



Nonhuman Well-Being is a Part of Happiness and Well-Being Conceptions Among Central Indian Indigenous Communities

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Accepted: 4 November 2024 / Published online: 9 January 2025
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Abstract

The ontological turn in social sciences has revealed the anthropocentrism of earlier literature, but the role of interspecies relations in well-being ideals remains less explored. We examine the role of interspecies relations in well-being conceptions. The study is conducted among Indigenous communities to capture alternative human realities to those mainly reflected in the academic well-being literature. The study asks: what are the perspectives of selected Indian Indigenous communities on interspecies relations and well-being, and what is the role of the interspecies relations in their well-being and happiness conceptions? The research was conducted qualitatively using an immersive study technique, participatory observation and interviews, in eight villages in Central India. The material was analysed by participatory analysis and qualitative coding. The respondents form an ‘interspecies community’ with most of the nonhumans: the respondents had familial, reciprocal and caring relations with nonhumans, and perceived both the humans and nonhumans to similarly depend on a shared ecology. Such caring relations that relate to a sense of connection, and the well-being of the local humans and nonhumans were seen as important for human happiness. The caring relations towards the nonhumans, and sense of interdependency with the interspecies community tie the well-being of nonhumans to the local well-being conceptions. The local perspectives emphasize and respect the well-being of the nonhumans more than the predominant academic well-being conceptions.

Keywords Interspecies relations · Happiness · Well-being · Indigenous ontologies · India

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1 Introduction

The past few decades have seen happiness research greatly rising in volume and popularity throughout social sciences and policy discussions. However, the “ontological turn” in social sciences has exposed the fundamental anthropocentrism in much of the earlier literature (e.g. Haraway, 2008; Joronen & Häkli, 2017; Lorimer, 2012), and has highlighted the relations humans have with nonhumans as essential aspects of human worldviews and ethics more generally (Haraway, 2008; Mathews, 2017; Thomas, 2015). The role of interspecies relations in well-being ideals has not been well acknowledged or explored. As a consequence we are lacking essential understanding about well-being. Also, understanding the role of interspecies relations in well-being and happiness ideals may help to combine human and ecological well-being better. This is sorely needed by humanity globally in its striving towards sustainable development (e.g. Caillon et al., 2017; Sandin et al., 2015; Steffen et al., 2015).

Many Indigenous communities exemplify practical applications of alternative, nonanthropocentric approaches to the world; but Indigenous views have been rather marginal in academia outside the field of Indigenous studies (e.g. Kealiikanakaolehailani & Giardina, 2016; Marker, 2018; Müller et al., 2019; Rosiek et al., 2020; Yap & Watene, 2019). This is despite them being significant players in the governance of the global natures because they inhabit at least a quarter of the world’s land surface (Garnett et al., 2018) and potentially have viable alternatives to sustainable development (e.g. MacNeill, 2020). However, instead of being seen as holders of knowledge, Indigenous communities have been historically subjected to epistemological injustices through being studied without knowledge inputs from themselves (Foley, 2003). Even today, Indigenous perspectives on development and well-being are marginalised and under-researched, and communities are often subjected to outsiders’ ideals of development, and lack territorial sovereignty and autonomy (e.g. Garnett et al., 2018).

This study examines the role of interspecies relations in well-being and happiness conceptions among Indigenous (Gond and Baiga Adivasi; the terms with which the respondents identify) communities in Central India. The study asks: (1) what are the locals’ perspectives on interspecies relations and well-being, and (2) what is the role of the interspecies relations in their well-being conceptions? Interspecies relations refer both to material and subjective relations between humans and nonhumans.

The research questions and the study population are important. First, they broaden the understanding of possible conceptions of well-being and happiness in the academic well-being and happiness literature by providing examples of real-life nonanthropocentric conceptions of well-being. Second, they contribute to the understanding of the role of interspecies relations in conceptions and ideals of well-being and happiness more generally. Third, such nonanthropocentric conceptions of well-being may point to more sustainable ideals and practices of development. Fourth, they help to reverse the historical epistemological injustices that Indigenous communities have faced by asking about the perspectives of the Indigenous from themselves. Fifth, because conceptions of well-being and happiness are foundational to development ideals, the questions also contribute to the mainstream development discourse where nonhuman well-being is often overlooked. Sixth, better understanding of Indigenous well-being and development ideals may also support the frequent claims to sovereignty and territorial autonomy of Indigenous regions.

The research is a descriptive, qualitative study based on fieldwork in eight Adivasi communities. We conducted the research with qualitative methods to obtain an accurate

understanding of local perspectives regarding interspecies relations and well-being ideals among the communities. We used interviews, immersive methodology and participatory observation.

The following section describes the predominant well-being and happiness theories in academia and discusses them in relation to the ontological turn and Indigenous scholarship. The third section describes the methodologies, fieldwork and analyses with related ethical issues. The results on interspecies relations are presented in the fourth section, and on well-being ideals in the fifth section. After a brief synthesis of common themes, the concluding section recaps the findings on locals' perspectives about interspecies relations and conceptions of well-being and happiness, addressing the final research question on the role of interspecies relations in shaping well-being ideals among selected Indigenous communities. It also contrasts these insights with mainstream academic perspectives and explores their broader implications.

2 Overcoming Anthropocentrism in Happiness Literature: Lessons from the Ontological Turn and Indigenous Studies

The prevailing happiness and well-being theories in academia may be divided roughly into (1) preference satisfaction and the related resources and capabilities approaches (e.g. Hausman, 2012; Sen, 1999), (2) objectivist accounts (e.g. Deci & Ryan, 2000; Gough, 2017; Martela & Sheldon, 2019) and (3) mental state theories (e.g. Diener et al., 2018, see also OECD, 2013), and their combinations.

A clarifying distinction is whether well-being is seen as that which is good for the person, or as a good life “all things considered” (Haybron, 2014, p. 312) that may involve ethical standards beyond what is in one's self-interest. Many of the prevailing accounts overlap with both sides of the distinction. Preference satisfaction may equally well include other-oriented preferences, for example. However, it appears that the majority of the approaches that consider well-being beyond what is good for the person discuss ethical standards limited to the human social domain. They are concerned with relations among people (e. g. Alkire, 2002; Diener et al., 2018; Griffin, 1988; Sangha et al., 2015).

So, the prevailing well-being and happiness theories tend to be human-centered and to focus on the individual, social or material resource aspects of happiness though there is increasing interest in the relationship between happiness and nature. Mayer and Frantz (2004), for example, provide results suggesting that the intangible benefits born from human-nature interaction, benefits beyond material need satisfaction such as food and breathing air, are as important for happiness as its other conventional correlates such as marriage, education and income. One possible explanation for this is the “biophilia hypothesis” (Wilson, 1984). According to it, humans have an innate need to feel connected with nature. In alignment with the theory, interaction with or felt connectedness to nature has been found to relate to significant benefits to health, happiness, and mental well-being (e.g. Bratman et al., 2019; Chawla, 1999; Mayer et al., 2009; Pritchard et al., 2020; Russell et al., 2013).

