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"Just the freedom to get good at things and stuff like that": Why spending less time at work would be good for individual, social and environmental wellbeing.

Introduction

Reducing the length of the working week is an idea which has been gaining traction for a number of years now. Even before the global shutdown precipitated by COVID19, economic stagnation, the threat of job losses due to automation and Artificial Intelligence (AI) and the looming catastrophe of climate change, UK politicians and policymakers were considering major adjustments to working times and the social contract. During the 2019 UK general election campaign, a Universal Basic Income (UBI) trial and a shift to a 32-hour work week were included in the manifesto of the UK Labour party. Whilst many on the political right expressed deep scepticism about such policies, public appetite for working time reductions (WTRs) seems to be growing. A YouGov Poll in the UK in 2019 on support for a 4-day week showed 63 percent were in favour and 71 percent of people thought it would make the nation happier (YouGov, 2019). The idea that we could work less and maintain or improve living standards has significant historical precedence. In 1930 J M Keynes suggested that technological progress would soon allow us to work only 15 hours a week (Keynes, 1963).

Previous research on whether enacting the policy would be beneficial for individuals, families, wider communities and the planet has been primarily quantitative or theoretical (e.g.: Buhl & Acosta, 2016; Devetter & Rousseau, 2011; Hayden, 2006; Knight, et al., 2013; Dengler & Strunk, 2018; Hanbury, et al., 2019; Kamerāde, et al., 2019; Wang, et al., 2022). Research on the link between time affluence and wellbeing has shown that increased time affluence means people spend more time on activities which meet their psychological needs (Kasser & Sheldon, 2009) and that people who value free time appear to be happier (Hershfield, et al., 2016; Whillans, et al., 2016). However, there have been fewer attempts to explore empirically how the potential benefits of reduced working hours would be operationalised and understood. Drawing on in-depth interviews with people who have already taken steps to reduce their hours of work, this paper investigates further why having more free time is likely to be beneficial for individual, social and ecological wellbeing. During coding we noticed a resonance between the way people used their free time and Self-Determination Theory (SDT), a well validated psychological theory which suggests that feelings of relatedness, autonomy and competence are necessary, and thus beneficial, for psychological wellbeing. On this basis we have organised our data according to these categories of experience to highlight the mechanisms through which spending less time at work contributes towards improved wellbeing. An examination of how time is used when working hours are reduced could indicate the broader implications of implementing WTR policies.

Here we are interested in *how* and *why* reduced working hours affect wellbeing given the policy's prominence in post-growth, degrowth and post-work visions of the future. Many people instinctively grasp the advantages of working less but these intuitions have so far not been tested empirically. Degrowth writing in particular has well developed conceptualisations of how working less will faciliate improved wellbeing and the good life. Thus we begin the process of testing whether their expectations of improved social and ecologcal harmony are bourne out by the lived reality of those working fewer hours. However, as the degrowth project is about much more than WTRs and envisages deep structural and political transformations away from a growth-centred, linear, fossil fuel driven capitalist economy our reflections on the the social and ecological implications of WTRs are necessarily circumspect and partial. There is insufficient space here to deliniate the contours of this vast transformative project and its implications for economy and society more generally. As such it is not our intention in this paper to assess the economic ramifications of a widespread reduction in working hours (such as its implications for employment or productivity) or to layout the intricacies of WTR implementation and its co-dependency with other progressive policies such as UBI and/or Universal Basic Services. These issues remain the subject of much debate. (See Bosch & Lehndorff, 2001; Kallis, et al., 2013; Kallis, 2018; D'Alisa, et al., 2015; Spiegelaere & Piasna, 2017; Frey, et al., 2020; Cárdenas & Villanueva, 2021; Alcott, 2013; Buchs, 2021; D'Alessandro, et al., 2018 for examples of more detailed discussion of degrowth policy options).

The structure of the paper is as follows. First we present an overview of SDT and its use as a framework for assessing eudemonic, needs based wellbeing, then we discuss previous approaches to understanding the relationship between time use, work and wellbeing. After that we consider degrowth engagements with wellbeing in more detail. This is followed by details of the research design. In the empirical sections we present how less time at work allowed respondants to partake in caring activities and the cultivation of friendships (relatedness), to develop new skills and use the ones they already had in different arenas (competence) and to reduce alienation and increase feelings of self-determination and freedom (autonomy). In the final section of this paper we discuss the impilcations of our findings for individual, social and ecolgical wellbeing.

Self-Determination Theory and wellbeing

We frame our discussion of how WTRs are likely to contribute to improved individual wellbeing around the three psychological needs identified by Self-Determination Theory (SDT) for the optimal function of social development and personal wellbeing. These are the need for competence,

relatedness and autonomy (Sheldon, et al., 2001; Deci & Ryan, 2000). Within SDT autonomy is understood as 'the need to experience one's behaviour as volitional and self-endorsed', competence as 'the need to experience efficacy and mastery in important activities in one's life' and, relatedness as 'the need to feel significant and connected to important others' (DeHaan, et al., 2016, p. 2039). The validity of needs as opposed to preference based approaches to is well established (Ryan & Deci, 2017; Gough, 2015).

