

The Human Happiness of Sustainable Design

Samantha Foss

Texas State University

Sustainability is a buzz word in the world of environmentalists, but is often underestimated in the field of human services. The general public is often unaware of the fact that sustainability efforts within a community have an impact on not only the environment but also people. Current research shows links to higher self-reported rates of happiness within communities that focus on sustainability (Cloutier, Jambeck, & Scott, 2014). This research and understanding of a community's attitude around sustainable design could have substantial impact on public policies surrounding environmental legislation and citizen's overall happiness. This paper will explore the research of sustainable development and design and the impact on communities.

Social workers often think of communities as the result of interactions between people, but often undermine the impact of a community's attitude toward the environment as a precursor to citizen happiness. Social workers must think on a macro scale of what impacts the health and well-being of the communities they are serving in order to address systemic, cyclical, issues. This research will explore the macro system of community while focusing on health, with the designated topic of health and well-being of citizens as a result of sustainably-oriented communities. This paper will help outline the reasons why policies that advocate for sustainable design will not only impact the long-term health of the environment, but also have positive long-term health for humans.

Before exploring the research, it is useful to define all the key terms that will be used throughout this paper. Community defined in context to this topic will be described as people with common interests and goals living in a geographically close area (Community, n.d.). Sustainable design, abbreviated to SD for the remainder of this paper, is any community structure that aims to meet the needs of now without undermining the needs of the future

(Cloutier et al., 2014). And lastly, happiness will be defined as generally having more positive emotions than negative emotions in life (Cloutier et al, 2014).

The research discussed in this paper uses varying measures to understand the impact of these terms on humans within a community. Topics of research will start with the barriers to sustainability, the long-term impacts of sustainability, social work theories that support sustainability as a framework to happy communities, and current and future policies to promote SD for community happiness. The range of topics will allow for a holistic understanding of what SD can offer to communities to help workers create healthier, happier communities that they serve.

### **Challenges to sustainability on a macro level**

#### **Poverty barriers**

The Brundtland Report defined sustainable development as “development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (World Commission on Environment and Development, WCED, 1987). The goal of SD can be overwhelmingly difficult for a multitude of communities and people interested in this theory of happiness development. Many times the cost of creating infrastructure or new city-wide technologies are above the means of poverty-stricken areas (Wilson, 2012).

The variance of people with resources to partake in sustainable design movements is an issue that is necessary to examine for social justice. Not only does poverty impact the ability to afford new technologies and better community design, but it also creates tensions between citizens. Communities that have higher levels of inequities between the rich and poor may have less social cohesion than a mainly middle class community (Oliver, 1999; Wilson, 2012). It has been found that Americans tend to have lower levels of self-reported happiness in years of

feeling extensive economic inequalities than the years with less inequities (Oishi, Kesebir & Diener, 2011). Understanding this reality helps in examining the challenges that impede communities from SD and, in turn, happiness.

### **Policy barriers**

Though the proof that SD impacts overall happiness of communities and the citizens within them, there is a challenging, slow progression toward policy changes. Many times the issues of design and infrastructure have varying impacts on people throughout the community. As with any issue, conflicts often arise because working toward one person's happiness in a community may make another unhappy. For example, while people experiencing homelessness may want to live in a park that allows them to be safe, others may consider this circumstance not sustainable and therefore petition to remove people living in their park. Changing policies can harm certain groups of people while directly helping others. These conflicts may be more prevalent in more culturally diverse communities, which may have greater divergence among residents' personalities and values (Cloutier & Pfeiffer, 2015).

The systems perspective sheds light on the issues of implementing policy (Hutchison, 2013). The systems perspective shows that physical and societal systems are intertwined, often creating tension (Van Bueren & De Jong, 2007). This comes into play when government officials or business owners are deciding whether to eco-consciously renovate areas of town or to tear down and build new. It also comes into play in deciding nature layouts in cities, education programs in schools, and housing requirements. The tensions among what is best for the future or community can directly compete with vested interests in quick-gain outcomes. The opposing or complementary goals create or impede possible policies to promote community sustainability and happiness.

