CRITICAL COMMENTS FOR CRITICAL TIMES: QUESTIONING PSYCHOLOGY’S CONTRIBUTION TO A SUSTAINABLE SOCIETY

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Abstract

To date, most of the attention in psychology to environmental behaviour change has focussed on changing attitudes and behaviours. More recently, attention has been given to the role of identity and social norms. The word ‘lifestyle’ has also slipped into psychologists’ vocabulary although it is difficult to see operationally what the psychological properties of lifestyle are.

This chapter will discuss six problematic issues concerning the theories and approaches commonly employed in environmental psychology to address issues of sustainable development and consumer behaviour: the failure to recognise that behaviours are complex and non-linear; the concentration on instrumental and direct approaches to behaviour change which ignore the social world in which everyday life is lived; the failure to see attitudes and behaviours in the wider context of understandings and beliefs about environmental and social change, power and influence, justice and equity; the trend towards devising instruments of change that rely on forced change and compulsion rather than free will and choice; the uncritical theorisation of sustainability drawn from political and governmental areas of debate.

The sixth issue is in many ways even more problematic and will require a fundamental change in the kind of assumptions environmental psychologists make and the questions they ask concerning future pathways to a more sustainable society. The focus on changing consumer behaviours, with its individualistic and market-oriented implications, has to be challenged. Will focussing primarily on consumer action deliver the low carbon society aspired to by governments given the tacit conspiracy between the constantly re-created desires of the hedonistic consumer that a carbon-intensive producer needs to realise his profits? Attacking consumer behaviour simply addresses the ‘downstream’ symptoms rather than the ‘upstream’ causes of environmental problems.

The chapter concludes by arguing that any attempt to develop a sustainable society has to understand how the relationship between individuals and their social contexts can be changed, so that individuals have more control over their living conditions. This leads ultimately to questions of empowerment, self-determination and democracy. The emphasis in a transformative environmental psychology should shift to the relations of production and consumption and the political relations within which unsustainable ways of living and working are produced and reproduced.

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Technological fixes by themselves will not solve the problem of climate change. It is recognised that global warming and its consequences need to be addressed by changing peoples’ behaviour and everyday practices. Perhaps emblematic of the growing call made on the social sciences to contribute to enabling a low carbon economy, psychology is regarded as being able to make a crucial contribution to the development of more sustainable lifestyles amongst the population. The supposed skills of psychologists in being able to affect behaviour change and the individualistic orientation of government consumer behaviour change policies inevitably mean that psychologists are often seen to be well placed to advise governments. The sound of wind turbines and furiously pedalling cyclists is drowned out only by the feet of psychologists beating a hasty path to the nearest government policymaker with their ideas for how we can change people’s attitudes and behaviours towards over-consumption.

Most of the attention in psychology on sustainable development has focussed on understanding the public’s attitudes towards environmental and sustainability issues and identifying how barriers to behaviour change in respect of, for example, changing travel modes, waste and energy reduction can be overcome. There is no shortage of research studies which simply reproduce the same research questions leading to surveys which confirm time and time again that people are concerned about the environment. We know that people are concerned about the environment, or do we?

In a study recently published by the UK Government (Defra, 2007), we find that while people express concern about transport, energy, waste etc, when asked without prompting what are the most important issues Government should be dealing with, their principal concerns were crime (49%), health or social services (47%), and education (36%) - less than 20% mentioned the environment (19%). And even more remarkable, despite the unprecedented attention now being given to global warming, carbon emissions and Al Gore’s film An Inconvenient Truth, is that concern for the environment has actually dropped since 2001 – there is even less concern than in 1993 (Defra, 2007, p5).

We need, at least, to think carefully about the assumptions we make about the public’s concern over environmental issues and their openness to changing their everyday practices. This is not to suggest that surveys of people’s concerns are inaccurate or that people are not telling the truth, but how do we explain these findings? I think we can look to two explanations.

First, we need to challenge the value of more research on environmental attitudes and behaviour, and ask whether philosophically, conceptually, theoretically and methodologically we are tackling these issues the right way. This kind of analysis locates the problem within our research; somehow people are concerned but the way we are framing and asking questions, and subsequently analysing and interpreting the public’s responses leads to very different, confusing and ambiguous results.