SDT is a broadly eudemonic approach to wellbeing which views 'living well in terms of pursuing goals which are intrinsically valued and of processes that are characterised by autonomy and awareness'. As such, the focus is 'on the *content* of one's life, and the *processes* involved in living well, whereas a hedonic approach to well-being focuses on specific *outcomes*, namely the attainment of positive affect and the absence of pain' (Ryan, et al., 2008, p. 140; 163). SDT does not view hedonic and eudemonic approaches to wellbeing as oppositional as some have suggested, (eg. Lamb & Steinberger, 2017) rather it is the means through which hedonic outcomes are achieved which is important.

The wellbeing 'functionings' proposed by SDT are parsimonious in comparison to many more philosophical to eudemonia (e.g. Max-Neef, 1992; Nussbaum, 2000 etc) and unfortunately do not foreground the relationality and symbiosis that exists between human wellbeing and the natural environment. However, key proponents of the theory are attuned to these important questions and have suggested that there is some overlap between the fulfilment of SDT needs and ecological sustainability in terms of individual consumption decisions and other types of pro-environmental behaviour (Kasser, 2017; Kasser, 2009; Kasser & Sheldon, 2009). Buchs and Koch (2019) support a eudemonic and needs based approach to wellbeing for scholars working in the degrowth tradition as what they term 'real' needs can be satisfied with low resource inputs.The openness of the needs specified by SDT help avoid charges of paternalism which have been directed towards more rigid approaches (e.g., Nussbaum's capabilities approach) (Smith & Reid, 2017).

Time use, work and wellbeing

Debates around the role that work *does* and *should* play in society have recently been attracting significant interest given a widespread suspicion tapped into by David Graeber (2018) and Rutger Bregman (2017) that due to bureaucracy, presenteeism and unnecessary consumption we perform far more waged work than is strictly necessary. Although wage and GDP growth continue to be viewed as important indicators of a well-functioning economy,[1] long term increases in GDP have not

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[1] A point that we would dispute, but which there is insufficient space to address in this article.

been found to produce proportionate improvements in subjective wellbeing[2] (SWB) and life expectancy,[3] although countries with higher GDP do tend towards higher levels of life satisfaction (Easterlin, et al., 2010; Kahneman, et al., 2006). The reasons for this are understood to be due to the influence of social comparison; changes in GDP do not necessarily produce changes in relative status and the adaption of material expectations; as aspirations rise these offset the positive impact of income increase on wellbeing over time (Sekulova, 2015). Kahneman et al. suggest that the failure of increases in GDP to trigger improved wellbeing is also related to the way in which we spend our time: 'As income rises, people's time use does not appear to shift towards activities that are associated with improved affect' (Kahneman, et al., 2006). Kate Soper (2020) has developed this intuition further by showing how contemporary consumerism, and the long hours work culture this requires, robs us of time to engage in alternative hedonisms such as 'the pleasures of art, craft and sociable living' (p146).

Much of the empirical research explicitly on the relationship between time use and wellbeing has taken place within happiness economics tradition in which the value of free time is predicated upon notions of scarcity and consumer preferences for leisure or work, derived from utility theory in neoclassical economics. These conceptualisations of a rational self-interested subject continuously orientated towards happiness optimisation do not cohere well with degrowth approaches which emphasise our interconnectedness and relationality, and have been explicitly critiqued by those in favour of needs based approaches to wellbeing (eg Gough, 2015) and degrowth/post growth scholars (eg. Demaria, et al., 2013; Raworth, 2017) who push for a less self-interested more relational conceptualisation of individual subjects. Nevertheless, we include discussion of this literature as this is the body of work which has engaged most explicitly with the question of how time-use patterns, and in particular the amount of time we spend at work, affects wellbeing.

Research into hedonic wellbeing patterns across the day suggest that for many work is one of the least pleasurable times of the day (Kahneman, et al., 2004; Bryson & MacKerron, 2015; Knabe, et al., 2010; Wolf, et al., 2019). Research into the wellbeing differential between employed and unemployed people in Germany found because the unemployed can allocate more time to activities more satisfying than work, such as sport and seeing friends, although they are on average 'sadder' when engaged in leisure activities, their average affects across the day are similar because they spend less time at work (Knabe, et al., 2010). These findings were confirmed by Wolf et al. (2019) who found that although work is one of the least pleasurable activities it is also one of the most

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[2] Subjective well-being (SWB) is commonly defined as 'a person's cognitive and affective evaluation of his or her life' (Diener, et al., 2009, p. 1)

[3] Life expectancy is often used as an objective measure of wellbeing (Büchs & Koch, 2019).

meaningful, although taking care of children and exercise were experienced as the most meaningful overall. This suggests that if, without making people unemployed, we reduce the amount of time allocated to displeasurable experiences like work, thereby eliminating the 'saddening effect', while allowing people to continue to experience the meaningfulness of work then it is likely that across the whole population hedonic wellbeing would increase overall.