## **Long-term benefits of sustainable design**

### **Rational Choice Perspective**

The rational choice perspective explains human behavior as a response to each person's goals and their choices on how to most effectively reach them (Hutchison, 2013). It is believable to assume that most humans want to be happy, and sustainable design can help promote that goal. With that in mind, social workers can take a rational choice perspective approach to why to promote and advocate for sustainable design living with clients and their community as a whole.

On a micro level, the human benefits to health are evident. Data collected by Monopolis demonstrated that Americans who practice voluntary simplicity self-report 17% to 20% higher in well-being than the average American (2011). Monopolis declares voluntary simplicity to be in conjunction with sustainable design by a person's commitment to simple living in regards to material possessions, and lessening life chaos (2011). This shift in what matters and what we spend time on is what alters personal happiness. This conscious lifestyle allows a person to understand how one chooses to live and how one chooses to consume impacts what one values and the meaning of life (Escobar-Tello, 2016).

Through a macro lens of happiness there are also gains to be had. Communities can contribute to happiness and well-being with a more sustainable approach to living. SD allows for innovation and design that promotes community members to engage in creating change in problems bigger than their own self (Escobar-Tello, 2016). By navigating ways to shift a community to have SD it brings people closer by caring about neighbors, future generations, and their own goals for a more fulfilling happiness. The results and analysis of the data gathered by Escobar-Tello showed that translating these complex values into tangible sustainable design

values creates an innovative 'Design for Happiness' mind-set beneficial to communities participating in such revolutions (2016).

### **Social Exchange Theory**

Social exchange is founded on the premise that social behavior is dictated by aiming to get greater resources and better outcomes in the social marketplace while minimizing negative costs (Hutchison, 2013). Social relationships health and capital within the social marketplace are shaped by that community characteristics. These characteristics include conditions of the tangible environment like housing layouts and designs, land use for public parks or corporate structures, and street connectivity for walking and biking. Emerging research has demonstrated relationships among urban design, population density and social cohesion make impacts on happiness (Cloutier & Pfeiffer, 2015).

This approach to improving happiness shifts social exchanges into positive gains. By promoting community-level happiness there is a focus on social equity, environmental protection, economic development, and long-term thinking for the future of communities. These goals not only benefit each person, it also better engages citizens into caring about the happiness of those around them with understandable goals presented in community action efforts toward a sustainable future (Cloutier & Pfeiffer, 2015).

In our globalized society social exchange theory plays out on a large scale. The actions of one system or location can have rippling impacts far greater than ever before. There are immediate and short-term consequences, while other actions have enduring effects. This globalized perspective further pushes the benefits of combining happiness with sustainability by emphasizing our never-ending interdependence, and our impacts on the happiness or turmoil of others. The intention of communities should be not to ignore or avoid environmental

deterioration, but rather analyze and understand about pathways that lead to sustainability and well-being for the world (O'Brien, 2013).

### **Social Behavioral Perspective**

Social behavioral perspective is another tool to understand SD and its impact on happiness. This perspective relies on the idea that human interaction with others or environment shapes a person's behaviors; varying mechanisms of feedback and response can create changes in a person or community by conditioning for certain responses (Hutchison, 2013). This perspective allows social workers the possibility to understand how social interactions shape choices such as sustainable practices that impact happiness.

People who participate in sustainable practices receive feedback encouraging continuation of their choices on the micro level. By lightening personal burdens and cleansing possessions in an attempt to practice voluntary simplicity, one gains happiness (Monopolis, 2011). Viewed through the lens of sustainable design many personal choices can have a larger, intrinsic value. The choice to buy organic, pasture-raised eggs from the farmer's market can bring better nutrition to a person's life, but through the larger lens it brings much more; the eggs bring philosophical ideas of the ethics of animals, the impact on soil and environmental mindfulness, the support of local economy, and connection to the neighborhood compost for the community garden. This metaphorical and physical feeling of doing well for the world and one's self promotes the continuation of positive choices.