Second, it could be that people are not really concerned; this is a more worrying scenario. Is it perhaps not surprising that that people see health, crime and education as being more important? They are instantly meaningful, they are concrete not abstract, they relate very much to the individual. Despite being against their own interests, people still do not see harming the environment actually harms them. This is well illustrated by the headlines in tabloid papers - “Now a tax on your dustbin” (The Daily Mail, 5th October 2006), “The first
recycling martyr” (The Mail on Sunday, 22nd October, 2006) and “Dustbin spies sweep Britain” (Daily Express, 5th October, 2006) - that have developed an almost pathological antagonism towards any attempt in the UK to try and solve the waste crisis and which believe it is an inalienable human right for people (i.e., taxpayers) to create as much waste as they like. Or perhaps people feel totally powerless in the face of natural and human global forces?

In conclusion, two propositions might be put forward to explain why the public are proving resistant to behaviour change strategies implemented by government in general and there are potentially two problems with the environmental psychology of sustainability and climate change:

1. People are concerned about sustainable development but our research paradigms, theories, methods are not providing the right kind of evidence-based support to assist in the development of a more sustainable society

2. People are not concerned about sustainable development, because they do not see its relevance or urgency, a problem exacerbated by social scientists uncritically importing concepts of sustainability from political and governmental areas of debate.

Five Critical Issues

This chapter discusses five critical issues concerning the theories and approaches commonly employed in environmental psychology to address issues of sustainable development and consumer behaviour. The first four of these issues seek to lend support to the first proposition that people are concerned about sustainable development but our research paradigms, theories, methods are not providing the right kind of evidence-based support to assist in the development of a more sustainable society. The fifth issue addresses the second proposition.

1) The failure to recognise that behaviours are complex and non-linear

Only five years ago the emphasis at most conferences on the contribution of environmental psychology to sustainable development research, policy and practice would have been on awareness raising and changing attitudes. Much less attention would have been given to behaviour change. One reason for this would have been that it was assumed that if we can win over the hearts and minds of the public, then behaviour change will follow. Such a view relies on a basic linear model of information/attitude/behaviour change which suggests that giving people information will lead to attitude change which in turn will lead to behaviour change (e.g., smoking, fast food etc). Of course, if it were as simple as that then smoking and healthy eating campaigns would be more effective. Given that the benefits or returns for engaging in more environmentally sustainable ways Decisions are not always the product of a rational, deliberative and individual evaluation; they are more likely to be based on opportunistic or emotional impulses, habit or cultural tradition, family, friends, role models and wider interests. Likewise, the relationship between attitudes and behaviour is far from straightforward. Positive attitudes may not always be a precursor for behaviour change, and as we know, behavioural intention is not guaranteed to lead to actual behaviour (Kaiser,
Wölfing and Fuhrer, 1999). Indeed, attitudes may be a consequence of the self-monitoring of our own behaviour and the situations in which this behaviour occurs (Bem, 1972).

2) The concentration on instrumental and direct approaches to behaviour change which ignore the social world in which everyday life is lived

When we are seeking to achieve a behavioural impact we should not necessarily look for a direct effect. Behavioural impact can be direct or indirect. For example, the effect of an environmental intervention programme may be to work directly on behaviour change, or indirectly through enhancing social cohesion and community identity. We have evidence that social cohesion and community identity can be an important pre-condition for change respect of sustainable behaviour (Uzzell, Poli and Badenes, 2002). We should also remember that sustainability is not just a ‘green issue’ – the behaviours which we are trying to change are as much concerned with our social and economic lives as the environment; they are indivisible. It may be more persuasive and appealing if we do not refer to the environment, as this may alienate some people. Research undertaken in the UK examining the potential role of children in changing the attitudes and behaviours of their parents as a consequence of the environmental education experiences at school found that one barrier to children taking their environmental learning home was that the environment was not seen as an appropriate topic for discussion around the dinner table. Some parents found such a discussion intimidating because the child appeared to know more than them and the parent did not like to be put in the position of pupil. (Uzzell et al, 1994; Uzzell, 1999); likewise, others may see it as an issue in which they are totally disinterested. Approaching environmental issues through health issues may be more effective. It must also be remembered that most programmes have an effect and potential beyond that intended. Sometimes this can be positive and worthwhile and should be measured as well (e.g., increase in community identity and neighbourliness). However, some strategies may lead to unintended negative consequences (e.g., social division).