The relation between human happiness and nature tends to be organized around the concept of ecosystem services, however. This conceptualization of ecosystem services as benefits that humans derive from nature mostly treats the relationship between humans and environment as a one-directional flow of resources or benefits from nature to humans

neglecting for example two-way impacts commonly acknowledged among Indigenous peoples (e.g. Comberti et al., 2015).

All in all, academic conceptions of happiness and well-being mainly embody anthropocentric worldviews that separate humans as conscious, intentional agents from nonhumans, and thus see humans as having a higher moral worth and consequently focus on relationships between humans (Mathews, 2017).

Ontological turn theories provide the conceptual tools to surpass anthropocentrism in configurations of the socio-material world, including ideals of well-being. A characteristic description of thought in the ontological turn is that “Nature, Society and other identities are rethought as relational achievements” (Dewsbury, 2011; Lorimer, 2012). This entails that it is ontologically impossible to extract a human body or mind from the “messy relations of the world” (Haraway, 2008; Lorimer, 2012). Any apparently bounded identity is embedded within hybrid networks, where agents participate in co-constituting each other in their interaction (Rosiek et al., 2020; Thomas, 2015). Consequently, agency is a distributed and relational quality of being able to have an effect or to be affected, “manifest in all aspects of reality” (Rosiek et al., 2020). Thus, the foundational thought of ontological turn theories is the notion of the primacy of the *relation*—not on the apparent identities on either “side” of that relation. Furthermore, in this way of thinking, interactions are not described with implications of direction from cause to effect, or from one apparent identity to another. More appropriate is to speak of multidirectional relations of agentic capacities where co-becoming participants to that assemblage are affected and have an effect.

Ontological turn theories inform us about the primacy of relations, and the reductionism inherent in conventional causal explanations. It is healthy to acknowledge these foundations, as they guide us to seek for more nuanced understandings suitable for understanding complex dynamic systems comprising both humans and nonhumans. However, empirically speaking, any description of a phenomenon necessarily entails drawing of boundaries around the described identities. To facilitate the analysis, we make a working definition of “interspecies relations” as those relations occurring more immediately between humans and nonhumans. These include material interactions between the humans and nonhumans and the beliefs and thoughts that refer to nonhumans. Furthermore, the research focuses largely on the locals’ testimonies as they are treated as key informants on the local interspecies relations (Fox & Alldred, 2022), both the subjective and material aspects of those relations. However, in line with the ontological turn, the study subjects’ perspectives are not seen as privileged factors among the local hybrid networks; but parts of them.

In many Indigenous onto-epistemologies, similarly as in the academic ontological turn theories, world is not seen composed of separate entities but of “one substance,” “Naturacultura” as coined by MacNeill (2020), from which separate entities and related causal relations can be distinguished for analytical purposes in short time periods only (e.g. MacNeill, 2020). Indigenous onto-epistemologies share with ontological turn theories the notion that simple causal explanations are too reductionistic to describe the plurality of interactions in the environment (Berkes, 2018). Also, in accordance with the ontological turn theories, nonhumans are often seen to have agency (Escobar, 2007). This entails de-centering of the Human from their privileged position (e.g. Bawaka Country et al., 2013; Marker, 2018; Thomas, 2015). However, among Indigenous peoples, nonhuman agency seems to less frequently be understood as an abstract, general concept. The emphasis is more on the particular nonhuman actors (Rosiek et al., 2020), while fluidity characterizes the understandings of these actors. For instance, it is common to discuss nonhuman agency in connection with “personhood” of different nonhuman actors (e.g. Deloria, 1999; Opas, 2008; Virtanen, 2013; Naveh & Bird-David, 2014; Thomas, 2015). Naveh and Bird David

(2014) describe the dynamic, relational, and fluid perceptions of nonhuman personhood in Kattunaiker Adivasi communities in India: "[A]nimals and plants are both regarded as sentient co-dwellers in some cases, and as objects in others, depending not on what they are in essence, or where they are, but on when, by whom, and for what purpose they are approached".

While the centrality of humans is *ontologically* questioned, it needs to be noted that agentic capacities of different relations and actors are not symmetrical in terms of power. This draws attention to responsibility that takes into account nonhuman actors. Thus, ontological turn literature includes consideration on ethics (Braidotti, 2019; Haraway, 2008; Popke, 2009; Thomas, 2015). Especially, earlier research on Adivasi and other Indigenous onto-epistemologies emphasize reciprocity with and empathetic caring for nonhumans (e.g. Deo 2021; Ekka, 2017; Koreti, 2015; Müller et al., 2019). Such ethics have been seen to emerge from their kinship experiences with their nonhuman relatives and from a desire to live empathetically (Thomas, 2015, p. 978; Haraway, 2008; Popke, 2009) echoing the nonanthropocentric onto-epistemologies. In these onto-epistemologies, reciprocal interaction happens not only as two-way "transactions" between particular cognizers but rather *within and as a part of the hybrid network*. Ecosystem services are received within the hybrid network, and similarly, humans provide the service of caring towards the different beings within that hybrid network. This ethos of care in living within the hybrid network and acknowledging the gifts received from it is perceived as reciprocity (cf. Müller et al., 2019). These Indigenous relational ethics within such networks are exemplified in various Indigenous communities: in Yolnu communities' close attendance to subtle shifts in environment to know when the time is right to collect resources in a sustainable way (Bawaka country et al., 2013); in Maori worldviews of humans' place in the world as ones who should nurture the land they are part of (Thomas, 2015); or Adivasis who practice generosity towards their nonhuman kin in their forests by sharing resources with them (Jolly et al., 2024).

As is frequently observed among Indigenous peoples, different nonhuman agencies are entangled in Adivasi onto-epistemologies. Importantly, ancestral and other spirits are entangled with the more tangible and familiar nonhuman actors, as they are believed to reside amongst the different ecological and topographical features of their habitation, such as rivers, rocks, mountains, animals and trees (Bird-David & Naveh, 2008; Koreti, 2015; Paul, 2013). The local words for 'spirits,' the term adopted in this article, vary among the Advivasi. The Gonds and Baigas address them as *Devta* (*male spirit*) and *Devi* (*female spirit*). The used English translations for spirits also vary. The translations include 'gods,' 'idols,' 'animistic beings,' 'deities,' and 'super-persons' (e.g. Bird-David & Naveh, 2008). Of note is that these spirits may not be static entities; but relational in the sense that some entities may become spirits in different kinds of situations among the Adivasis (Bird-David & Naveh, 2008) in line with the relational onto-epistemologies.

