

Exploring governance designs for intrapersonal sustainability transitions: the role of mindfulness

Summary

Governance theories on sustainability transitions have so far neglected the (intrapersonal) individual level and do not address questions regarding the ways in which individuals may be supported in adopting sustainable behaviours. This paper aims to bridge the gap between transition governance theories and psychology by investigating (1) what kinds of governance designs could activate caring and affiliative motivations in order to support individuals in adopting and maintaining sustainable behaviours, and (2) whether or not (if so, how) this may be facilitated through incentivising cooperation. We will focus specifically on how governance may strengthen (compassionate) mindfulness, which has been linked, inter alia, to a reduced importance on materialistic values and a greater emphasis on intrinsic aspirations, thus potentially contributing to more sustainable ways of life. The paper will be largely conceptual and theoretical in nature.

Abstract

Despite widespread calls in sustainability discourses for changes in individual lifestyles, the level of individual experience is largely neglected in prevailing governance theories on sustainability transitions in high-income, high-consumption countries. In response to the global sustainability challenges facing humanity, some call for ‘drastic changes in behaviour and lifestyle’ (UN 2014: 10), a new lifestyle that is “consistent with the guiding principle of global sustainable development” (WBGU 2011: 62). Yet the prevailing theoretical models of steering change towards sustainability, notably transition management and adaptive management, are ill equipped to handle the phenomenon of behavioural change at the individual level. In these governance models individuals only play a role in terms of their characterisation as change agents, stakeholders, policy maker and the like.

The ways in which governance approaches may support individuals in adopting sustainable (environmentally and socially responsible) behaviours in enduring ways are far from clear. Some suggest that change towards sustainable behaviour is more likely to endure in the long term if it entails significant and meaningful experience and changes in attitude. If, on the contrary, individuals change their behaviour only in reaction to rules, regulations, or incentives (e.g. driven by anxiety), the alteration is more likely to be cursory and temporary, and the individual is prone to revert back to old habits (Maiteny 2002, Dobson 2007).

In order to understand how governance may address intrapersonal sustainability transitions, the starting point of this paper is to question the assumptions that underpin current sustainability governance models with regard to human motivations. While much effort has focused on increasing substantial sustainability (e.g. by reducing material flows and greenhouse gas emissions), and some effort went into strengthening procedural sustainability (Leach et al. 2010), the motivational side of sustainability has not received much interest outside the realm of psychology¹. While individual

¹ A notable exception is a report by Crompton and Kasser (2009) which discusses environmental policy implications of psychological research in some detail.

behaviour can be driven by numerous motivations, the dominant policies addressing sustainability challenges are based on theories that assume individuals act out of self-interest. However, not only philosophers argue that human beings often do things because they are the right thing to do (commitment). Psychologists also provide evidence for a wide array of motivations that are not linked to self-interest, such as caring and affectionate motivations. When caring motivation systems are under-stimulated 'we rob ourselves of opportunities for mental and bodily regeneration through contentment and peace and we fail to exploit resulting opportunities to cooperate in trusting, affiliate groups' (Snower 2013: 15).

This paper will therefore address two main questions: (1) what kinds of governance designs could activate caring and affiliative motivations in order to support individuals in adopting and maintaining sustainable behaviours, and (2) whether or not (if so, how) this may be facilitated through incentivising cooperation. We argue that the latter may be essential because democratic transitions towards sustainability require a great deal of cooperation among actors with different (and often opposing) interests within society.

Since these are very broad questions, which cannot be answered within the scope of a conference paper, we will focus more specifically on how governance may strengthen mindfulness – a well-known and effective approach to stimulate our caring motivation. Mindfulness involves the reflexive contemplation of one's own experience in the domains of the body, states of mind, feelings and experiential phenomena. It is a process of observation and lucid awareness of one's experience, which leads to the development of clear comprehension, a cognitive element that helps distinguish between wholesome and unwholesome mental factors. Mindfulness has a strong ethical and emotional component, as it involves qualities such as compassion, kindness, tolerance, patience, generosity, courage and equanimity (Bodhi 2011, Dreyfus 2010). Research has shown that mindfulness plays a central role in strengthening caring and affiliative motivations which are also a base for sustainable behaviour. Mindfulness has been shown to be linked, inter alia, to a reduced importance on materialistic values and greater emphasis on intrinsic aspirations (e.g. relationships and community involvement) and to behaviour that is 'volitional and self-endorsed' rather than 'mobilised by external pressures and conditioning' (Brown et al. 2009: 728). Mindfulness that encompasses compassion – 'the human ability to "feel with" and care for other human beings, species, and non-living nature' (Leiserowitz and Fernandez 2008: 48) – may thus motivate individuals to adopt sustainable behaviours. Ericson thus suggests that promoting mindfulness could contribute to more sustainable ways of life (Ericson 2014). Others call for more systematic social scientific research on mindfulness. Such research, however, has been surprisingly scarce outside the laboratories and experimental settings of psychologists and neuroscientists. This paper aims to contribute to filling this gap in the literature and to provide sustainability governance with some innovative food for thought.

This paper will be largely conceptual and theoretical. It will draw upon the literature on sustainability governance (particularly transition management), mindfulness in psychology and religious studies, motivational psychology as well as economics. It might also draw conclusions from interviews with members of sustainability initiatives across Europe on personal challenges of adopting sustainable lifestyles that are scheduled for the first quarter of 2015 within the EU FP7 project GLAMURS².

² For more information, please visit www.glamurs.eu.

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