3) An individualistic and reductionist consumerism critique which fails to see attitudes and behaviours in the wider context of understandings and beliefs about environmental and social change, power and influence, justice and equity

Environmental psychology research often seems to make the assumption, largely as a consequence of the framing of the research agenda by governments, that climate change and reduced carbon emissions should be addressed by focussing on changing consumer behaviour. Consequently, with the problem of climate change laid firmly at the feet of a public responsible for excessive consumption by pursuing ignorant, errant, and self-serving consuming behaviours, psychologists draw on a variety of models and theories to account for and then recommend to government and others, strategies which can be employed to affect behaviour change by persuading or forcing people to consume and waste less.

Attacking consumer behaviour simply addresses the ‘downstream’ symptoms rather than the ‘upstream’ causes of environmental problems. Of course, at one level it seems appropriate to address consumer behaviour because it is the consumer who needs and wants goods and services. The assumption in consumer-oriented policies is that it is consumer demand that
drives production, and therefore attention should focus on the consumer to try and stem their insatiable appetite. This is a simplistic reading of the producer-consumer relationship. The idea that producers are simply responding to the market demands of consumers is mythical. Producers are constantly seeking to (re)create consumer desires. We are repeatedly told that the route to success whether it is through the display of material possessions (i.e., having) or the acquisition of a socially-desirable identity (i.e., being) is through consumption. The ways in which our society is organised in general and producers in particular instil in us a dissatisfaction with what we own, are, experience or achieve and offer us a solution – consumption. A more acute view was expressed by Seabrook “It is not so much that capitalism has delivered the goods to the people, as that the people have been increasingly delivered to the goods….” (Seabrook, 1988, p 183). Consumption and production, demand and desire cannot be disaggregated with simplistic cause/effect models; they are the product of attitudes, values, and motivations but incubated within a structural context of social, political and cultural forces.

While it may seem logical within a neo-liberal economic culture to try and change consumer behaviour in order to achieve a change in production, the mechanisms and devices which producers enjoy and employ to impact on the market are not so readily available for the consumer to resist consumption persuasion assaults. Consumers are rarely organised and able to assert collective pressure through marketing strategies and practices which producers exercise. They can only operate through individual and largely ineffectual action. It is only when consumers become politically organised that they can challenge producers and government. This is unusual, with the fuel protests in Britain in 2000 being a rare example (BBC, 2005). Moreover, the marketing budgets of most producers are overwhelming greater than those who seek to advocate more sustainable everyday practices. For example, in 1999, the advertising expenditures for US food products were $7.3 billion (Harris et al, 2002). In contrast, in the same year the US Department of Agriculture spent $333 million on nutrition education, evaluation, and demonstrations (Gallo, 1999). A solely consumer-oriented strategy ignores the fact that greater power and better organised forces are working in the opposite direction, namely to sell as much as possible at any, including a damaging, environmental cost. This is well illustrated by an interview with Dorothy Thompson, the CEO of Drax power station, the largest coal-fired power station in the UK providing 7% of Britain’s electricity, but also Western Europe’s largest industrial source of carbon dioxide. In a newspaper interview on whether decisions should be based on economics or environmental ethics, Thompson argued, “If you’re faced with two decisions, and one’s going to make you a lot of money but give no environmental benefit, and one’s going to make the same amount of money but result in an environmental benefit, it’s very clear which one you go for.” However, when subsequently asked whether the company would take the pro-environmental option if it compromised profitability, Thompson replied “No, because my shareholders wouldn’t support it. They invest in us for a profit. We’re not a not-for-profit organisation.” (Harris, 2007, 31).