Gondi Punem or the *Koya Punem* (*transl. 'the way of life of the Gonds'*) is an oral philosophical framework and a code of conduct for Gonds delineating central perspectives and ethical views the Gonds have with respect to other humans and nonhumans (Koreti, 2015; Paul, 2013). As an oral tradition, documentation of Koya Punem remains scarce with few, early Hindi language documentations such as the one by Kangali (1983). These were used as material to be discussed with the Gond communities in this study. *Koya Punem* emphasizes upon the entanglement of the ancestral spirits and local ecological elements through the code of ethical conduct to maintain peace with the ancestral spirits (Koreti, 2015; Paul, 2013). Koya Punem views the humans and the nonhumans to constitute a community, and the well-being of nonhumans is related to the well-being of the community. The

Koya Punem classifies the entire Gond society into 750 clans and each clan protects at least three different animal, bird or tree species. Also, they work to protect beings such as rivers, mountains or lakes. Thus, the fundamental philosophy of *Koya Punem* can be read as a way of coexistence and cooperation with the nonhuman actors (Koreti, 2015; Paul, 2013). It advocates codified ritualistic practices such as seasonal rituals dedicated to different totemic beings (locally called *pandums*) which appeases ancestral spirits manifested within the nonhuman elements of their environment. In a similar fashion, the Baiga Adivasis have customs and traditions that regulate behavior toward and protect nonhumans, rooted in a respect for spirits (Fuchs, 1965; United Nations Development Programme, 2013).

As many Indigenous communities provide examples of empathy, caring and reciprocity in interspecies relations, there is reason to assume that they might provide examples on how happiness relates to interspecies relations. Such alternative, nonanthropocentric onto-epistemologies tend to share many aspects of ontological turn in their approaches to the world and can be seen to partake in the group of theories forming the turn (Rosiek et al., 2020). Also, for the same reason, ontological turn approaches appear well fit for better understanding of Indigenous experiences. Similarly, while the ontological turn literature is concerned with ethics, it appears largely silent on happiness. While the conventional social research has largely focused on social factors of beliefs and attitudes, the ontological turn has highlighted the role of interspecies relations as factors and aspects of beliefs and attitudes in general (e.g. Haraway, 2008). The role of interspecies relations in well-being ideals appears not researched, however, and the well-being literature appears largely lacking conceptualizations basing on ontological turn and nonanthropocentric approaches to the world.

In other words, the predominant academic happiness conceptions largely reflect anthropocentric worldviews that separate humans as conscious, intentional agents from nonhumans and treat humans as having higher moral worth (Mathews, 2017). Other-oriented conceptions of well-being exist; but they are mostly limited to the human sphere. Nonhumans are lumped under the term “nature” (e.g. Lorimer, 2012) and mostly treated as instruments for human well-being. It appears that well-being has not been well discussed or researched from the viewpoint of the novel approaches to the world present in the ontological turn in social sciences that align with many Indigenous views, and, furthermore, even Indigenous scholarship has not particularly studied well-being ideals. As interspecies relations may be pronounced in the well-being ideals of the Adivasi, we explore these to provide an example of what a nonanthropocentric view on happiness might look like in practice.

3 Methodology and Research Ethics

The research is a synthesis of three independent studies that complement each other. Uotinen mainly focused on happiness and well-being; Loivaranta on interspecies relations; and Seal on the ontological and philosophical perspectives and rituals in the localities including those related to well-being and interspecies relations (Table 1). While combining three qualitative studies in one article is an unconventional approach, we find it to be of value for cross-validation of the results and to obtain a richer picture of the research subject.

The studies were conducted in eight hamlets spread across two states of central India (i.e. Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh) between 2015 and 2018 (Table 1). These regions are among the poorest in the world (e.g. PRADAN, 2022). All the locations were forest

Table 1 Study areas and data construction methods. 1 refers to Seal's study; 2 to Loivaranta's and 3 to Uotinen's

Location		Data collection and analysis
1	Southern Chhattisgarh; village Banoli	10 months immersive study (October 2017 to July 2018); participatory observation, field notes and collaborative, participatory analysis of them during weekly meetings in the single hamlet of Banoli. The early documentation of Koya Punem in Hindi (Kangali, 1983) was used as material
2	East Madhya Pradesh; villages K, J and G. (pseudonymized)	Two separate visits lasting few weeks in 2017; thematic and semi-structured (n = 36), recorded interviews, and 10 short interviews that were not recorded but noted on paper; each interview with one or various (up to around 17) interviewees; qualitative coding
3	East Madhya Pradesh and North-West Chhattisgarh; villages K, A, B, S and R (pseudonymized)	A single visit of five weeks over November and December in 2015 with one in-depth interview outside India (country omitted for anonymization purposes) in 2017 during an Adivasi's travel in relation to an NGO project; thematic and semi-structured (n = 10) and in-depth (n = 3) interviews, mostly recorded interviews, each with one or various (up to around 17) interviewees; qualitative coding

The amount of interviews (n) refers to interview sessions, of which some were individual interviews and some were group interviews (Table 1). The largest interview groups included 17 persons

All data was collected between 2015 and 2018

villages with a majority of Gond or Baiga population. In these remote study villages in Central India, the residents practice traditional livelihoods (i.e. subsistence farming and foraging Non-Timber Forest Products), but some are also involved in seasonal labor. All the villages are small with a few dozen households. Some of the village names are pseudonymized due to the sensitive nature of other research conducted in the same villages. Seal chose to retain names of respondents in order to respect the fact that they are the owners of the knowledge.

Convenience and snowball sampling methods were used in contacting the interviewees. In an effort to reduce the limitations of snowball sampling, respondents were also contacted when incidentally encountered in the villages. Also, the researchers aimed at the even distribution of age and gender. In Uotinen's and Loivaranta's interviews, the interviewees were aged between 15 and 80. Seal used his native language, Hindi, to interact with the community members of Banoli. Uotinen and Loivaranta both worked with interpreters. The interviewees were informed of the purpose of the research, and consent was obtained.

Seal conducted an immersive methodology. A key method in immersive methodology is the systematic writing of a field diary to reflect on the findings through participatory observation and discussions with the locals.¹ During an immersive research, a researcher participates in the daily lives of the locals. Seal for example participated in the gathering of the forest produce, the festivities and rites, the harvest and production of local beverage and the crafting of tools. The findings in the field diary are discussed regularly with the locals for validation and for the creation of novel insights. Seal attempted to understand the significance of nonhuman actors within the everyday practices through an Indigenous (Adivasi) philosophy of life (*Koya Punem*). The early documentation of *Koya Punem* in Hindi (Kangali, 1983) was used as material for this. The diary entries attempted to understand each aspect of the everyday and how the *Koya Punem* connects the idea of prosperity, well-being, good health and its sustenance across human and nonhuman elements of their environment which are associated with their lives. The entries were periodically read out to the respondents-participants during meetings to verify whether the researcher understood and correctly interpreted the significance of the *Koya Punem* as intended by the speakers.

Uotinen and Loivaranta conducted semi-structured and thematic, in-depth interviews. Thematic and semi-structured interviews allowed such discussion topics to arise that were relevant for the respondent and at times new to us. While the thematic interviews took the form of a more freely flowing discussion, we steered the discussions towards the topics of our interest: well-being and happiness in Uotinen's study, and different nonhuman beings and ways of relating to them, in Loivaranta's study. Some example questions that Uotinen used are "What does good life consist of?" "Is happiness important?" and "What is the relationship between the Baiga and the earth." Loivaranta's thematic interviews during the first trip included broad questions, such as "how do you feel when going to forest". In Loivaranta's second field trip, there were more structured question sets that inquired about the relations with each nonhuman category separately such as the trees and wild animals.