However, wellbeing is much more than just moment-to-moment happiness, and as such hedonic wellbeing has been criticised as being an overly individualistic indicator unable to provide insight into the eudemonic aspects of wellbeing (White & Jha, 2018). Even with the inclusion of more eudemonic indicators the reduction of wellbeing to easily quantifiable metrics has also understandably been viewed with suspicion, especially as these critiques echo many of the problems identified with using GDP (Lamb & Steinberger, 2017; Smith & Reid, 2017). The measurement of people's SWB positions them as consumers rating the satisfaction with their lives. Given that almost everyone wants to be happy, happiness becomes a marker of our success, producing the very real possibility that a 'false self' will emerge from this type of research (White, 2017). With this in mind, our research design was open and rather than asking people to identify specific momentary (arbitrary?) emotional states, we instead gave them space to outline how their lives had changed as a result of working less and then traced links between the way in which newly acquired time was being used and a eudemonic psychological needs-based understanding of human wellbeing.

Wellbeing and the degrowth agenda

The degrwoth project is broadly about meeting human needs without transgressing planetary boundaries. Degrowth has been defined as the 'equitable downscaling of production and consumption that increases human well-being and enhances ecological conditions at the local and global level, in the short and long term' (Schneider, et al., 2010, p. 511). Whether spending less time at work promotes wellbeing is an important question as WTRs/work-sharing agreements are a key plank of the degrowth project (Kallis, et al., 2013; Norgard, 2013; Kallis, 2018).

Reducing production and consumption is almost certain to be required if 1.5 or even 2 degrees of climate warming is not to be surpassed (Raworth, 2017; Keyßer & Lenzen, 2021). However, a shrinking economy may mean that labour markets contract and fewer jobs are available, although complex interactions between "lumps" of labour, fixed costs and spending patterns mean that it is unlikely that the reduction in hours worked will lead to a proportionate redistribution of hours (Spiegelaere & Piasna, 2017). Work sharing is one way to avoid the social harm and politically destabilising effects of unemployment. Unfortunately, as Büchs and Koch have noted, 'there are no

historical examples of societal wide degrowth', and thus there is an 'absence of empirical data that could be examined to study its effects on wellbeing' (2019, p. 162).

Research has shown that to prevent the transgression of planetary boundaries basic needs must be met by a much lower level of resource use than is currently, if this is to be the case. Human needs theory (THN) is an attractive theory of wellbeing in this context as it presents human needs finite and satiable with a sufficiency of consumption. THN which like SDT views human needs as universal and objective, independently proposes autonomy (plus health) as the key mental capacity which must be fulfilled in order for someone to enact whatever goals are meaningful to them (Doyal & Gough, 1991). The definition of autonomy used includes aspects of what SDT would subdivide into competence and autonomy. Relatedness is viewed as an intermediate need which supports and is supported by autonomy (Ryan & Deci, 2017).

There are significant parallels between the cateogies of experience necessary for wellbeing stressed by SDT and the vision of the future painted by degrowth protagonists. For example D'Alisa et al. have argued that, 're-centering a society around care would pave the way to degrowth'. This is partly because 'it reinstates the importance caring has on the wellbeing of the family, the neighbourhood and society as a whole' (D'Alisa et al 2015). Long hours of work lead to social dislocation and hinder our escape from the alienation inherent within much modern employment (Jaffe, 2021). They supress the possibility for conviviality and the formation of close connections outside the nuclear family making caring activities more difficult. Degrowth and autonomy are also 'deeply entangled' (Deriu, 2015), with degrowth understandings of the term drawing heavily on the work of philosopher Castoriadis who viewed it as a mode of being in which 'a person rejects becoming a passive product of their psyche and history in favour of being an active co-author of their own life' (Castoriadis 1991 p165 from Windegger & Spash, 2021 p8) This work stresses the relationality and interconnectedness of human existence as well as the way in which capitalism threatens our autonomy via deskilling – almost all our basic needs are met by the market – and the removal of the requirement to think about what we desire in life (Deriu, 2015; Windegger & Spash, 2021). This understanding of the term is much more political in that it is explicitly incompatible with neoliberal capitalism. Finally, degrowth and SDT both emphasise reskilling and the potential implications of what has been termed the 'amateur economy' whereby some productive activities are slowed down, decentralised and become a source of personal satisfaction rather than being orientated around the creation of GDP (Norgard, 2013).

Research design

The data for this paper is drawn from an inductive piece of research which explored the lifeworlds of 40 people who had voluntarily reduced or limited the amount of time they dedicated to paid work. Analysis focuses on the naturally emerging language which they used to categorise and assign meaning to their experiences (Lune & Berg, 2017). Voluntarily reducing working hours was the key criterion of selection as previous research has shown that people who work part-time because they want to have significantly higher wellbeing levels than those who are underemployed (Author and Author, 2018). During the interviews we discussed at length how people's lives had changed as a result of spending less time at work. We found that respondents spoke very favourably about their decision despite the challenges working on a short hour contract posed: financial strain, loss of relative status, reduced social contact with work colleagues, and less time structure. Their motivations were varied but broadly speaking negative experiences at work and a lack of control over work hours and a desire to spend their time in more meaningful ways served to pull them out of work and push them towards other more varied activities (Author, et al., 2020).

Although we were broadly interested in wellbeing, we did not pose our questions in these terms as we did not wish to impose this framework of meaning on the interviewees (Joffe, 2012). Instead, we asked about the benefits of spending less time at work and then conducted thematic analysis on the data which were connected to this topic. During coding we noticed a resonance between the comments of our interviewees and SDT. More specifically, the ways in which interviewees conceptualised the benefits were more time for activities which were likely to generate feelings of relatedness, competence and autonomy.