Most environmental psychology research rarely positions behaviour within its larger social, economic and political context. While values and attitudes are clearly important in influencing behaviour, they are not formed in a social and cultural vacuum. They are embedded, nurtured and emerge from a social context, in particular, class, gender, ethnicity, and space, resulting in and deriving from specific everyday cultures. Understandings and
beliefs about environmental change have to be seen in the context of a wider set of understandings and beliefs about society, the nature of change, its purpose and efficacy, and the role of different groups in society in bringing about change (e.g., ethical trading; organic food; North-South divide; inter- and intra-generational justice; species justice). We continue to live in a fragmented and organisationally, socially and culturally complex society where it is not possible to talk about ‘the public’ as if it were an easily identified homogeneous group with shared values and interests. In addition, the means by which we communicate today are far more diverse and the networks to which we belong more multifaceted. As a result, social change and influence processes are now more complex.

4) The trend towards devising instruments of change within a political and economic context that encourages choice may be inimical to a sustainable society

There is an assumption in our society that choice should be high on the list of societal values; it has been a mantra of neoliberal governments since the 1980s. On the surface, of course, choice seems like a good idea. But in a society such as ours that is complex, complicated to understand, and difficult to influence choice is not necessarily a benefit. Rather than being an enhancing and enabling liberty, it ends up being psychologically damaging and disabling for the individual and society and represents a tyranny not a freedom (Schwartz, 2005). Moreover, one of the most significant drivers of consumption, carbon emissions, waste and resource use is choice.

We know from research that increasing choices is ultimately counterproductive. In a recent experiment, researchers set up a display of high-quality jams and customers could taste samples. The customers were also given a money-off coupon for they bought a jar of jam. In one condition six varieties of the jam were available for tasting, but in another 24 varieties were available. The entire range of 24 varieties was available for purchase. The table with the larger selection of jams attracted more people. However in both cases people tasted about the same number of jams. But it was the purchasing behaviour that was most interesting -- 30% of the people exposed to the table of only six jams actually bought a jar; compared with only 3% of those exposed to the table of 24 jams (Inyegar & Lepper, 2000). When we are presented with so many choices, the experience can become paralysing and stressful as we stand in front of the shelves in complete indecision as if the decision really mattered. Of course we want to choose, but we want to choose wisely; we want to feel that we are making a reasonably rational choice based on criteria which are salient and important for us (e.g., sugar content, amount of additives etc), and that we have the relevant evidence and information on which to make the decision.

It is now being recognised by the UK Government that if behaviour change is the desired goal, then efforts should be focussed on changing behaviours. Because it is acknowledged that behaviour change will not simply be achieved by raising awareness and changing attitudes, the UK government is now looking at how it can bring about behaviour change directly. The typical levers are laws, regulations and financial penalties, but these are not always favoured as they tend not to win many votes. As Gifford writes in connection with the employment of coercive traffic management methods: “...drivers tend to be self-interested and they tend also to be voters......... Politicians may be cool to coercive measures, because they have an eye on the next election” (Gifford, 2007, p. 202).
It is not the intention in this chapter to argue that changing consumer behaviour should not be undertaken as if policy options should be loaded exclusively onto producers. Changing consumer behaviours so that people consume less energy, purchase more energy efficient appliances, produce less waste, and reduce their global footprint will be necessary. But we have to re-think more critically what it is that needs to be changed. Changing lightbulbs will not stop the inexorable growth in energy consumption and carbon emissions. Changing the needs and desires for particular ways of life that are so carbon-demanding may. Likewise, arguing that the market must be more constrained in its demand for the products of corporate producers misses the point that it is producers who are continually creating not only new products but new desires. Perceiving opportunities for developing new products to create new markets as well as renewing existing ones is the job of producers who are there to satisfy the demands of their shareholders who, as Dorothy Thompson stated above “….invest in us for a profit”.