¹ The methodology by Seal is grounded in immersive action research. The central development in this line of thinking has been documented in Dr. Anup Dhar's presentation "Action Research: Writing on Righting Wrongs" in the 2015 Symposium on "Research and education for rural development and food security to build resilient rural environments: Australian and Indian perspectives" held in New Delhi, India. A working paper based on the presentation was accessed the 28th of June 2024 from <http://practicalphilosophy.co.in/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/Action-Research-writing-on-righting-wrongs.pdf>. The method used by Seal is explained more in detail in Seal (2020). Another example of research based on the presentation by Dhar is Kriti, S. (2019).

Both Uotinen and Loivaranta transcribed their own recorded interviews and analyzed their own transcribed interviews by qualitative coding (Cope, 2010). Both used software for coding the data: Loivaranta used Nvivo 12 and Uotinen used RQDA software. In both studies a hybrid coding technique was used to form the codes: some of the codes were researcher-led and some informant-led (Brewer, 2000). First, relevant parts of interviews were selected and assigned a code that reflected a category to which the excerpt might belong. These codes were “connection”, “interdependency”, “forest-as-family” in Uotinen’s study and “spirits”, “trees” and “wild animals” in Loivaranta’s study, for example. Then, these codes were contrasted with one another, they were refined, new codes were created, and some codes were grouped under larger thematic categories such as “happiness-as-connection,” “meaning-of-happiness,” or “interspecies” in Uotinen’s study. In Loivaranta’s study, the coding proceeded in such a way that codes “trees”, “wild animals” etc. were refined into subcodes such as “sibling”, “sacred”, “resource”, “enemy”, and then from these subcodes emerged thematic codes describing the ways of relating (e.g. “familial”, “need”, “protection”, “fear” etc.). Then, the codes were revisited from the viewpoint of the research question assessing the relationships of the codes with the research question and selecting the most relevant codes. Finally, the data was re-checked to find any contradicting cases. Moreover, both researchers had made a preliminary, table-based analysis between periods of data collection. Loivaranta used this analysis to refine the structure for interviews of the second trip, and Uotinen used the preliminary analysis to inform results validation with one of the respondents in a country outside India (country omitted for anonymization purposes) (Table 1).

After each of us had conducted the analyses, we drafted summaries of the findings and read each others’ summaries. Based on this, we formulated the research questions of the article around the key themes found in each research (well-being and interspecies relations). The synthesis of the answers to the research questions is informed by both posthumanist and Koya Punem ontological frameworks, as well as our interpretations of the interviews and our reflecting these interpretations together.

To ensure that the results and our interpretations of what the respondents said are as accurate as possible, we returned to validate our preliminary results. While Seal validated his interpretations through weekly discussions with the community members; Uotinen and Loivaranta created summaries that were presented to some of the respondents. Also a preliminary summary of this article was presented in 2019 in village meetings in K, J and G. These visits did not result in changes in the main results. By engaging in this reflective dialogue, we have aimed also to respect the communities’ self-determination.

In terms of positionality, it is worth mentioning that all of the contributors to this paper have, in addition to researchers, been either social workers or NGO volunteers at the time of field work, in projects that aim to improve the implementation of Indigenous rights in India. Despite our commitment to reversing injustices, any research conducted by outsider scholars in Indigenous settings contains power dynamics (Chilisa, 2012; Smith, 1999). The researchers advance their professional career by extracting information from the respondents, and the conduct of research might have various impacts on the researched communities. Thus, there is a requirement for reciprocity and respect towards the informants, which may be expressed in different ways of giving-back (Opas, 2008; Rosiek et al., 2020; Smith, 2000, 2008). The preliminary results have been brought back to three of the study communities in 2019, accompanied by a list of rights that Indigenous people are entitled to according to international law. Also, the

research may in itself support greater self-determination of Indigenous communities through communication of some of their own understandings of interspecies relations and well-being.

4 Results on Interspecies Relations and Interspecies Community

4.1 Humans and Nonhumans Constitute an Interspecies Community— Acknowledging the Spiritual Within the Material Relations

The interspecies relations play a large role in the lives and the worlds of the humans among the localities. A central theme arising from all of our studies together might be termed “interspecies community”. According to the findings of all of us, respondents tended to perceive the forest and its entities as actors worthy of respect and care. These entities include the soil, waterbodies, plants, the humans themselves, spirits, and to some extent, wild animals. The respondents identified with the forest and its nonhumans; and the relations with these actors tended to be described as reciprocal and interdependent. Also, many of the relations with the nonhuman actors were described in familial terms, all the human and nonhuman actors were seen as dependent on the functioning of the whole. The reciprocity of the relations and the central significance of nonhumans within the community is described in Seal’s field diary as follows:

In Bastar, it gets difficult to find one’s way through the forest unless one learns to identify trees. Navigation depends heavily on the ‘landmark services’ provided by the various trees of the forest. One takes either the left hand trail or the right hand trail from such landmarks; No East, West, North and South, no compass. The Sun keeps time, the moon tells the weeks and the months, the leaves give people their plates and cups, flowers and bees give them their honey and alcohol; roots, fruits, tree saps and insects gratify their hunger. Unlike our lives which revolve more around monetized exchange, people in Bastar organize their lives around what might be called an interspecies reciprocity. Animals, plants, birds and insects and humans draw from each other what they need. Each offers themselves to the other for the other’s survival around the seasons.

(Field diary, Seal)

The informants perceive their place in the interspecies community as integral and complementary to the community. Moreover, the nonhuman community members are seen as equally worthy of protection as humans. Respondents to Uotinen’s and Loivaranta’s interviews described their identification with the forest and its nonhuman beings as follows:

“We are incomplete without jungle and jungle is incomplete without us”

(Interview with a group of women in A, Uotinen).

“The same way we protect ourselves, the same way we protect the forest and wildlife”

(Interview with a group of women in J, Loivaranta).

Moreover, the interspecies community was often assembled in relations which had a sacred element into them. Each study revealed that ancestral and other spirits² were themes that often recurred as central to interspecies relations in the localities. Although it is difficult to assess and beyond the current research what the various spirits actually mean among all of the studied the localities, they frequently played a role in the perception of agency and personhood among entities in the interspecies community. The spirits were often intertwined with the landscape and the nonhumans; and the respondents often felt kinship with them.

In line with the early documentation of Koya Punem from the 1980s (Kangali, 1983, 1994), Seal observed that the Gondi spirituality continues to embody such reciprocal and interdependent interspecies relationships, influencing people's behavior towards nonhumans. *Koya Punem*, discussed with the locals, informs them about ways to keep the ancestral spirits happy and encourages caring about and protecting the local humans and nonhumans. It also instructs in ways how to use, consume and care for the different elements (living and nonliving) of the forest and the land to sustain themselves in a manner that respects the functioning of the whole network of beings. Such an ethic is sustained by the community as they personify the trees, mountains, rivers and animals as beings with spirits, some of whom are also their ancestors; whom they respect. Equally as one needs to care and respect for a family member to avoid conflicts, one needs to care and respect the ancestors and the other spirits for the well-being of their entire community.