We excluded from the study people who had reduced their hours primarily to devote more time to childcare, people suffering from ill-health, and people for whom a short hour schedule was a transition period, such as while studying. For some a conventional fulltime work week had only been endured for very short periods and thus they had worked short hours for most of their working life. For others the opposite was true, and most of their career had been spent working a conventional fulltime job until a shift in perspective led WTRs to be sought. Some of the people we spoke to had standard office jobs whilst others worked outside or away from home. The interviews lasted between 60 and 160 minutes and were audio recorded, transcribed and analysed using NVivo and by hand. Interviewees were recruited through online (e.g., a forum for rock climbers, those subscribed to a mailing list for 'Idlers' and a community of professional freelancers), personal networks (e.g. acquaintances of friends) and snowballing. Our use of heterogenous purposive sampling means that the sample was not representative, however this approach did allow us to collect a diverse set of perspectives, work biographies and social backgrounds.

The following sections use rich qualitative data to show how each of the three SDT needs were more easily fulfilled as a result of spending more time away from formal waged work. Our analysis considers what is so 'pleasurable' about certain types of leisure activities and why they may offer more than just hedonic benefits but may also contribute to improvements in eudemonic and evaluative aspects of wellbeing.

Results: Relatedness

Relatedness is a key psychological need posited by SDT and is experienced when 'one cares for and is cared by important others and is thwarted when one experiences isolation or disconnection' (DeHaan, et al., 2016, p. 2039). We highlight two relatedness-inducing time use practices that interviewees claimed were enabled by their decision to spend less at work. These were the cultivation of friendships and caring for vulnerable friends and family members.

Caring and the cultivation of friendships

Around half of the interviewees invested some of their extra spare time in developing meaningful relationships with people outside their immediate family, although this was something women in our sample were nearly twice as likely to do than men:

> I feel like I can be more there for my friends. I got a few friends with sort of mental health problems so I'm able to actually spend time with them and be with them and help them out and go to appointments with them and things like that which is a massive deal because friends are really important. (Carly – cancer nurse – 32 – 22.5 hours week).

This quote illustrates that time off may increase caring activities outside the nuclear family as degrowth advocates have hoped. The speaker also makes clear that this is a relational activity in that the benefits of the caring activity acts in both directions: her friend benefits from her support and she benefits from strengthening of the friendship.

When Cath reduced her hours, some of her additional free time was absorbed by helping her mother and sister attend hospital appointments for various health problems. She was also better able to support her nephew who was struggling with his mental health:

> I have a nephew, he's a bit, how do I put it, [phew] mental health. I've gotta take him up to this place on the industrial estate to see mental health nurse every 6 weeks. […] Just not getting a job, his dad never bothered and I think it just got all on top of him. Cut his wrists. He has no feeling now I think in his right hand. Yeah. He self-harmed himself. […] And it's took us, nearly, I would say 2 year, if not longer to get the mental health team in for him. I was just getting passed from pillar to post (Cath – home care assistant – approx. 25 hours a week – 50).

In our research we have tended to conceptualise work as an activity for which paid remuneration is received rather than socially reproductive activities, although the boundary between these two domains is fluid given that much socially reproductive labour is increasingly commodified, often due

to a lack of time (Lyon, 2010). The volume of work Cath was required to do also has an important structural dimension as she lived in a local authority which between 2011 and 2020 lost 55 percent of its budget (MacFarlane, 2019). This has inevitably meant cutbacks to basic services such as a patient transport or mental health support, increasing the care burden and associated workload for vulnerable communities. Many working-class women are socialised into caring work from an early age, as such caring subjectivities[4] are not pre-given but emerge from the practice of care work both in formal and informal settings (Hebson, et al., 2015). Cath also described how with her nephew she had built a bar in her garage which had a pool table, darts and a log burner. She socialised and cooked meals for her work friends here on a fortnightly basis. The situation Cath describes reveals how 'endemic care deficits' have become completely normalised and can only be solved by giving adequate funding and status to caring activities (Chatzidakis, et al., 2020, p. 9) (e.g., via the implementation of a universal care income). The 'promiscuous' care work performed by both Cath and Carly has the potential to improve the wellbeing of both givers and receivers of the care. For example, rather than viewing her emergent care responsibilities as a burden, Cath viewed the close connections to family and friends which were enabled by her short hour work contract as life enriching. She felt highly integrated into her local community due to her current job as a care worker visiting elderly people in their homes and her previous (long hours) job as a taxi driver.

For interviewees who had children, spending less time at work allowed them to cultivate social relationships outside the nuclear family which had previously absorbed practically all available time and energy:

> Because work used to seep into my weekends, I would almost jealously guard my weekends because if I wasn't working, I really wanted to spend time with my wife and family. Now I feel, yeah, great, would be lovely to see all those people who I've almost lost touch with (Phil – data analyst – 52-6weeks of work/6 weeks off work).

Similar themes were evident in other interviews as well. For example, Tony described 'catching up' as 'very important', noting that keeping 'people up to date with what I'm doing, finding out what they are doing is very meaningful' (self-employed disability needs assessor – 39 – 1-2 days a week).

