Exploring intrapersonal conflicts in sustainability transitions from an integral perspective

Summary

Sustainability transitions require changes on different levels. Some argue that they start within the individuals, starting in the inner dimension by reflecting upon values, needs or culture and leading to changes of behaviour and lifestyles. However, if individuals aim for more sustainable lifestyles they are often confronted with intrapersonal conflicts due to conflicting motivations or trade-offs between different needs. This paper aims first to explain those conflicts in more detail and second show one method, which allows addressing them in an integral way by looking underneath the behavioural level and linking the individual with the collective interior and exterior levels.

Abstract

It is difficult, perhaps impossible, for individuals to live sustainably within industrialised societies that have a high structurally-embedded resource consumption. As the individual level is strongly connected to the structural level, transitions to sustainable development require changes on all levels - from the individual to the collective, local and global level. On the individual level such a transition requires a change in lifestyles, which can be achieved through the pursuit of alternative strategies to meet one's needs by using fewer resources.

From the Brundtland definition of sustainable development (WCED 1987) we know that meeting needs now and in the future is a precondition for sustainability. Meeting one's and others' needs is also a precondition for subjective wellbeing. Thus, meeting needs could reach both aims. However, whether this can be realised depends among others strongly on how the needs are met, i.e. which strategies are used.

Needs are intuitively understood as the basic motivation or reason to act. 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. These strategies can be related to the criterion of sustainability e.g. through the material consumption required to their implementation. But as strategies are negotiable (contrary to needs), other, more sustainable choices are often possible. The need for freedom, for instance, can be met using diverse strategies, e.g. by openly expressing one's opinion about a political issue, by standing on the top of a mountain, or by driving with high speed on a highway. All these strategies require very different amounts of resources. But all of them may enable someone to meet their need for freedom and contribute to their subjective wellbeing.

The choice of the strategies is dependent on resources and technologies available, on preferences, on habits, culture, values and socialisation as well as on the social environment and is often done on a subconscious level. A transition to sustainability would require a change of this choice and on the underlying factors, such as habits or values. Even if this change can lead to a higher wellbeing (see for instance Crompton and Kasser 2009, who argue that people with stronger intrinsic, thus immaterial values, tend to have a higher wellbeing than those with extrinsic materialistic values), people are often reluctant to a change, because the effects of applying new strategies are uncertain or because they feel at unease.

At this level of strategies conflicts and connected feelings of unease are likely to appear, depending on numerous factors, such as culture, age, resources, gender, or social norms. It is through choice and implementation of alternative strategies that a shift to more sustainable lifestyles takes place. Linking strategies to their underlying level of needs helps to reflect upon the actual purpose of strategies, namely to meet needs and thus to further one's quality of life.

Intrapersonal conflicts 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 intrapersonal conflict has been present for a long time and no resolution is in sight). Such conflicts can also be seen as tensions sensed by the individuals.

We can differentiate between three different types of tensions: intra-individual, intra-societal, and inter-generational tensions. We encounter sustainability-related intra-individual tensions when we experience an inner conflict between a strategy (or a set of strategies) that is prescribed or is in line with sustainable development and our usual (or alternative) behaviour. Intra-societal tensions occur when needs of an individual or societal group that wants to pursue sustainable strategies in our society are affected by the strategies of other individuals or groups. Inter-generational tensions, finally, come about through certain societal strategies that, by caring for next generations, inhibit the realisation of current needs or, rather, vice versa.

This paper aims (1) to present those individual conflicts, which are embedded in sustainability transitions and (2) a possible integral way to address them.

We argue that personal interior development might be a starting point or key driver for a social transformation (Esbjörn-Hagens 2006, Rauschmayer and Omann 2012). If it remains on the individual interior level, it stays unconnected to social and exterior processes and might not have much influence on the transition.

Integral theory, developed by Ken Wilber (1995, 2006) describes fundamental dynamics of evolutionary systems in four quadrants that represent perspectives relevant for creating knowledge or innovations, also called the AQUAL model (Riddell 2013, Esbjörn-Hagens 2009). These quadrants (see Fig. 1) lie along four dimensions: interior and exterior; individual and collective. The upper left quadrant, the interior individual or also called the subjective/psychological one, would be the starting point to address intrapersonal conflicts when pursuing sustainable lifestyles; by overcoming the conflict, new strategies in the form of new lifestyles might emerge, which express themselves in concrete behavioural actions, i.e. in the individual exterior or behavioural/objective one.

Sustainability transitions are transitions on individual and collective levels – whole systems need to be transformed (Loorbach 2007, Grin et al., 2010, Schäpke and Rauschmayer 2014), meaning that a sustainability transition also needs to take place in the two exterior quadrants, the cultural and the social/systemic (Kunze 2009).

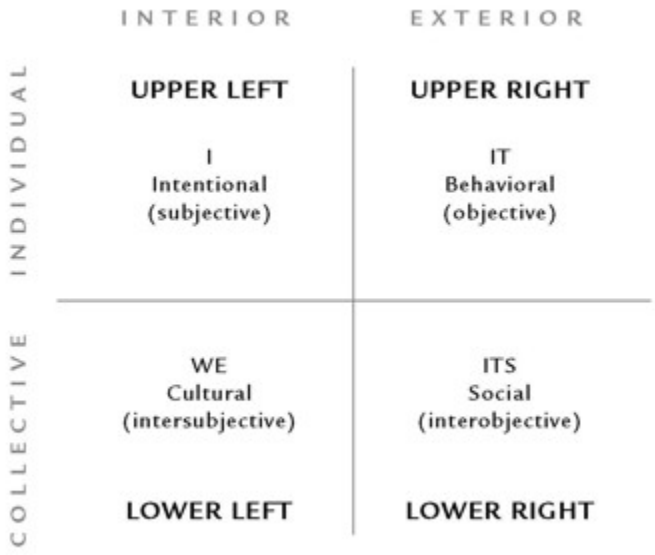

Fig. 1: The four quadrants (Esbjörn-Hargens, 2009)

A possible way to address the conflicts and thereby setting a first starting point for interior individual and collective change is a method called THANCS (thriving through awareness for non-conflicting strategies) developed by the authors (Omann and Rauschmayer 2011). It is a four-step process that first aims to acknowledge the existing conflicts, second helps the individual to reflect upon the internal reasons for the tensions, third supports the communication of the reflection results to others – thus coming from an intrapersonal to an interpersonal level or from quadrant one to three, and fourth, introduces a process of creativity to find ways of dealing with or even overcoming the tension(s), swapping over to quadrant two. We will show this method along an example and by linking it to Wilber's quadrants and draw first conclusions, whether the integral perspective allows to address intrapersonal sustainability conflicts in a way that connects to sustainability transitions on a collective and exterior level.

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