Persuasive information alone will not bring about change in the context of producer and consumer relations that promulgate unrestricted choice philosophies which are destroying the very basis of life. We have reached a situation where restricted choice and forced change may be necessary on both consumers and producers if there is to be a more widespread realisation and acceptance that damaging environmental, social and economic actions are destroying the very basis of life. While this may be an unpalatable and difficult-to-sell message for politicians then maybe our task is to ascertain where there are instances when people would prefer or be more accepting of a limited choice. Correspondingly, there may be some instances where the public are not resistant to regulation if they can see both the personal and collective benefit. Is the resistance to change as great as policy makers assume? There are many examples within and beyond the environmental context, where behaviour change has been enforced by governments (e.g., compulsory wearing of seat belts and crash helmets, the banning of smoking in public places). Do we agree with Gifford when he writes that “the role of environmental psychology in this conundrum is to conduct research aimed at understanding which kinds of coercive measures, presented in which manner, and implemented according to which schedule, might be accepted by voting drivers” (Gifford, 2007, p 202). If we, as environmental psychologists, do not get involved then the consequences could be unpredictable as this example illustrates. Such alienation is reinforced by coercive actions, even when they are seemingly successful (but usually successful for the coercive power, not necessarily those in terms of achievements. But they might incite people to acts of resistance whenever they feel they have the power to challenge them.

One UK local authority implemented an Alternative Weekly Collection (AWC) scheme for waste and recyclables in 2006. In an AWC scheme non-recyclable waste is collected fortnightly and recyclable waste alternative weeks. However, residents are not allowed to over-fill their wheelie-bin so there are strict limits on the amount of non-recyclable waste they can dispose, thereby forcing them to reduced and recycle. As far as the local authority officers were concerned, the scheme was a great success as recycling rates in terms of tonnage increased from about 25% to 40% in less than nine months. Although it was deemed a ‘technical’ success, politically it was calamitous as the imposition of coercive change was resented because basic psychological lessons concerning feedback and the communication of the benefits of the scheme were not followed. At the most recent local government election (May, 2007) the political party which introduced the scheme went from a 29 – 26 seat
Council majority to losing 23 seats so that the former controlling party now has three seats compared with the former opposition party which has 51. It was widely accepted that the introduction of the AWC scheme was one of two significant local factors in this reversal. This may also say a great deal about how alienated the majority of the population feels about their ‘ownership’ and stake in the environment.

5) The uncritical theorisation of sustainability drawn from political and governmental areas of debate and policy

The second proposition put forward at the beginning of this chapter was that it could be that people are really not concerned about the environment or they could just feel totally powerless. This may be due to the kind of strategies that we are employing to try and change their attitudes and behaviours. We know from survey after survey that the public’s understanding of sustainability and sustainable development is poor (Darnton, 2004). What is sustainability and sustainable development? The concluding part of this chapter focuses on the term sustainability which is problematic in two respects.

The first problem is its wide range of meanings. While a lack of definition and coherence is clearly unhelpful, it has also been argued by Lélé that such arbitrariness can be politically useful:

‘Sustainable development is a “metaphor” that will unite everybody from the profit-minded industrialist and risk minimizing subsistence farmer to the equity-seeking social worker, the pollution concerned or wildlife-loving First Worlder, the growth-maximizing policy maker, the goal-oriented bureaucrat, and therefore, the vote-counting politician.’ (Lélé, 1991: 613).

So, while the term may be good to organise social cohesion it is not a good basis for empirical and theoretical research or even social and environmental action. The principal model used to incorporate the different dimensions of sustainability has been based on the Brundtland Venn diagram (1987). The way sustainability is constituted in this model suggests, however, that the social, economic and environmental aspects of everyday life should be treated as separate entities, meeting only in the middle to form a harmonious whole. But can we envisage an economy that is not constituted by specific social relations, and only interacts with the social and environmental aspects of life at the margins? The overlapping three elements suggest a state of harmony where the different goals and logics of these elements come together, while we know from political and daily experience that, even if we accept for a moment the separateness of these dimensions, their relationship is one of conflict and contradictions, rather than harmony. While we would not deny the importance of the social, economic and environmental dimensions to sustainability, analysing the world in terms of these domains only serves to encourage us to think about them separately and independently. The separation of these domains makes the conflicting social interests and relations which constitute each of them invisible. Even if we treat each of these domains in a relational way, it is not made at all explicit within the model as to how the social and economic processes operate.