Friendship and relations with extended kin are an important but diminishing part of social capital and important contributors to wellbeing. Friendship plays an important role in the facilitation of happiness, however the quality of the friendship and associated social interactions is important for the happiness and wellbeing benefits to be conferred (Cacioppo, et al., 2011; Demir & Weitekamp, 2006). Demir and Weitekamp assessed the quality of a friendship by scoring the 'provisions' it

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[4] Subjectivity can be used stood as 'one's understanding of self and of what it means and feels like to exist within a specific place, time, or set of relationships' (Morales and Harris, 2014; p. 706).

provides (companionship, help, intimacy, reliable alliance, self-validation and emotional security). They found that higher quality friendships predicted greater happiness and that in agreement with previous research (Baldassare, et al., 1984; Parlee, 1979) that companionship, understood as spending time and doing things together was the most important feature of friendship (Demir, et al., 2007; Demir & Weitekamp, 2006). These findings are important as companionship involves a time investment, thus if free time is hard to come by it seems likely that this key indicator of friendship quality and thus the ability of a friendship to contribute to happiness will also suffer. More regular contact with friends and leisure activities orientated around spending time with friends and family have been shown to improve subjective wellbeing and higher life satisfaction also (Brajsa-Zganec, et al., 2011; Baldassare, et al., 1984).

Although we excluded people from the study whose labour market participation was limited by childcare responsibilities, we spoke to a number of people (all men n = 6) who had children living at home, had them at home when they initially reduced their hours of work or were involved in their care if they were separated from their partners. Although providing childcare was not their primary motive for working a short-hours contract, they found that working less had led to increased involvement in the lives of their children. This was generally viewed as a welcome side effect of the decision to work short hours. Micky, who until having children a couple of years ago had organised his work routine in a way that maximised the amount of free time available to climb, noted:

> 'Being the only Dad at a lot of playgroups and things, I'm very aware that so many parents must be missing out on […] a lot of little moments of their child growing up. If you only see you child after nursery for 2 hours a night, then it goes without saying that you don't get to know them as well as if you see them throughout most of the day (sport training tool manufacturer – 30 hours a week (variable) – 33).

Here he is highlighting a change in not just the quantity of time he spends with his daughter but also the quality of their relationship. As in many of the quotes discussed previously the emphasis is on the development of a deeper, more robust connections which provide both hedonic and eudemonic benefits. When widespread WTRs were enacted in France in the early 2000s, an evaluation of the policy found that 52 percent of men spent more time with children (Hayden, 2006). Dengler and Strunk (2018) have argued it is vital that working term reductions are organised in a way which is sensitive to the temporal nature of many caring responsibilities. They suggest that a reduction in the length of the working day is likely to lead to more gender equitable outcomes than a shortening of the working week.

The experiences discussed above suggest that a reduction in working hours could lead to a 'profound transformation of values, so that both men and women would not experience work and family commitments as 'doubly burdened but as doubly enriched'' (Stoper, 1982 quoted in Sirianni and

Negrey, 2000). D'Alisa, Deriu, and Demaria (2015) argue that 're-centering a society around care would pave the way to degrowth' (2015: 64). The increased space created for care and activities which enable feelings of relatedness is an important aspect how de/post-growth economies hope to improve wellbeing in a context in which material affluence may be stagnant or declining. However, this is only going to be possible in a context where it isn't squeezed between long paid work hours and is allocated the time and status that this fundamental life enhancing activity deserves.

Results: Competence

Competence is a key psychological need, it 'occurs in environments that provide opportunities to acquire skills and obtain informational feedback that support effectiveness' (DeHaan, et al., 2016, p. 2039). Our interviews revealed that a significant proportion of time away from work was dedicated to activities which increased feelings of competence. This occurred primarily through skill development and skill utilisation. Skill development included allotment gardening, running, surfing, currency trading, climbing, motorbiking, cycling, writing novels, mini horror stories for podcasts, or children's books, amateur dramatics, learning the piano, monitoring radioactivity, learning to mend bikes and build community gardens and a wide variety of other activities.

Skill Development and utilisation

Almost all the interviewees took part in some form of competence enhancing activities outside work. Key areas for skill development were sport and creative activities such as learning an instrument or writing. Interviewees often perceived the ability to develop skills in a variety of arenas as a key advantage of spending less time at work: 'I get bored with things, I like to learn new things' commented Hans (42 - self-employed web designer – 30 hours). Some interviewees stressed the mutually reinforcing dynamic whereby the first step was to create space for alternative activities:

> 'It's almost like you have to create space in your life and then other things will come and fill it. […] So, I've kind of created a little bit of space for other things you know with the French, for instance which I absolutely love learning French and I'm not going to stop until I'm fluent. […] I've done arts and crafts and glass making' (Paula – 43 – educational psychologist – 3-4 days a week)

The interviewees were drawn towards non-workplace based competencies as it seemed that many did not want to be defined by the skills they had acquired at work. Skill development was thus considered a means to exercise autonomy as we discuss in more detail below. When outlining the benefits of reduced hours Seth commented: 'It's definitely just the freedom to like, to get good at things and stuff like that' (33 – self-employed gardener – 4-days approx. a week). Many of the skill development activities engaged in by our interviewees were conducive to flow experiences such as playing instruments, writing, climbing or different types of craft. Flow is understood as concentration, enjoyment, intrinsic motivation and a match between challenge and skill level, often

requiring the mastery of new skills (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). Recent research on the relationship between time use and subjective wellbeing found that although flow experiences have a positive effect on in-the-moment wellbeing, they did not seem to translate into more permanent higher wellbeing (Isham, et al., 2019). Other interviewees enjoyed exercising competencies gained in their working lives in contexts of their own choosing such as during voluntary work. For example, Maxwell talked in detail about how he was able to use skills acquired as an electrical design engineer to design apparatuses which solved problems that arose during voluntary work for a moorland regeneration charity.