The hill and the stream which flows past Banoli village is considered as the spirit of the ancestors of Banoli who established the village by clearing the forest. It is believed that the villagers should protect the hill and the stream as it in turn protects the villagers.
(Field diary Seal)

In Loivaranta's and Uotinen's studies these themes were captured in the code "spirits." The interviewed individuals had differing views about spirits, but it was often described that they were intertwined with the landscape and the nonhumans. For instance, Loivaranta found that among the Baigas, the rivers are both needed for survival, and considered as spirits. An old man in J described how the spirit of the river is appeased by offering prayers for her, and in turn, people seek healing from the river. In K, a female informant described how protecting the forest also contributes to the well-being of water streams, and hence appeases the spirit of the river. Uotinen found that a connection with spirits (similarly as with other actors) is important for happiness, which will be discussed in more detail later, and that all things ought to be treated akin to spirits attesting to the significance of the spirits in the behaviour of the people towards the nonhumans.

"If we are having an animal like cow, here the cow is a god ... if the cow you are getting the milk [from] and the milk is using for god as well as ... production ..., all the things we will do of that milk ... so ... the animal is one but getting the benefits for all: like god, like person, like everything anywhere. ... if we are getting the things from that cow, we should protect the cow, we should worship because she is an original god, because she is giving life to the person and ... she

² These were referred to by various terms: 'Devi,' 'Devta,' 'Devi-Devta,' and, in translated interviews, the English words 'gods' or 'deities.'.

is using milk also to her own things, ... there will be protection, we should not kill the cow. ... I said the cow like [an example].”
(Interview with two healers in K, Uotinen)

According to Seal's findings, these kinds of perspectives to the world continue to be embodied in and affect behavior through institutionalized rituals called *Pandums* (c.f. Kangali, 1983, 1994), intended for caring for the whole ecosystem as discussed later in more detail.

4.2 Familial and Reciprocal Relations with Trees: Needs and Protection are Intertwined

Within the interspecies communities, there is a personal, familial side to the particular relations. Trees, for example, are seen as ancestral family members who care and protect each other as well as the Gond family:

During a conversation with a community elder he said that trees communicate with each other. The trees such as Shajha, Pharsa, Mahua, Khajur and Kusum are spirits of the ancestors of the Gonds, who cohabit with each other and the Gonds. These trees like to grow close to each other, and they share their nutrition and protect each other just like they do with the Gonds.
(Field diary, Seal)

In the interviews of Loivaranta, amongst the Baigas and Gonds, trees were likewise most often described in affectionate terms: as family members, friends, or places where spirits reside. The reciprocal and familial nature of the relationship was described to change over time: it was mentioned that trees are protected like children, when they are small and need care, and as they grow and start providing food and shelter, they are treated like parents. Some respondents saw trees as brothers and sisters, and described how they celebrate this relation by tying strings around the trunks of trees, as they do around the wrists of their human siblings, to honor this familial relationship. A male respondent in G described how going to different places in the forest is like going to visit family members.

On the other hand, trees were described to provide materials that are necessary for the life of the communities, and for that reason they must sometimes also be felled—but only in genuine need and not any more than needed. Only one respondent in K saw trees mainly as a resource, and did not describe any kind of affectionate relation to them (and only one person left the question unanswered). While almost all of the respondents to Loivaranta's interviews described their own relation as respectful towards beings in the forest, it was also mentioned that some *other* residents don't have the affectionate, protecting relation to trees. However, nearly all of the respondents emphasized the importance of protecting the forest even when there isn't a "personal" relation to it.

The above descriptions exemplify the sub-codes under the code "tree", including siblings, children and parents, sacred, and resources. From these nuanced sub-codes emerged thematic codes describing the ways of relating, such as "need", "familial" and "protection". These codes were interconnected: trees provide resources, and precisely because of that, there is that loving, affectionate, even familial relationship, which also acknowledges the needs of the trees to be taken care of. This is exemplified in the interviews of both Uotinen and Loivaranta:

The relationship with the forest is like the relationship with children: as long as you treat them well, they will treat you well; but if you abandon them, then you can't expect them to treat you well. So, you need to take care of the forest, or otherwise they won't help you.

(Interview with Woman in K, Uotinen)

We . . . treat [the trees] like [our] children and the forest like [our] children. . . . And when we cut them for use, we actually feel like . . . we are using them for our use so we have a very close relationship with them. And whenever there is a forest fire we go to put them out, we try to protect them.

(Group discussion in G, Loivaranta)

4.3 Relations with Wild Animals are Less Familial

With wild animals, the relations are more ambiguous. The interviews by Loivaranta revealed that wild animals were sometimes described as community members, but mostly as enemies: they were referred to as scary or attacking crops. Some mentioned that they may sometimes be a punishment from spirits, in that the spirit takes the shape of a tiger or a snake. Overall, there was variance in relating to wild animals. Generally, most of the respondents reported that they tend to avoid animals, but there were also respondents who stated that there is no fear of wild animals. While two respondents referred to animals as food, some other respondents said that wild animals are not killed or that they are protected. In terms of seeing animals as community members, there were respondents who said they are not such, because there is not so much in common with animals. On the other hand, some referred precisely to similarities between animals and humans, which make animals community members. A male group in G described that animals are members of the community, because of shared and common needs, and ways to fulfill them: just like us humans, wild animals also need food to eat, so to some extent they are welcome to even eat from the crops. Similarly, a woman in K described such acknowledgement of the needs of wild animals:

[W]ild animals are also like family, because like we are dependent on the forest for survival, they are also dependent on the forest for survival. and we consume the same thing, they also consume the same things from the forest. So we have a very, very amicable relationship, like both of us are dependent on the same forest.

(Interview with woman in K, Loivaranta)

Respondents also mentioned that wild animals belong to the forest, especially the more dense parts of the forest, which are less frequently visited by humans. It was noted that wild animals need such dense forest to be happy. Thus, on one hand the well-being of animals was related to belonging to the wilder spaces of the forest, which entails a distance between animals and humans, and on the other hand, the well-being of animals was related to their need for nutrition, which makes them similar to humans.

Here, the sub-codes under the code "wild animals" included adversarial entities such as enemies or punishments, but also members of community. The most common ways of relating included fear and avoidance, but also themes "need" and "familial" which again are connected. For some respondents, the needs of nonhumans are connected to the notion of being part of the same community. An elderly man in G perhaps summarized

the general, somewhat contradictory feeling about wild animals: they are "half enemy, half our people".

5 Results on Well-Being Conceptions

5.1 Happiness and Well-Being Conceptions

Now that we have explored the ways in which interspecies relations can be personal, we focus more on one particular aspect present in these relations: happiness and well-being conceptions.