Humans learn through other human's reactions to their choices. If a person chooses to plant vegetables in their yard for the neighborhood while another chooses to put a hateful sign in their yard, the consequential feedback from these actions will shape future choices. "Our natural desire for happiness becomes the entry point for discovering that our well-being is inextricably

associated with the well-being of others and the natural environment” (O’Brien, 2013). If communities pay mind to this human fact, there is potential for exponential gains.

Social relationships may also lead to social capital, such as the collection knowledge and resources from others. This capital creates feedback that allows self-growth, and often pivots into confidence and happiness. Social capital begins to accrue when we trust and reciprocate with one another and share information and common social norms, which can affirm or detract from sustainability efforts (Cloutier & Pfeiffer, 2015). It is likely that if a community is practicing sustainable goals, the information shared and the norms created perpetuate the progress.

### **Public Policies in Sustainable Design**

In response to the issues raised in prior sections of this paper social workers should analyze the policies happening now, and what may be created in the future. The long-term goals of sustainable development harvest a plethora of constructive outcomes for communities. Often thinking of sustainability efforts, people generalize a need to sacrifice for the environment, neighbors, or their own personal reserves. Research indicates that SD requires no sacrifices in happiness, but that designs actually improve happiness and sustainability simultaneously (Zidansek, 2007).

### **History of SD policies in other countries**

The application of macro level social theories and changes has been happening on a global scale for some time. Social workers must understand these systems in order to be active in policy-making and advocating through their communities and personal clients when applicable. When working on nurturing a happier self, client, or community it is worthwhile to pay attention to what is working in other areas of the country and world.

For education-based social workers in schools, libraries, or within the community there is evidence that promoting SD through promoting sustainable happiness is effective. At Cape Breton University in Nova Scotia, Canada there are currently classes being offered through multiple intersecting degree plans in order to educate students about sustainable designed communities and their impact on individual happiness (O'Brien, 2013). This program works by bringing in social exchange theory and rational choice perspective in choosing how to live and that choice's influence on daily happiness.

Additionally, Bhutan and Thailand are phenomenal leaders in SD, and social workers should understand their policies. By doing so, social workers could urge the American government to reflect Bhutan's understanding of human happiness. Bhutan tracks nine domains that affect happiness for the assessment of their Gross National Happiness including psychological well-being or mental health, physical health, time and work-life balance, social connection and relationships, and environmental (Baramuechai, 2007). Thailand uses the Green and Happiness Index which reflects many of the same priorities, including surroundings and ecological systems (Baramuechai, 2007). These governments are actively promoting an understanding of physical surroundings impacting their citizen's well-being.

### **Current SD policy for the United States**

The implementation of policies in the United States has been created in some education efforts and city policies. The policies promote a connection to community, self, and broad understanding. Firstly, education such as 21st-century learning, Health Promoting Schools programs, social and emotional learning, and entrepreneurship education are contributing to United States expansion of SD ideas (O'Brien, 2013).

Research in local communities suggests that this ought to be thought of when planning cities, for example, by increasing cycle lanes. These approaches, aimed at aligning behaviors with sustainability, address extremely vital aspects of progressing toward a sustainable future; and certainly deserve further attention (Kjell, 2011). These programs are alive in a variety of cities, including Austin. This November Austin passed a bond to create safer ways to travel through the city on bike for a more inclusive, cleaner, way to travel through the city (2016 Mobility Bond, 2016). Other states focused on sustainable design are Vermont, Washington, and Oregon (Marcus & Wingfield, 2007). By looking at their successes and failures in policies and implementation social workers can more deeply apply these lessons to their communities.

### **Conclusion**

As a country proud of a long history of fighting for injustices and promoting equality amongst all citizens, there are a multitude of improvements needing to be made. Social workers need to practice advocating for sustainable design in the micro, mezzo, and macro level of work. With a holistic approach progress is inevitable. The goals for policy must be made at local, state and federal levels to reach all possible avenues of sustainable design implementation.

In order to create support for these policies we must realize that everything we consume and our impact on the planet effects our happiness (Escobar-Tello, 2016). The happiness of one's self also complements the lives of others. The string of connection amplifies choices impacting each other and the environment. Communities must provide opportunities for residents to achieve meaningful and long-term happiness, by considering how a future of SD might also contribute to happiness and sustainability (Cloutier et al, 2014).