To talk about the economy as if it were an independent facet obscures the fact that there is not a single ‘version’ of the economic. There are different economic systems and it has been a characteristic feature of the capitalist system to create environmental degradation and
Inequality. What we are witnessing with the more recent cocktail of neo-liberalist policies and globalisation is that such environmental degradation and inequality is now happening at a global level. Expressed in these terms it is difficult to see how the actions of individual consumers can affect this process given the production-generated demand identified in Section 3. This is illustrated by the following example. Before 1992 the bulk of corn consumed in Mexico was produced in Mexico itself and constituted the staple food of the Mexican diet. Following the 1992 NAFTA Agreement the US exported corn to Mexico at dumping prices thereby putting Mexican peasants out of work. This had the effect of forcing them to seek work in cities, especially US cities prompting moral panics about immigration and necessary border controls. With the growth in corn-based ethanol production, exports to Mexico have significantly decreased and the price of corn has soared because of the dependency on US imports.

This example shows the effects of unequal global power relations between the South and North in respect of the implementation of environmental measures; rich northerners feed their car with food taken from poor Southerners. Even the internationally highly-respected and cautious periodical The Economist recently concluded “It is not often that this newspaper finds itself in agreement with Fidel Castro, …… but when he roused himself from his sickbed last week to write an article criticising George Bush’s unhealthy enthusiasm for ethanol, he had a point. Along with other critics of America’s ethanol drive, Mr Castro warned against the “sinister idea of converting food into fuel” (The Economist, 2007, p 13). What was for a long time seen as a viable move into an environmental friendly energy policy transforms into a reproduction of the power gap between the poor and the rich.

In many ways the Brundtland model corresponds to what has been referred to as the ‘weak’ model of sustainability (Huckle and Sterling, 1999). In such a model the status quo of societal relations which have been responsible for environmental degradation are retained and action to achieve a sustainable society relies on the consumer responding to education, incentives and limited regulation within the context of a largely uncontrolled market economy. Technological fixes and Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) policies are the principal demands placed on producers in terms of their contribution to achieving sustainability.

‘Strong’ sustainability contests this almost laissez-faire approach and challenges the current relations of production by questioning the autonomy of corporations and the workings of the free market in favour of government and citizen’s interventions to achieve a sustainable future. In the following discussion a preliminary model of sustainability is put forward - referred to as transformative environmental sustainability (Uzzell and Räthzel, in press) - that corresponds more to a strong sustainability position. Instead of regarding the economy, social life and the environment as separate, or even in simple interaction, we suggest it is necessary to look at the specific social relations which underlie and create these domains.

**The Societal Body: Transformative environmental sustainability**

Although learning to live sustainably on this earth is ultimately non-negotiable as the earth’s resources and capacities for absorbing and accommodating anthropogenic impacts is finite, our wants are relative, insatiable and negotiable because they are the product of political determination and social conditions. This makes it possible to generate certain
questions, which have to be answered in order to know how to tackle environmental issues in relation to the social conditions within which they exist. As the relations of production, consumption and political relations are the drivers of (un)sustainable practices it is decisive to understand their origin and operation.

**Relations of production**

‘The economy’ is not universally the same in all societies; economic activities differ significantly whether we have a subsistence economy, a socialist economy, a feudal economy, a neoliberal or a Keynesian economy. The term relations of production allows to see “the economy” as a set of social relations (for instance between workers/employees and “shareholders”/management), which are necessary in order for production to happen. The question of ‘the social’ is thus not relegated to a specific domain outside the realm of the economy and the environment, but precisely defines the way in which the economy functions. Questions about the sustainability of the relations of production would then include: who decides what, how much is produced and how? Who decides whether certain products and how much of them are needed? To what degree are the workforce and the people living within the radius of the production process included in production decision-making?

**Relations of consumption**

The relations of consumption focus on the power relations through which consumption processes are structured, and which in turn may serve, amongst other things, to reproduce class relations (Bourdieu, 1984). And we know for example, how women, young people, and older people are targeted in specific ways to increase their consumption. Norms of body beauty, appearance and fitness are invented and promoted to make sure that there is a high level of consumption, in order to become what is mythologized as a successful individual. Thus, we have to analyse consumption within specific socio-cultural contexts. Moreover, the power of retailers becomes visible to show that what is hailed as consumer’s choice is in reality a form of dependency on decisions which goods do and do not reach consumers and how and at what cost.

