Intrapersonal conflicts – lock-ins for sustainability transitions? Consequences for policies and governance

Standard literature on environmental governance and governance for sustainability transitions pays insufficient attention to the complex psychological processes that may occur at the individual level in sustainability-related contexts. Instead, most of these governance approaches target the niche or regime levels. This paper looks at the context of individuals experiencing conflicts about decisions with different impacts on sustainability. Such intrapersonal conflicts (IC) are presumably a common phenomenon among people who want to live more sustainably but at times experience it as highly challenging due to conflicting motivations (e.g. needs or values). They may hinder individuals wanting to live more sustainably from doing so and may even lead to psychological lock-ins (a state in which an IC has been present for a long time and no resolution is in sight). We assume that people facing intrapersonal sustainability conflicts may be found in sustainability initiatives and will ask members of sustainability initiatives in seven European regions about their experience.

We take an interdisciplinary approach, combining psychology and political science, in order to investigate whether – and if so, how – specific governance modes or mechanisms can address intrapersonal sustainability conflicts. We explore how models and theories from psychology can enrich governance theories about sustainability transitions through a look at individual coping with sustainability-related conflicts. Taking ICs related to sustainable behaviour as a starting point to think about alternative environmental governance approaches, current policies can be understood as ways to deal with is-ought discrepancies on a societal level. Policies can target both opportunities to act (e.g. through taxes, laws, economic incentives, technological solutions, and infrastructure), and abilities to act (e.g. through education and information). However, policies aimed at resolving intrapersonal, i.e. motivational conflicts to behave pro-environmentally, are almost non-existent or at least not explicitly designed to do so.

Intrapersonal conflicts are understood as competing, incompatible motivations, i.e. motivations whose behavioural consequences interfere with each other. Motivation is the active orientation on a specific outcome with the aim of fulfilling needs, pursuing values, and attaining goals. This definition implies two crucial aspects: Firstly, it mentions possible roots of the active orientation – and thus for the motivational conflict. Secondly, these roots, particularly needs and values, are constructs that are on a deeper or more abstract psychological level than commonly studied factors such as norms, attitudes, or intentions. Indeed, psychological theories and models prefer to portray factors on sustainable behaviour that can be operationalised and, thus, measured. Hence, concerning the more abstract level of needs and values, there is no integrating psychological approach.

Needs are intuitively understood as the basic motivation or reason to act. Remarkably enough, psychologists have not yet come up with a revised theoretical approach since Maslow (1943) and McClelland (1961). More prominent approaches are being dealt with in economics that take a specified list of needs, based on Maslow, as a basis for participatory or analytical work (Max-Neef 1992, Camfield et al. 2010, Guillen-Royo 2010, Rauschmayer et al. 2011). A main characteristic of this work is the distinction between abstract, universal needs and concrete, negotiable strategies to realise these needs. Conflicts appear on the level of the strategies that depend on culture, age, resources, gender etc. It is through choice and implementation of alternative strategies that a shift to more sustainable lifestyles takes place – linking the strategies back to the level of needs helps to remember that strategies are meant to meet needs, i.e. to further quality of life.

Values are understood by psychologists as general preferences for end states or ways of acting; they serve as goals and guiding principles that apply across different contexts and underlie more specific attitudes, preferences, and behaviours (Clayton 2009; Schwartz 1992: 21). Although they are supposed to be closely connected to needs, there is no psychological theoretical analysis of this potential relationship. Focussing on values, psychologists have suggested different models. For instance, according to the *value-belief-norm theory of environmentalism*, the psychologist Stern (2000) distinguishes between *egoistic, altruistic* and *biospheric values*, i.e. referring to the entity the

value is oriented onto. Bilsky and Schwartz (1994) rather refer to the content of values, describing two orthogonal value dimensions with opposing poles (openness to change versus conservatism, self-transcendence versus self-enhancement), hosting nine types of values.

The importance of ICs is highlighted by the large body of research on how people **cope with ICs**. While a lot of emotion-focussed coping strategies have been identified, they have rarely been applied to explain pro-sustainable behaviour. In two articles by Crompton et al. (2009) and Stich et al. (2012), emotion-focussed coping strategies have been detected in conflicts about sustainable behaviour, e.g. denial (refusal to admit certain aspects of reality), relativisation, searching for counter-arguments, distortion (reshaping of reality to meet inner needs), denial of responsibility (refusal to admit own responsibility for something), accusation (direct allegation that someone is guilty of something), projection (refusal to accept own weaknesses by comparison with others' weaknesses), limit exposure to negative emotions, staying in the present with ones thoughts, leading attention to little positive things, searching pleasure or apathy. Crompton and Kasser (2009) also propose a strategy to effectively cope with ICs about sustainable behaviour that is closely related to therapeutic approaches. This approach carries the assumption that people's non-sustainable behavioural strategies can be exchanged for pro-sustainable strategies that can fulfil their needs and values just the same. Apart from the therapeutic approach and hints to group support and mindfulness training, we are not aware of attempts to connect the resolution of intrapersonal conflicts and sustainable action.

There is a wealth of literature on the **governance** of natural resources and governance processes for sustainability transitions. However, the largest part of this literature takes an economic, political sciences or sociological perspective (see overview in Sandström 2009), and thus tends to ignore insights from psychology that could help to better understand what motivates individual behaviour. Here, we aim to bring in psychological perspectives to the study of governance. In particular, we ask how governance mechanisms could be designed to help individuals cope with intra-personal conflicts in a sustainable way.

Combining our thoughts on governance with our considerations on intrapersonal conflicts, what would be **suitable governance approaches to reduce conflicts** between different values or needs? In principle, we can distinguish between (a) the reduction of conflict potential, i.e., before they occur and (b) the mitigation and management of existing conflicts. In addition, we need to differentiate between (i) conflicts that are recurrent and might have become generalised, and coping strategies are thus generalised, too, and (ii) conflicts related to one-off behaviours (such as the purchase of a house or flat) that need to be addressed in a timely fashion in order to be effective (ie, before a final choice is made).

This paper provides first ideas, assumptions and hypotheses about governance options for the resolution of intrapersonal conflicts about sustainable behaviour. It provides a summary of the ways in which policy and governance may help individuals cope with sustainability-induced intrapersonal conflicts:

1. Measures or settings that reduce the potential for intrapersonal conflicts – e.g. by changing prices, nudging, banning options, providing information (e.g. product labelling);
2. Measures or settings that support and guide the coping with intrapersonal conflicts. Measures in this sense could strengthen psychological resources pro-sustainability identities or increase self-efficacy or compassion.