Others reported that skills acquired outside work improved their ability to perform well at their jobs, thus increasing feelings of competence in this arena as well:

> 'Interestingly, my passion for theatre and writing novels, has really developed my skills within advertising as well. Because storytelling is a key factor, different formats, and stuff, and you see innovation in different sectors and you kind of think about how you can bring that through' (Anna – 42 – freelance media strategist – 4 days a week (variable).

This idea that how we use our leisure time outside work has implications for our performance at work has been explored by occupational psychologists who suggest that individuals who have higher levels of detachment/recovery during leisure time experience higher levels of engagement when they return to work (Sonnentag, 2003; Boekhorst, et al., 2017). Work engagement aids initiative taking and the pursuit of learning goals. Further, recovery is aided by specific recovery experiences such as psychological detachment, relaxation and mastery (Binnewies, et al., 2010; Sonnentag, et al., 2008). As such, it is possible that having more free time facilitates the development of skills which can trigger feelings of mastery. This allows higher levels of recovery which not only produces feelings of competence outside work, but which also aids learning at work increasing competence in this domain as well.

Half of our interviewees took part in some kind of voluntary work, and environmentally orientated volunteering activities were particularly prevalent amongst our interviewees, probably as voluntarily working less is often associated with non-materialistic values and environmentalism. Volunteering included environmental conservation, regeneration and monitoring, as well as activities which promote more sustainable (circular) use of resources. Other studies (Buhl & Acosta, 2016; Hanbury, et al., 2019) have demonstrated how working less increases social engagement via intensifying social relationships and increasing voluntary work. The uptick in voluntary activities is important as it can be conceived as a shift from activities that are orientated around the creation of GDP to those which have a more direct and genuine social use and value. The wellbeing benefits of feelings of competency outside work sometimes seemed to be related to the development of skills and

activities which had social value or allowed interviewees to develop skills which may have increased feelings of autonomy and self-sufficiency which (as noted earlier) can be erased through the commodification inherent within the capitalist economy.

Results: Autonomy

The need for autonomy has always been the most controversial of the three psychological needs emphasised by SDT (Chirkov, et al., 2003). In SDT autonomy 'is afforded when behaviour is experienced as choiceful and volitional' (DeHaan, et al., 2016). In SDT the opposite of autonomy is not dependence, as those who feel the theory overstates the importance of the western value of individualism have suggested, but heteronomy (i.e. when actions are experienced as alien to the self and someone is compelled to behave in a way which does not necessarily align with their interests (Chirkov, et al., 2003). In the discussion below we separate the autonomy related benefits outlined by interviewees into two categories: a stronger sense of freedom and self-determination and decreased feelings of alienation at work, although these are arguably two sides of the same coin.

Alienation, self-determination and freedom

Marx views alienation as an unavoidable reality of life under capitalism which requires the atomisation of tasks, increasing specialisation from workers, and prevents us from becoming our true selves. Psychological and subjective conceptualisations of alienation derived from his work focus on feelings of powerlessness, meaninglessness, isolation and self-estrangement (Seeman, 1959). As Soffia et al. (2021) argue: 'workers might see their work as useless and suffer reduced wellbeing when work does not provide them with the means to use and develop their skills, abilities and capacities, or because their abilities are denied by others in the workplace' (p6). John expressed his feelings of alienation at work very clearly:

> I'm playing a role when I'm doing that kind of a job, it's not really me. […] So, I didn't have a great deal of autonomy. How you have autonomy working for [Company X]? You know, it's a fairly constrained job there's not much, scope for doing your own thing. Being in management, it doesn't feel meaningful, you don't feel that you'd come home from a day of 'yeah, I did a great day of managing'. You know, middle managing. So, it just didn't have any […] any kind of challenge that I was particularly interested in (John – 54 – ex-IT manager – 1-2 days a month).

John's comment explicitly references powerlessness, meaninglessness and isolation, he is both indifferent and detached from work but in addition he hints at self-estrangement, and the need to perform an identity which he feels no connection to, reminiscent of the emotional labour required of customer facing service workers. His comment that the work did not contain 'any kind of challenge that I was particularly interested in' indicates that feelings of competence in areas which are not autonomously chosen are less valuable than when someone views the competency as an authentic mode of self-expression.

As the quote below illustrates, Tom also experienced strong feelings of alienation at work, and like many of the other interviewees a reduction in work was associated with increased feelings of autonomy.

> 'I seem to be surrounded by people who […] just seem quite unhappy with repetitively doing the same task over and over again as quickly as possible for money. […] I don't think I can sign up to do this for the next 45 years. […] I vowed that by the age of 40, I'd be able to get up every single day of my life and if I chose to, I would be able to make every decision: that of where, what I wanted to do that day. […] I could choose to go to work. I could choose if I wanted to not work' (Tom – 37 – carpenter – project work: days off work = days at work).

