building, nurturing, or developing relationships with the young is hence not at the forefront of people's minds as a central purpose or goal of interactions with the young. Instead, there are other driving forces and ideas about what is most important to achieve when meeting the young–bringing in ideas and thoughts from youths, getting confirmation, deepening understanding around certain issues in the *LUPP*, meeting in person, or educating the young. For example, one participant said:

> *We adults listen to the young people and get thoughts and ideas and input and because there are still quite a lot of different types of topics that are discussed on Democracy Day in different groups, and I think you have many wise thoughts and ideas that I think are valuable for us to take with us. (Participant 1, May 2021)*

Who takes the initiative and responsibility for building and nurturing relationships with the young?

Many of the participants express that the Democracy Day event is unique and important. Here, they suddenly get to meet young people "for real," something they otherwise rarely do. This suggests that the officials and politicians themselves rarely take responsibility for, or take the initiative to, build or

nurture relationships with the young in the community. Instead, they are invited, and someone else takes the initiative and provides the framework.

This raises questions about what happens during the other 364 days of the year. However, a few participants emphasised that Democracy Day should be seen as one of several forums throughout the year to gain a broader understanding of young people's experiences.

Conscious relational distancing rather than a shift up the institutional hierarchy?

During the interviews, we spoke to civil servants and politicians in leadership positions within the institutions of the municipality. They are typically not seeing or interacting with the young during their everyday work. Rather than striving to build relationships, they express concerns and a risk of listening to the individual perspectives of the young or being in relationships with individuals.

There is a strong emphasis on the importance of representativeness, statistical data, and basing decisions on what is "true" for most people in a group–for example, all young boys or everyone in a certain district. What we observe is a type of systemic, conscious distancing from being in relationship (listening to, getting close to individual youth, building relationships).

What does this imply for the ability truly to make a relational shift in these institutions? Is it possible for a leadership that is relationally sceptical or distancing to lead a relational welfare institution? One of the participants explained:

> *I also think that we need to find somewhat developed forms that take this a step further, which means that we will never be able to get individual children and young people to be representative of all of the municipality's children and young people. And it is important to keep in mind. But it is also important that children and young people can have their own voice. (Participant 3, May 2021)*

Is there a mutual curiosity and equal interest?

Another interesting pattern concerns who is expected to learn from whom in this relationship with the young. It includes the important difference between getting young people to learn the system versus changing and improving the system together.

There is a central tone among the participants around the importance of educating the young people about "how it works." The young need to learn about the council or the political working process, for example. However, there is less of a counter-movement showing curiosity about learning from the young and sincerely inviting them to change and improve their reality and their lives.

If the forms of society are already given and taken for granted by the institutions, there will not be much room for true curiosity, co-creation, or respect for the young people's experience–nor the potential actually to transform and innovate based on the perspective and reality of the young.

What if youth engagement is more about relationships and how we interact rather than about what?

The challenge of creating commitment among the young is a frequent concern among the participants. There is also a dominant thought that reaching such engagement is about carefully choosing what issues to focus on when inviting the youth. But what if it is at least as much about relationships and about how we relate to and interact with the young? What if the young were sincerely invited as equal and competent actors in, for example, developing and co-creating the future of our city?

There is also an idea that the young are primarily attracted by local, rapid results and short-termism, which does not necessarily correspond to reality. For example, the young are highly involved in long-term issues concerning climate change.

Another pattern, related to both building relationships and long-term thinking, is the question of actually meeting several times–returning to the young, giving feedback on the input they provide, or even teaming up to make change happen together over time. The participants highlight that this kind of relating over time is probably central to motivating the young to participate and not lose their commitment. However, it seldom happens, and it should be noted that the participants often talk about the importance of giving feedback

to the young rather than engaging in a joint process of co-creation where realisation takes place together in teams or partnerships with the young.

As participant 4 said:

> *If we could show that this effort gave this result, then, I think, then you strengthen this to come and say what you think. But if you don't get any feedback, if you yourself can't obviously see a difference… I said something, but it doesn't make any difference, so why should I? Why should I say what I think? (Participant 4, May 2021)*

When do we meet as whole persons rather than in a role or concerning a narrow question?

Finally, there is an acknowledgement among the participants of the value of authentically meeting as whole persons. While it rarely happens, when it does, the individual meeting with a young person opens up a unique way to understand the whole–their actual life–and to build a much more genuine and strong relationship.