**Political relations**

The political, that is, the process of decision making, is not explicitly articulated in the Brundtland model, suggesting that somehow political decision-making and action is implicit and unproblematic. It seems to imply that consensus rather than conflict is the *modus operandi* for reconciling the social, economic and environmental. This does not encourage us to see political relations themselves as in need of transformation. If we want to work towards a sustainable society we need to include the structure and functioning of political institutions and the way people relate to them into the programme of transformation. In this sense, the concept of ‘social sustainability’ is self-contradictory since the existing social relations, including the political ones, have produced the very situation with which we are faced and therefore should not be sustained. If we aspire to build what we might call a sustainable
society we have to transform social relations instead of making the existing ones sustainable. Social relations are constantly changing. We need to think how to organise societies in a way that processes of change can be controlled democratically. The question this poses would be: how should societies be organised which allow more direct forms of democracy, more egalitarian forms of distribution of power, work, and goods? Therefore, any attempt to develop a sustainable society and sustainable production and consumption has to understand how the relationship between individuals and their social contexts can be changed, so that individuals have more control over their living conditions.

As it is the relations of production, consumption and political relations which are the drivers of (un)sustainable practices, a transformative process model of sustainability should focus on the forces rather than the battleground. Thus, instead of a Venn diagram we propose a model of sustainable development that might be better represented by our model of The Body Politic on a Global Scale\(^{57}\) (Figure 1).

![Figure 1: The Body Politic on a Global Scale](image)

This shows how the relations of production, consumption and the political constitute a societal which can integrate into a whole, but one which is also always fragile and which is in danger of disintegrating and becoming dysfunctional. While we still have to separate these relationships analytically, we have tried to retain the notion that they are inseparable. The model suggests a shift in the focus from individuals to the social relations within which unsustainable ways of living are produced and reproduced. For environmental psychology, this requires a theoretical approach that takes as its starting point the idea that individuals are the sum of their social relations, i.e., they are the cause and consequence of their relations to others and the environment. Our task should be to examine the reciprocity between people.

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57 This model has been developed as part of the ongoing research programme ‘Sustainable Development and Globalization’ between the University of Surrey (David Uzzell) and the University of Umeå (Nora Räthzel).
and environment and the ways in which they mutually reproduce the material conditions for their existence.

**Concluding Comments**

This chapter has argued that there are potentially two problems with the environmental psychology of sustainability and climate change

1. People *are* concerned about sustainable development but our research paradigms, theories, methods are not providing the right kind of evidence-based support to assist in the development of a more sustainable society

2. People *are not* concerned about sustainable development, because they do not see its relevance or urgency, a problem exacerbated by social scientists uncritically importing concepts of sustainability from political and governmental areas of debate

What should our response be as environmental psychologists? To address the first of these issues, we need to devise a new research agenda for a transformative environmental psychology. This would

- incorporate a more comprehensive view on individuals as workers and consumers band citizens
- seek to understand the ways in which individuals and their “values, norms and behaviours” concerning (un)sustainability are constituted by the ways in which they work and the social relations and places within which they live
- examine the ways in which the social production of the environment by corporations and workers/employees, that is, working processes and production decisions, impact upon the ways in which individuals experience the environment.

To conclude, these are some examples for the kind of research questions this type of approach generates:

- How do we understand the relationship between people’s work, their social relationships, the places they live in, their positions within the given power relations and the values deriving from these and what conceptual models of sustainability can be derived from these understandings?

- How can social-psychological understandings of the formation of subjectivities at work be used to devise effective policies for the democratisation of the production process?

- How could employees’ increased control over their work process influence their modes of consumption and ways of life in general?

- How do employees engaged in the production of environmentally damaging goods or services negotiate their interests as producers, consumers of such goods, and as inhabitants of a healthy planet?

To address the second issue, one strategy will be to contribute to the construction of sustainability education and awareness programmes so that environmental issues can be
conceived within a broader environmental, social and political context of causes and consequences. Technological responses by themselves will not solve the growing problem of global warming. As was illustrated with the example of the use of corn for ethanol production, technological solutions do not happen in a vacuum, but within existing unequal power relations locally and globally, which are reproduced if they are not tackled simultaneously.

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