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Editorial: Sustainable consumption and care

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Editorial on the Research Topic Sustainable consumption and care

Sustainable consumption is an essential element of the transition to a sustainable lifestyle. In the everyday, care is intertwined with processes of looking after oneself, family, household, and friends, as well as for distant others and the community. Care touches all areas of human life, including material dimensions such as the living environment and the resources required for production and consumption. Looking at sustainable consumption through the lens of care provides us with conceptual tools to rethink how we protect the planet, its biodiversity and the people who live on it. Care emphasizes our vulnerability as living beings and the way in which a complex web of life-sustaining relationships holds us accountable to one another. Care is thus an important thread that connects the ecological, economic, social and political systems in which we operate.

Research on care and sustainable consumption is fragmented. Research on care has its origins in feminist scholarship, first developed in relation to health. More recently, care has been extended to environmental and sustainability studies. Research on sustainable consumption and care can be broadly divided into four categories. A first strand of work is concerned with whether ethical consumption can allow caring relationships to flourish. A second strand looks at sustainability in the context of parenting, focusing on gender relations and caring activities, in which health overshadows sustainability. A third body of work is concerned with the ways in which inconspicuous consumption is intertwined with care activities, for example in food or energy consumption, mobility, and leisure activities. Finally, the fourth strand considers care as a dimension of geographical communities or communities of interest that supports sustainability and resilience.

This Research Topic of papers highlights care as a fundamental yet undervalued component of sustainable consumption. From household practices to broader societal transformations, care emerges as both a practical and an ethical lens through which to understand and address sustainability. Gender dynamics, time use, community building, and social justice are recurring themes that argue for rethinking sustainability in relational rather than transactional terms. The nine contributions to this Research Topic are organized around two groups of papers. The first group considers care as a set of practices or activities that support or hinder the transition toward more sustainable forms of consumption. The second group outlines pathways toward care-centered societies.

The first group is composed of four papers. In their paper “*The cultural practice of decluttering as household work and its potentials for sustainable consumption*,” [Muster et al.](#) show how the current trend of decluttering and minimalist lifestyles is a form of self-care and caring for the household. While opening households toward more sustainable modes of consumption, it also runs the risk of being reclaimed by the consumerist ideology of constant accumulation and leading to an increase in consumption. In “*Care, gender, and change in the study of sustainable consumption: a critical review of the literature*,” [Godin and Langlois](#) show that transforming consumption often means interfering with established routines, practices, and activities of care. Thus, transforming household practices toward more sustainable forms of consumption risks further entrenching existing and persistent gender inequalities in the distribution of care work. They thus propose a reduction and redistribution of care work. [Smetschka et al.](#) come to similar conclusions in their paper “*Time to care—Care for time—How spending more time for care than consumption helps to mitigate climate change*.” Based on an analysis of time-use data in Austria, they show how men’s and women’s time-use patterns are shaped by the gendered division of care work and how this affects their respective carbon footprints, particularly in relation to time prosperity or pressure. Finally, “*Social ties and sustainability in neighbourhood canteens: a care-based approach*,” [Dyen and Michaud](#) draw on “third spaces” and ethnographic fieldwork conducted in two neighborhood canteens in France to show how participation in such collective and community-building spaces is driven either by a desire to receive care, a desire to give care, with both impulses often occurring simultaneously.

Five papers address pathways toward care-centered societies. In “*Who cares (for whom)?*,” [Spangenberg and Lorek](#) (a) argue that in order to solve the current care deficit, which is largely caused by an unequal distribution of care work, and to ensure social reproduction and thriving communities, profound transformation is needed in [terms of] the institutional recognition of care work. In their perspective paper “*Towards care-centred societies*,” [Spangenberg and Lorek](#) (b) then highlight the differences between various types of care work, and discuss how the distribution of paid and unpaid care work affects sustainable development. In his paper “*Toward sustainable wellbeing: Advances in contemporary concepts*,” [O’Mahony](#) mobilizes care as a tool to better integrate nature and the environment into the concept of wellbeing, arguing for a more collective, relational and systemic approach. In looking at “*Sustainable consumption, resonance, and care*,” [Wahlen and Stroude](#) turn to the concept of resonance to think about care in relation to people and politics, things, and collective singulars, to suggest that thinking about care as an experience of resonance can help to redefine the role and place of consumption. Finally, in their paper titled “*Using the theory of protected needs to conceptualize sustainability as ‘caring for human wellbeing’*,”

an empirical confirmation of the theory’s potential,” [Di Giulio et al.](#) describe how community-level practices of care foster social ties, resilience and sustainable systems, demonstrating the interconnectedness of individuals and society, and the systemic transformations needed to institutionalize care as a foundation for sustainable and equitable societies.

As a whole, this Research Topic explores care as a transformative lens for sustainable consumption, emphasizing its relational and systemic dimensions. From individual practices such as decluttering and time management to community-building efforts in shared spaces, care emerges as the linchpin that connects personal actions to broader societal goals. By prioritizing empathy, justice and relational wellbeing, the contributions highlight the need for structural changes to elevate the role of care in our economies and policies. Current frameworks undervalue care, and place a disproportionate burden on women and marginalized groups. A care-centered approach requires an equitable redistribution of responsibilities, challenging traditional gender norms and ensuring inclusion. Crucially, care offers a narrative for sustainability that resonates with everyday experience, linking ecological action with human wellbeing. This perspective reorients sustainability from an abstract goal to a shared societal responsibility that nurtures both people and the planet. Future research should deepen the understanding of the transformative potential of care in promoting inclusive, just and sustainable societies.

Author contributions

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Conflict of interest

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