It is seen as rare to talk about the entire reality of young people. Normally, the meetings are limited to very specific questions and are based on narrow roles. This dynamic is illustrated by the following two quotes:

> *Above all, I think it's so funny because many times young people have an image that when someone says you're a politician, they see an aunt or uncle in a suit, and it's like they're something else. And when you come to a class or when you sit on the Democracy Day and meet young people and tell them that you have an ordinary job, you are an ordinary person, you have a family and so on. Aha, like that. It's somehow like they have an image of a politician being something else. (Participant 1, May 2021)*

> *A very exciting forum where you get to meet young people in a completely different way than you might otherwise do. As politicians, we usually meet committed young people around very specific issues. Now you talk to the young very broadly about their whole lives. (Participant 7, May 2021)*

Discussion

Overall, the study and the six themes point toward how fundamental a shift it actually is to move into a paradigm of relational welfare in practice–a shift that reaches beyond merely adopting new practices of co-creation or dialogue and into actually shifting ways of being and the underlying mindset. Such a shift aligns closely with what is emphasised in connection with the Indigenous concept of living in the right relationship (Kawagley, 1993; Villegas, 2010), as well as within the Inner Development Goals (IDGs) (Jordan, 2021), regenerative leadership (Hutchins & Storm, 2019), and dialogic Organisation Development (Bushe & Marshak, 2015).

Even though the studied event and municipality may see themselves as progressive in terms of currently inviting the young and listening to them during the Democracy Day event, awareness and interest in building and nurturing relationships as core to success remain low. Considering the essence of relational welfare–that relational bonds should serve as a starting point for promoting health and well-being (Cottam, 2018; Heimburg & Ness, 2021)–the discrepancy is significant.

It is also noticeable that manifesting and, in practice, revolutionising the relationship between people (i.e., the young) and the welfare state (i.e., the public sector) is a tough challenge. How might relational bonds between human beings serve as a starting point for promoting well-being in practice? Such a revolution will likely require a journey of exploration and experimentation in close community with the young.

However, there is currently a wide and growing spectrum of research and insights to use as inspiration for such a journey. For instance, there is clear potential in focusing on and designing youth involvement initiatives and facilitation based on research concerning *mattering* (Prilleltensky et al., 2023)–that is, strengthening the young's experience of feeling valued, seen, heard, and appreciated, as well as enabling them to actively participate, take initiative, add value, and be part of making a positive difference.

In contributing to such manifestation and practical ability, this chapter concludes with some design questions, as presented in Table 11.2. These design questions may inform and spark the design and facilitation of events relating to social justice and the well-being of the young in a new paradigm of relational welfare.

Table 11.2

Design questions connected to each of the six emerging themes

1. Relationships in focus or off the radar?
DQ1: What new relationships would possibly give new life to the social justice and wellbeing of the young and the ecosystem in which they live? DQ2: How might we establish, build, and nourish those relationships, including relationships with nature, during the event? DQ3: How do we create spaces not only for discussion, but also to create lived experiences together?
2. Who takes the initiative and responsibility for building and nurturing relationships with the young?
DQ4: How might we make sure to strengthen the experience of the young of feeling valued, seen, heard, and appreciated? DQ5: How do we make sure to enable, invite, and allow the young as competent actors actively to participate, take the initiative, add value, and be part of making a positive difference? DQ6: How might we make relationships into something that brings wellbeing consistently over time, beyond and past the event?
3. Conscious relational distancing rather than a shift up the institutional hierarchy?
DQ7: How can the leadership manifest and model that the relational bonds are the foundation and should serve as a starting point for promoting wellbeing and social justice? DQ8: How might we institutionalize a stronger focus on understanding, nurturing, and building relationships for co-creating wellbeing within our public organizations and culture?
4. Is there a mutual curiosity and equal interest?
DQ9: How might we listen more than we speak in our interactions with the young? DQ10: What might we learn if truly being open and curious about the life, ideas, and perspectives of the young?
5. What if youth engagement is more about relationships and how we interact rather than around what?
DQ11: How do we invite and hold space for relationships with the young in a way that enables the most engaging and important initiatives and conversations to emerge? DQ12: What higher and long-term purpose would provide a deeper meaning and attraction to this event? DQ13: How might relationships be nurtured by including acts of empathy, kindness, and relational responsibility in the event design?
6. When do we meet as whole persons rather than in a role or concerning a narrow question?
DQ14: How do we hold space and give time really to see and meet the young as whole persons, beyond a narrow agenda and our current roles? DQ15: What questions and/or designed experiences could facilitate such genuine interactions?

Future research could potentially explore and further elaborate on practices and new ways of relating, inspired by the questions above.

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Reflection Questions

Reflect on your younger years. Have you ever experienced a strong and respectful connection with another person or living being, where both of you supported each other and felt like you mattered? If so, how did that experience make you feel, and in what ways has it influenced the person you are today and your relationships?

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