In the discussions happiness appeared to be something that is desirable, important, about good life and feeling, about feeling completeness of life, about the absence of bad feeling and problems, worthy of action, and about good attitude and behaving well. For example, happiness was about a sense of completeness, feeling like celebrating; but also about good behaviour.

The people whose souls have happiness or are full someways, they go to celebrate the gods and give them offerings and honor them [in] some ways ... Whoever is devoted to that god ... they go there and celebrate together, and also village elders come there to guide them, and not only people, but also animals are involved. ...

I'm not currently [happy] because this year has been bad ...; sickness. Even when festival is coming, we don't feel like getting new clothes ... when people are happy ... people feel like celebrating.. This year me and my family are not that happy. Usually during the festival there is a lot of singing and dancing but this year because so many have died, usually all are happy, this year I didn't feel like it because all were sad. ... Even going to the jungle does not feel so pleasant anymore because people and their memories are still there and it feels quite terrible to go to the forest.

(Interview with a woman in K, Uotinen)

Q: [Do you] think that a person is well if he has no sickness in the mind or in the body? So, is the person then well, or is it not enough to not have sickness in the body or in the mind to be well?

A: If the person is not having any problems he will not, in that condition, ... drink alcohol or anything bad with the person and he will ... be worshipping ... the god and ... he is not doing such wrong things so he or she will be happy.

(Interview with a man in K, Uotinen)

Importantly, things that contribute to happiness were about both human and nonhuman issues. It was about having children, having education for children, good agriculture, smaller burden of work, good social relationships, neighbours not having problems, having money and city amenities such as good buildings, good food and good beds, for example; but also about land, forest, biodiversity and having rights for local management of land.

Forest makes me very happy; in case there is no food in home; I like to go to forest and rest there even when collecting food. When [I am] at home; I do not like to be just at home; without forest, it does not seem complete.

(Interview with a woman from K, Uotinen)

Q: How often do you go to the forest?

A: 3–4 times a day. ... Sometimes I stay in the forest from sunrise to sunset.

Q: How do you feel in the forest ...?

A: If I go to the forest, I feel good, relaxed. When I see the green leaves and the trees, I am very happy. We are happy to go to the forest.

(Interview with a woman from S, Uotinen)

The village peoples are dependent on forest so they can't be happy without the forest; but city people get everything without the forest, and so they can be happy without forest.

(Interview with a woman in A, Uotinen)

However, not all mentioned the forest or its nonhuman beings when they were asked about well-being.

Q: Have you thought about what is good life?

A: I have not thought about good life ... I always only think about agriculture and income.

(Interview with a man in A, Uotinen)

5.2 Interspecies Happiness and Well-Being Conceptions

Among the respondents, happiness is not anthropocentric: it is seen as dependent on the local nonhumans and their well-being. The central subcodes “interdependency” and “connection” of the higher level code “interspecies” in Uotinen’s study shed further light on the role of interspecies relations in the local happiness conceptions. In Uotinen’s research, interdependency refers to well-being being dependent on others’ well-being; and connection refers to affection and love with both humans and nonhumans encountered already earlier in Loivaranta’s study.

Interdependency is reflected in the following accounts. When asked “can you be happy if [X] is unhappy?” from three respondents (interviews with a woman in A, a man in K, and a woman in K, Uotinen), the well-being of humans near and far, well-being of animals, and of land were all mentioned as conditions of one’s own happiness: one could not be happy if those were unwell. Although one respondent did not immediately recognise this in an abstract sense, she saw them to depend on the well-being of the nonhumans when the matter was discussed more concretely.

Q: Can [you] be happy if earth is not happy?

A: If the land is full of greenness means the land will be happy, if . . . nothing is there, the land will be sad. If the land will be green, full of greenness, full of plants, I will be happy, if it is not, means [I] will be unhappy.

(Interview with a man in K, Uotinen)

Q: Can you be happy if an animal is unhappy?

A: I don’t understand how my happiness and theirs are related.

Q: What if a hen is sick, for example?

A: I can not be happy. I will try to find medicine. If the animals are happy, we are happy; we are fully happy if they exist.

(Interview with a woman in K, Uotinen)

The above woman in K also commented on the idea of interdependent happiness:

This is true, when others are unhappy; it is difficult to be happy. . . . When trees are

growing well, the leaves are green, they make [us] happy. When [we] meet other villages nearby, . . . [we] discuss how [our] forests are doing: are they getting weaker or stronger, are they blossoming well and are they filled with leaves.
(Interview with a woman in K, Uotinen)

The code “connection” was a word used by two Baiga healers in K. It seems to refer to a sense of connection with others including nonhumans. It was described as being a variant of love. It is not something fleeting or abstract; but it is with the particular surroundings and beings in the locality and also relates to action for protecting them. Importantly, human happiness is contingent on having such a sense of connection with others including nonhumans.

In an in-depth interview by Uotinen, two Baiga healers, a couple, in K, explained that a spirit gives the following account, mediated by the healers:

Q: In [The researcher’s country] there are lots of richnesses but there are suicides and not all people fare well . . . I am trying to study or find answers to cure . . .

A: if you are not having connection with those you are loving . . . for example . . . [one] is believing [in] the god, [and] if there is no connection between the god and he, he will . . . [die by] suicide; he will . . . find [himself] alone. Like . . . if you are loving some . . . person, if she or he does not [love you], you will feel alone, and you will . . . come to that suicide. If there is no connection between people, you . . . come to the suicide . . . If there . . . is no connection, no love, no belief . . . that is the reason.

(Interview with man and woman in K, Uotinen)

In a follow-up, in-depth interview to verify the preliminary results of Uotinen, A woman from K, commenting on the discussion with the healers, explained that connection brings happiness.

Being together is important; one cannot do this alone; to be happy . . . Being alone without that connection everything seems so heavy, all bad things seem so burden; but when together we can learn from each other, and it all makes sense, and being alone, none of it makes sense.

(Interview with a woman from K, Uotinen)

Connection characterizes also the interspecies relations of at least some of the Baigas. In the follow-up interview, the woman from K was asked whether connection is related to forest, and she said that:

“forest also helps in having a connection . . . I do not understand the thinking of those people who don’t have it.”

She described their connection with the nonhumans:

... [In] the surroundings, there are streams and wells, we like all of them in equal measures. . . . The love [I have] for trees; the connection is not seasonal; in the sun it gives shade, in the wind the leaves make sound, and soothe and peace the mind. It is nice to sleep under them. Also, they kind of talk to you. Even a river is not only for water; but makes sounds. Feels like somebody would be saying something to you. It feels like you just want to watch and be part of that.

(Interview with a woman from K, Uotinen)

So, felt connection with others, be they human or nonhuman, is seen as important for human happiness, and the well-being of both other humans and nonhumans are parts of well-being and happiness conceptions. Such well-being ideals appear to relate to the respondents protecting and supporting the local nonhumans:

If someone would try to take away the forest, [we] would come together and resist. [I'd] be extremely sad. It's a living thing, it'd be barren land. It would not mean the same if it's not that forest.