Tom outlined how following a period of ill-health ten years ago he had significantly reduced the role work played in his life and since then each period of work was followed by a period of time away from work of equal length. He described how this made him feel:

> 'I really do feel like I'm retired. I don't feel like I work. […] Work is not there but my want for money is zero. It's absolutely zero. […] I suppose I'm lucky. I do work in a world where the pay scale is above what you need to live on but, is it? Also, you can increase that by needing and wanting less, which is very natural for me, anyway.' (Tom – 37 – carpenter – project work: days off work = days at work).

Flora also commented that before reducing her hours she was more prone to treating herself through shopping but noted that 'when you go part time you just you just sort reign that in. But you don't feel like you need to do it anyway' (science teacher – 43 – 4-days a week). This realisation that their wants rather than his capacity to fulfil them were limited echoes comments made by Giorgos Kallis in his recent book 'Limits: Why Malthus Was Wrong and Why Environmentalists Should Care'. Here, drawing on the work of Cornelius Castoriadis, he argues that limits are necessary not due to a lack of abundance in nature, but rather because autonomously chosen limits, open up a sense of freedom and a route towards the good life for individuals (Kallis, 2019). Freedom in this context is not in the neoclassical sense of 'freedom from' but 'freedom to' self-determine the content of one's own life (Windegger & Spash, 2021).

Linking reduced hours of work to increased feelings of freedom was common across many of the interviews. Work by its very nature entails a loss of control; the time, place and activity is fixed by a power external to ourselves and so it is difficult to experience true feelings of autonomy when carrying out mandated activities. In the words of another interviewee: 'Even when I've enjoyed my job, I still had a boss who tells me what I had to do' (Adam – 45 – high-tech electronics consultant). Thompson and Jeffery (2001) have argued that 'when people spend their time in identity-affirming activities, be they at work or pursuing nonwork interests, they will tend to perceive less conflict between life domains' (2001, p. 18). This seems to draw on the discourse of Do What You Love (DWYL) which was emerging at the time and has been used to blur the boundary between work and leisure. The discourse of DWYL encourages people to believe that if a job aligns with someone's

'passions' it will no longer be experienced as a loss of autonomy as the activity undertaken aligns with their own goals (Sandoval, 2018). Leaving aside the ridiculous impracticalities of having everyone engaged in work which ~~is~~ aligns with what they love doing in life, this narrative was explicitly rejected by interviewees who often indicated that although they considered their job a good fit for their interests it was still *work* and they valued gaining skills and experiences across a more diverse set of activities that had been fully autonomously chosen. Overall, it was a small minority who experienced alienation at work in typical Marxian terms. More common was the feeling that the sheer number of hours that full-time employment required prevented people from developing selves which were incidental to their worktime identities by absorbing an excessive amount of time and energy which they would have preferred to have directed elsewhere.

An increase in autonomous periods of time was directly linked to a decrease in feelings of stress for many people:

> 'Having time where I'm not fixed in what I'm doing or having other people's needs, including my children's, determining what I'm doing. And so there's kind of a window of how many hours it ends up being on a Friday, where actually I can choose what I want to do or not. I find that's quite a kind of calming, stress-relieving, period of time (Chris -50 - renewable energy consultant – 4-days a week).

The idea that a reduction in feelings of time pressure and associated tiredness was often expressed using the idiom of space, e.g.: 'I felt like I didn't have enough, honestly like breathing space because I was working all week, and in the weekend I wanted to do things' (Philippe – 27 – acoustic engineer – 3 days a week). These unprompted validations of SDT's assertion that feelings of self-determination and autonomy are important for wellbeing reveal the threat that long hours of work pose to psychological health.

The desire for autonomy over time use sometimes limited interviewees' willingness to commit to activities which may have enhanced feelings of relatedness in those whose social circle was limited. For example, some interviewees were distinctly unenthusiastic about the idea of committing time to fixed socially beneficial activities:

> I think I'd be quite careful what I chose to do. I think kind of… I think committing myself to anything regular would, you know, it's probably quite selfish but I'd probably feel it was a bit of a burden after a while so if I was going to do something it would be something on an ad hoc basis rather than a regular commitment I think (Rhys – 45 – patenting lawyer – 3 days a week).

In some instances where work had been most drastically reduced, interviewees had almost unlimited autonomy over their free time. These interviewees sometimes seemed to lack momentum and fulfilment however they were adamant that their current situation was preferable to spending more time at work.

On the other hand, increased autonomy sometimes interacted with other processes which are beneficial to wellbeing. For example, Edward (60 – design manager in the water industry – 3 days a week) knew that he *ought* to maintain his fitness by going to the gym but as this was not something that particularly appealed to him, he lacked intrinsic motivation to engage in this type of behaviour. On the other hand, allotment gardening was something that Edward was personally invested in and as it was a genuinely autonomous choice, he was motivated to make this type of behaviour a long-term fixture of his life and as such had taken on two allotments totalling 600 square metres of ground. However, allotment gardening is much more time consuming than a quick trip to the gym. Giving people increased free time to commit to leisure activities that are self-endorsed is likely to result in higher levels of motivation (Biddle & Ekkekakis, 2005). Given that good health is known to protect individual wellbeing having more time for activities that maintain health seems like a virtuous circle that could be triggered by working less (Penedo & Jason R. Dahn, 2005).