Social workers should consider their communities as living, breathing, feeling organisms that must be looked after to support all the lives within them. By analyzing and understanding various theoretical perspectives and their role in SD happiness for clients and community's social workers can better promote SD through policy work and individual case management. The research presented in this paper creates a clear affirmation that a multidimensional approach confirms the impacts of SD.

We must promote these findings with advocacy throughout our community with environmentalists, public policy players, community stakeholders, and government agencies. With incremental changes such as changes the walking plans of a city, protecting and promoting green spaces, advocating for simple living, and engaging in dialogue about community ethics there can be long-term changes to the community. With social exchange perspective we can understand the social marketplace and the gains that can come from SD within it; with social behavioral perspective we can understand how to keep promoting actions and interactions for SD and happiness; with rational choice perspective we can relay relatable reasons that community's and their members will understand, and will encourage the want to enact changes to endorse SD.

It is evident that sustainable design will aid the present struggles of living things, and also create a better world for a tomorrow. It is each person's duty to make changes with the want to change things because they bring good feelings, patterns and impact to one's self and environment. These steps are not sacrifices, but instead are shifts to obtain the great rewards our future holds of possibilities for a stronger environment to nourish stronger, happier communities.

## References

- 2016 Mobility Bond. (2016). Retrieved November 20, 2016, from <http://austintexas.gov/2016bond>
- Baramuechai, J., 2007. The Green and Happiness Index. International Conference on Happiness and Public Policy , UN Conference Center, Bangkok, Thailand.
- Cloutier, S., Jambeck, J., & Scott, N. (2014). The Sustainable Neighborhoods for Happiness Index (SNHI): A metric for assessing a community's sustainability and potential influence on happiness. *Ecological Indicators*, 40147-152.  
doi:10.1016/j.ecolind.2014.01.012
- Cloutier, S., & Pfeiffer, D. (2015). Sustainability Through Happiness: A Framework for Sustainable Development. *Sustainable Development*, 23(5), 317-327.  
doi:10.1002/sd.1593
- Community. (n.d.). Retrieved October 19, 2016, from <http://www.dictionary.com/>
- Escobar-Tello, C. (2016). A Design Framework to Build Sustainable Societies: Using Happiness as Leverage. *Design Journal*, 19(1), 93-115. doi:10.1080/14606925.2016.1109206
- Hutchison, E. D. (2013). Essentials of human behavior: Integrating person, environment, and the life course. Los Angeles, CA: Sage.
- Kjell, O. N. (2011). Sustainable well-being: A potential synergy between sustainability and well-being research. *Review Of General Psychology*, 15(3), 255-266. doi:10.1037/a0024603
- Marcus, M., & Wingfield, B. (2007). America's Greenest States. Retrieved November 20, 2016, from [http://www.forbes.com/2007/10/16/environment-energy-vermont-biz-beltway-cx\\_bw\\_mm\\_1017greenstates.html](http://www.forbes.com/2007/10/16/environment-energy-vermont-biz-beltway-cx_bw_mm_1017greenstates.html)
- Monopolis, A. N. (2011). Voluntary Simplicity, authentic happiness, and ecological

- sustainability: An empirical psychological analysis of deliberate reductions in consumption and the cultivation of intrinsic values on subjective well-being in addition to a conceptual exploration regarding the impact of individual simplicity and socio-economic localization on global ecological sustainability. *Dissertation Abstracts International*, 71, 7067.
- O'Brien, C. (2013). Happiness and Sustainability Together at Last! Sustainable Happiness. *Canadian Journal Of Education*, 36(4), 228-256.
- Oliver, J. (1999). The effects of metropolitan economic segregation on local civic participation. *American Journal of Political Science* 43(1): 186–212.
- Wilson, W. (2012). *The Truly Disadvantaged: the Inner City, the Underclass, and Public Policy*, University of Chicago Press: Chicago, IL.
- World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED) (1987). *Our common future*. United Nations.
- Zidanssek, A., 2007. Sustainable development and happiness in nation. *Energy* 32, 891–897.