(Interview with a woman from K, Uotinen)

Such nonanthropocentric community-based well-being understandings were also found among the Gonds in Seal's study. Seal documents the local term *furman* (well-being) employed by the Gond community. *Furman* implies happiness and well-being as a condition where the entire network of beings remain safe and can continue to draw the necessary conditions of their existence from each other. Seal learnt from the village elders of Banoli that their ancestors agreed to settle and establish the village (Banoli) as they found *furman*, a condition of happiness, satisfaction and peace with the spirits, that brought prosperity to Banoli.

Additionally, Seal observed that despite acute poverty, the Gonds of Banoli continued to follow the restrictions of consumption vested upon each of their clans (*gotras*) by the *Koya Punem* which prevented each clan from cutting down their specific totemic tree species or to hunt their totemic animals and birds. They also performed their seasonal rituals *Pandums* which they believed kept their ancestors happy and satisfied.

Seal observed that from an ecological perspective the observance of the *Pandums* ensured that all material and biological conditions for the well-being of the forest (i.e. their habitat) were maintained by the community members.

The Gondi Calendar is marked by *Pandums* (a ritual that is to be performed before any fruit, seed, flower or leaf is used for human use or consumption). As per elders of the community *Pandums* are performed to pay respect to the life of the *pen* (ancestral spirits). It is commonly believed that *pens* govern the balance of the earth by assigning duties. Human's have the duty of dispersing seeds, protecting certain species or even to hunt certain other species. *Pandums* are the rituals which facilitate such governance.

(Field diary, Seal)

6 On the Convergence of the Three Studies

Table 2 summarizes the key findings in each study. Nearly all central results presented here were found in each study independently of the others providing robustness to the results. The findings in this table were included in the summary, which was validated in P, D, and K.³

³ Only this point "an affectionate, and reciprocal kind of relation with humans or nonhumans was seen as necessary for human happiness" was not included in the summary and, therefore, explicitly validated.

Table 2 Summary of key findings in the different studies

R	Tribes	Geogr. Area	Summary of findings in key themes
S	Gond	Southern Chhattisgarh, Uttar Bastar/ Kanker	Interbeings relations: The community had familial, caring, and interdependent relations with the nonhumans. Their ancestral spirits are part of the locality and coordinate duties for the benefit of all beings. Their relations with the nonhumans aimed at the well-being of the whole network of beings including both humans and nonhumans including through their social institutions and structures Well-being: well-being of humans and nonhumans is intertwined and depends on the well-being of the whole network of beings coordinated by their ancestral spirits
L	Baiga, Gond	East Madhya Pradesh	Interbeings relations: Most respondents had familial and affectionate relationships with nonhumans in the forest. Consideration for the needs of both humans and nonhumans affected the ways in which nonhumans are termed similar to humans, and this entails reciprocal care. The forest is seen as a whole where humans and nonhumans equally belong and which they constitute Well-being: Well-being of humans and nonhumans is intertwined. The needs of nonhumans are considered, and even in cases when nonhumans are not referred to as ‘persons’, their well-being is taken into account
U	Baiga, Gond, Panika	Northwestern Chhattisgarh & East Madhya Pradesh	Interbeings relations: Most respondents had familial and affectionate relationships with the particular nonhumans in the surroundings. The respondents saw themselves incomplete without the forest and the forest incomplete without them Well-being: The happiness and well-being of the nonhumans was important in itself and formed part of the respondents’ own happiness. An affectionate, and reciprocal kind of relation with humans or nonhumans was seen as necessary for human happiness

“R.” denotes researcher’s initial and “Geogr. Area” denotes geographical area in which study took place

7 Discussion and Conclusion

To explore the role of interspecies relations in happiness and well-being ideals among selected predominantly Baiga and Gond villages this article asked, what are the locals' perspectives on interspecies relations and well-being, and what is the role of the interspecies relations in their well-being conceptions. The interspecies relations refer both to material and subjective relations between humans and nonhumans.

Our findings in relation to the first research question about the respondents' perspectives on interspecies relations are as follows: The respondents perceived themselves to depend on the local nonhumans in a variety of ways such as for meeting the basic needs of food, medicine, and shelter. The respondents seemed to form a kind of an "interspecies community" with both the humans and nonhumans. They largely had caring, familial, and personal relations with the local nonhumans (cf. Müller, 2019; Jolly et al., 2024) including trees, rivers, animals, and spirits. The daily life in the villages as well as rituals and festivities tended to reflect and realize the ethics of caring for the nonhumans and the interspecies community as a whole. The respondents have their individual views and some describe a deeper affection or relating with the nonhumans than others, and likewise, there were differences in relating to different nonhumans. For instance, both trees and animals are considered in personal terms in many ways, but trees were more often described in more familial terms. Moreover, these interspecies relations were not static, but dynamic and changing. Thus, sometimes they were referred to in personal terms, and sometimes less personal. Interspecies relations were described with particular nonhuman actors, for instance the trees, whose needs are met in a reciprocal, caring relationship. Moreover, a responsibility to protect the shared ecology within the forest as a whole was widely shared among the respondents.

While a broad spectrum of factors were mentioned in connection with happiness, good life or important things in life, the well-being and happiness conceptions often mentioned land and forest among other things such as good social relationships, ease of burden of work and money. The well-being of both humans near and far, and of animals, land and forest were mentioned as conditions or factors of happiness. Although the nonhuman personhood emerges as a relational effect in ways which are invested with dynamic and changing meanings, (c.f. Naveh & Bird-David, 2014), the nonhumans were usually treated with respect and their well-being was valued for its own sake. Also, the well-being of the whole interspecies community was seen as important. The concept of connection, closely related to affection, was mentioned as an important part of well-being and happiness and it can be experienced both with humans and nonhumans.

We then turn to the remaining research question: what is the role of interspecies relations in happiness and well-being ideals among the communities? The interspecies relations and the conceptions of well-being and happiness are intimately linked. Firstly, the conceptions of well-being and happiness often refer directly to nonhumans and their well-being. On one hand, the nonhumans were seen as important satisfiers of material needs of humans; and on the other hand, the well-being of nonhumans was also seen as important in itself and as directly affecting human happiness. Secondly, the conceptions of well-being and happiness included ideas of proper kinds of *relationships* with the nonhumans (interspecies relationships) that contribute to human happiness. These proper kinds of interspecies relations are connection, affection, and respect for the whole interspecies community including nonhumans. They were seen as proper because the respondents saw that one ought to respect and care for the nonhumans for reciprocity due to them giving so much

to the respondents. These kinds of happiness conceptions are constituted in relation with nonhumans, and thus, are themselves interspecies relations.

Furthermore, interspecies relations are entangled with well-being on a more profound level, because nonhuman personhood, human and nonhuman needs, and a sense of familiarity are intertwined. The acknowledgement of the needs of both humans and nonhumans is an important factor in interspecies relations, as this acknowledgement relates to the personification of nonhumans and the related sense of community with them. Perceiving the forest as providing the necessary resources for humans is intertwined to the perception of similarly important needs of the nonhumans in the forest. In other words, acknowledging the immediate ecological dependence (Hannis, 2015) of humans and their well-being on what the surrounding forest provides, seems to invite the acknowledgement of the dependence of the nonhuman neighbors on the similar provisions. Personification of the nonhumans and the related perception of ecological dependence appear important to the familial nature of interspecies relations, and the importance of the well-being of the nonhumans in human happiness. Moreover, this familial nature of interspecies relations contributes to experiences of happiness of humans.