Discussion and conclusion

The analysis conducted above helps ground empirically how working time reductions might play out in the real world. Firstly, it illustrates the potential mechanisms and causal pathways through which WTRs have the potential to contribute towards improved individual psychological wellbeing. Although we discuss relatedness, competence and autonomy separately, there were definite overlaps between these domains. For example: volunteering was sometimes used to make friends (thus increasing relatedness) in addition to developing new skills or exercising already existing skills which is likely to illicit feelings of competence. Equally, spending time on sport or hobbies which had been volitionally chosen by interviewees often results in feelings of competence as well as autonomy. Secondly, the strong pull towards autonomously chosen competencies rather than just competencies per se is significant because for most people the competencies developed in work are not autonomously chosen. This may indicate the importance of allowing people sufficient free time to develop hobbies and projects they are invested in outside working hours. The imbrication of the different domains of wellbeing is in line with previous qualitative research which has shown relationality, competence and autonomy are 'vitally intertwined' (White & Jha, 2018, p. 156).

However, the degrowth project is about much more than offering shorter working hours as a means to improve individual workers' wellbeing. Degrowth modernity posits a shift towards a completely different way of living which is orientated around communing, caring, simplicity, conviviality and autonomy (D'Alisa, et al., 2015). These changes are made possible by strong social policies aimed at redistributing wealth throughout the economy such as maximum and minimum incomes (e.g. the CEO can earn no more than ten times that of lowest paid employee), higher taxes and/or the public

provision of basic services such as utilities, housing and education (Büchs, 2021; Kallis, 2018). The political feasibility of the degrowth project is sometimes contested with doubts expressed as to whether the required shift in value systems and practices is possible. In this research project the tendency for people to gravitate towards activities compatible with a degrowth modernity when working hours are reduced, suggests that simply giving people more free time might go some way towards shifting people away from materialist values. For example, given that caring subjectivities emerge from the practice of caring, (Hebson, et al., 2015) creating time for people to practice caring is likely to be a mutually reinforcing process in the co-construction of a more caring society. Our small sample size and its non-representative nature means that these results are not firm evidence of how WTRs will be experienced in the general population, but they are rather a hopeful indication of how the process of social transformation could potentially proceed. Further research into time-use practices following WTRs in a broader variety of social settings is needed to firm up the conclusions presented here.

The breadwinner expectation commonly placed on men often reduces the time and expectation that they will develop caring subjectivities. Yet an increase in men's involvement in social reproduction would relieve women of some of this work. Work in feminist economics has argued that strategies which attempt to reduce the amount of unpaid care work carried out by women devalue this type of labour. Nelson has suggested that the word 'husbandry' could be reclaimed to promote a masculine-associated ethic and practice of care (Nelson, 2016). The suggestion here is not that masculine care is qualitatively different to the care work performed by women but rather that maybe the word could help popularize a rich ethic of care which is consistent with a masculine self-image. This potentially opens up opportunities for greater equality in the domestic division of labour and increasing the possibility for women to lead richer and more fulfilling lives. As such, WTRs could help address issues of gender equality and the 'crisis of care' which is playing out across numerous social levels from individuals and upwards to communities, states and beyond (Fraser, 2016; Chatzidakis, et al., 2020).

The pleasure that interviewees took from activities not rooted in consumer culture was also evident during the interviews. These regularly required high levels of concentration but limited inputs of material resources. Research on flow experiences has shown that strongly materialist values can limit the extent to which an individual is inclined to experience flow and equally that difficulties experiencing flow 'may therefore encourage the adoption of stronger materialistic values'. They suggest that if this proves to be the case 'then providing the opportunity for people to create flow may inhibit the development of strong materialist values' (Isham, et al., 2020). Allowing people sufficient free time to engage in autonomously chosen self-determined leisure activities is an

obvious way of doing this. As such, despite reservations about an oversimplification of the relationship between working hours and environmental degradation in some accounts (see Antal, et al., 2021 for further discussion) we remain hopeful that WTRs might be able to help usher in a new relationship with the natural environment. Our argument here is not that everyone 'ought' to reduce their working hours to improve social and environmental outcomes as we recognise that for many people this is financially impossible, but rather that if actions were taken to collectively reduce working hours, then on the basis of the findings of this research individual, environmental and social benefits are a likely outcome. Potential routes to reduced working hours could include sectoral agreements between employers and unions, company level strategies, or government mandated limitations on weekly or annualised work hours.

Shifting to a more environmentally benign mode of living requires a narrative that can capture people's imagination to emerge. As WTRs may be beneficial for both the environment and worker wellbeing and quality of life, this hints at the possibility of building a shared agenda between environmental and labour movements, helping to resolve long standing tensions around the perceived trade-off between jobs and the environment and strengthening the power of both movements going forward. The hope of many of those advocating for WTRs is that the social environment that may develop to replace competitive consumer capitalism would better promote human flourishing. Our finding that when time wealth is increased the people who took part in our research project engaged in activities with individual, social and environmental benefits helps lends credibility to this claim.

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