These nonanthropocentric well-being and happiness ideals significantly depart from the predominant academic theories holding well-being mainly as an individual human-related or interhuman phenomenon, in which nature is treated separately and instrumentally. While self-oriented and other-oriented elements in the form of good action are common to both, the respondents' conceptions emphasize the well-being of nonhumans, and the well-being of both humans and nonhumans is seen as interrelated. While both see connection to others as important for well-being (e.g. Diener et al., 2018), the conceptions in the studied communities emphasize more on the connection to nonhumans as well. This is reflected in the empirical results about the everyday life in the communities, as well as in the discussions on the Koya Punem framework. The observed well-being ideals also appear to contrast with predominant developmental ideals that tend to focus on income, economic productivity and education. Despite the poverty of the studied hamlets in terms of predominant poverty metrics (e.g. PRADAN, 2022), the respondents did not only value income and education, though some did, but emphasized the well-being of the local nonhuman actors, and connection with both humans and nonhumans as well. Imposition of developmental ideals not taking these into account would seem to threaten central aspects of well-being and happiness among the respondents.

Such nonanthropocentric well-being conceptions may combine both human and environmental well-being in a more mutualistic fashion than the predominant development and well-being ideals thus being closer to a sought after ecological well-being conception (Caillon et al., 2017; Helne & Hirvilammi, 2015). Among the communities, a proper kind of relating to the nonhumans appeared essential in tying the well-being of the humans and nonhumans together: connection and affection with the nonhumans. Instead of conservation being a conscious intent, conservation may happen as a side-product of the caring interspecies communities and the related nonanthropocentric onto-epistemologies (Bird-David & Naveh, 2008). Indeed, a sense of relatedness with nature, prevalent among Indigenous communities (e.g. Müller et al., 2019; Niigaaniin & MacNeill, 2022), tends to associate with pro-environmental behavior across various cultures and continents (Whitburn et al., 2020). Given that the communities appeared to be more concerned about the well-being of the nonhumans than the predominant well-being and development ideals, it appears that greater self-governance and autonomy in managing areas according to the customary practices and concepts of development by those living in this kind of interspecies communities might support ecological sustainability and well-being (cf. MacNeill, 2020).

This could be achieved through the registration of community land rights, using international law (Tobin, 2014), or promoting biocultural approaches (Bavikatte, 2014; Caillon et al., 2017) or community protocols (Robinson & Raven, 2020). Additionally, Indigenous management would be more equitable than exclusively top-down state approaches (Müller et al., 2019).

The well-being ideals and ethics of care may contrast with the dominant narratives of academia because in the more affluent societies people are dependent not on immediate surroundings, but on products and services obtained from markets, from people, masking the role of nonhumans in their production. This is in line with the thoughts among the localities: “The village peoples are dependent on forest so they can’t be happy without the forest; but city people get everything without the forest, and so they can be happy without forest” (Interview with a woman in A, Uotinen). The academic literature tends to mainly reflect the Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich and Democratic societies (WEIRD societies, see Henrich, 2010). Although nonhumans are always behind and involved in the production of goods and services, and our existence is dependent on these kinds of ecosystem services, these are not directly experienced as sources of meaning, pleasure and need satisfaction. This suggests that, in line with the ontological turn literature (e.g. Lorimer, 2012), the conceptions of happiness and well-being reflect *implicit* relations between humans and nonhumans everywhere, also among the WEIRD communities.

It might appear to the reader that this study posits the context of rural central India as an ‘other’ of the WEIRD societies. However, it is not a simple dichotomy. Owing to a long history of colonization, Adivasi communities of rural central India have also been exposed to Western modernity with unequal terms. Historical power dynamics undoubtedly have affected interspecies relations; but their examination is beyond the current research. Moreover, we are aware of the dangers in researching Indigenous cultures as this may create misguided representations of their understandings (Cameron et al., 2014; Chandler & Reid, 2020; Radcliffe, 2017). Thus, our conclusions should be read not as a monolithic representation of an Indigenous ontology, but a conceptualization of interspecies relations present at the moment of study, supported by extracts of descriptions of life in the communities, and acknowledging that these relations are dynamic, heterogeneous and subject to change. Also, the results should not be interpreted as shared by all residents, as the communities also are not internally homogenous, and this heterogeneity was evident in our results as well. Our intent has been to be as much informed by the local social understandings as possible. Encouragingly, in all cases when the preliminary results were discussed with the villagers for validation of the results, the residents described the presented summaries to match their understanding, and to capture the local way of life better than any previous depictions made by outsiders.

Finally, we encourage a wider inclusion of interspecies relations into the inquiries about meaningful and happy life. As the predominant academic accounts on well-being have not yet explored interspecies relations in depth, we suggest that a fruitful new research agenda would be to study these questions in different contexts, also beyond Indigenous communities. The results could also be extended towards decolonial, participatory quantitative studies to quantify the relation between different types of interspecies relations and well-being ideals that might provide understanding on what kinds of relations may be more conducive to well-being ideals caring more for nonhuman well-being, for example (cf. Niigaaniin & MacNeill, 2022). However, it might be appropriate to replace “interspecies relations” with the term *interbeings* relations to help future researchers to be sensitive to a wider range of interspecies relations, such as those relating to spirits and waterbodies for example, that

may take place in different localities (see also the concept of “Naturacultura” by MacNeill, 2020). Neglecting these interspecies relations may lead to critical lack in understanding local hybrid networks, their dynamics, and experiences of well-being and happiness.

Acknowledgements The authors thank Emmaus Aurinkotehdas ry, Siemenpuu Foundation, and all the local NGO associations, the translators, and all those who enabled our field work. Warmest thanks go to the respondents of the study for their invaluable help and contribution to this study. The authors would like to extend their thanks to Jussi Jauhiainen, Timo Vuorisalo, Arttu Saarinen, and Pasi Heikkurinen, Barry Gills and Pirjo Virtanen for their support and comments that truly improved the manuscript. Anonymous referees are also thanked for their valuable comments.

Author Contributions All authors contributed to the study conception and design. All authors contributed to data collection, preparation and analysis. All authors contributed to writing the final draft. All authors read and commented on the manuscript versions. All authors read and approved the final manuscript. All authors participated in the revision of the manuscript and approved it.

Funding Open Access funding provided by University of Turku (including Turku University Central Hospital). Turku university foundation (Grant Numbers 4-641 and 080824), BGG doctoral programme, and the Department of Geography and Geology at the University of Turku.

Declarations

Conflict of interest The authors have no relevant financial or non-financial interests to disclose.

Informed Consents Prior and informed consents were asked and obtained from the respondents.

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