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## The psychodynamics of meaning and action for a sustainable future

Paul Maiteny \*

*The Grubb Institute of Behavioural Studies, London, UK*

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### Abstract

Environmental policy and social research tends to neglect the inner, experiential dimensions of human life. Yet, the ways in which individuals seek to achieve psychological and emotional well-being in their lives is inevitably expressed in behaviour that impacts on ecological (and social) processes.

The yearning for this 'inner human sustainability' is psychologically rooted and subjectively experienced. Beliefs and worldviews about how best to satisfy it are culturally (i.e. intersubjectively and collectively) constructed and expressed through behaviour that, in turn, supports or undermines the external ecological and social world. Consumerism and its associated behaviours are inherently unsustainable socio-ecologically and psychologically. Through a psychodynamic theory of human experience, meaning and behaviour, the paper explains why any policy, if it is to be effective in the long-term, must be attentive to psychological, experiential and cultural dimensions of human beings and beliefs about how needs and wants will be satisfied. It also argues that long-term societal and cultural transformation is only possible when individuals take responsibility for their own development, transformation and engagement in the larger social and ecological complex on which they depend. Policy-making, research and education are themselves cultural activities that seek to respond appropriately to changes in the external world within the constraints of powerful cultural (collective) and psychological (individual) values and priorities. A systemic approach to sustainable development requires consideration of the mutual dependence between eco-social and psycho-cultural realities. © 2000 Published by Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved.

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\* Tel.: +44-207-278-8061; fax: +44-207-278-0728.  
E-mail address: grubbuk@aol.com (P. Maiteny)

## 1. Sustainability entails inner and outer dependences

The psychological dimensions of sustainable development, and their implications for behaviour, have been largely neglected by policy-makers and social science researchers of the environment. Beck [1] draws attention to them but his indication of the links between ecological, social and ecological disintegration have not been adequately developed. This is a serious omission. Addressing it could strengthen the whole field of environmental social science which, in the UK at least, is currently experiencing anxiety about its future direction [2].

The Grubb Institute, in collaboration with a sustainable development non-governmental organisation, is currently undertaking a qualitative study with a group of people, all of whom have decided to try and reduce the environmental impacts of their lifestyles. We are seeking to identify factors that explain differences in people's willingness and ability to sustain *long-term* changes to their everyday behaviour.

The hypothesis, which underpins this paper, is that a sustainable future depends on sustainable changes in human behaviour — ie by persons — and that sustainable behaviour change depends, in turn, on meaning and conviction, as much as it depends on structural changes in society. We argue that behaviour that changes solely in response to incentives or regulation is less likely to be long-lasting than that which is *experienced* as imperative. Facilitating structures are then needed to support individuals in putting their convictions into practice. If these are lacking, frustration results.

Much behaviour is driven by the *experienced* desire to 'make things better', for oneself — and maybe for others. People seek satisfaction in their lives. This search for well-being is understood and pursued, as far as possible, through beliefs, values, ideologies, religions, myths, theories, etc that are deemed valid according to norms in society. Resulting lifestyles have socio-ecological (and personal) impacts, and are, paradoxically, also culturally framed and defined expressions of desire for well-being.

It follows that behavioural change to support sustainability is dependent on individuals changing the activities through which they seek — and experience — well-being. Fulfilment-seeking through consumerism and material accumulation clearly has a high ecological and social impact; activities such as learning, personal development, or community work, less so.

Such change only becomes possible when individuals start ascribing and internalising meaning and value to low-impact activity, or 'nonmaterial wealth' as von Weizsäcker et al. [29] have termed it, to the extent where they feel they have no option but to *act* on their convictions. Changes in behaviour are more resilient when founded on conviction and meaningful experience than when they are in reaction to incentives or regulation from outside. Real change occurs when a person's 'heart' is in what they are doing. Without this, old habits and aspirations are suppressed and can re-emerge later — with all the ecological and social knock-on effects this can entail.

In this paper we refer to 'inner' and 'outer' dimensions of individuals and collectives. 'Inner' refers to psychological impulses 'in the mind' that are not visible and can only be *experienced* by the person concerned. The person's functioning neverthe-

less *depends* on them. These impulses and inner experience can only be articulated and understood through a cultural context. Persons inevitably express themselves using cultural constructs and that are available to them — beliefs (including religious and political), norms, meanings, values, theories, etc. Any framework that is used to make sense of human experience, even unconsciously, is a cultural framework in the terms of this paper. Human beings could not function without such frameworks of meaning and are therefore *culturally dependent* as well as *ecologically dependent*.

The search for internal sustainability is the search for meaningful and fulfilled experience in life, and for the satisfactory frameworks that are needed to make it meaningful and purposeful.

Human beings, then, have external and internal dependences. To recognise and accept responsibility for them is an essential prerequisite to long-term sustainability. In this paper, we focus on the relationship between external bio-ecological and social sustainability, and internal well-being (which, as has been indicated, depends on internal *collective* cultural constructions or 'environments').

We wish to help fill a gap in sustainability and 'futures' research and policy. This entails moving beyond ecological and social dimensions and accepting that the real threats to human development arise not from the diminishing physical resources, per se — the 'outer limits' identified by the Club of Rome's *Limits to Growth* — but from the 'inner limits' of human beings, our inability or unwillingness to change ourselves psychologically, culturally and politically. Laszlo [3], a member of the Club of Rome and founder of the Club of Budapest, recognised this decades ago. The insight is being increasingly acknowledged within Futures Studies and other disciplines [4]. It can be hard to swallow, mostly because of the extent of individual change and responsibility it entails. It is, however, essential. Without addressing the inner dimensions and how they relate to the outer, human systems cannot be understood as systemic wholes. Neither can their impacts on the environment. Psychological dynamics and their cultural expressions are root-causes of unsustainability as a physical and social problem.

All belief systems or worldviews are ultimately inside human heads though their effects are concrete. Capitalism has become 'second nature' and habituated. There appears to be no alternative. Yet it risks leading its believers and perpetuators towards social, ecological, and therefore economic, ruin. As a politico-economic system, it appears to have 'a life of its own'. Global structures and institutions such as the World Trade Organization to which beliefs have given rise, tie all of us into them. As growing numbers of critics remind us, both inside and outside the field of futures studies, this 'second nature' system is not the only possible way of constructing our social, economic, and ecological world [5,6].

Notwithstanding the effects of political and financial interests and their power to perpetuate this cultural construction for their benefit, we should not forget that it also represents the way in which the majority hope to find fulfilment. It is an expression of prevailing human values, priorities and will.

The deep-rooted cultural change required for a more sustainable society requires, in its turn, deep-rooted personal transformation of values, priorities and behaviour. To move beyond analysis, description and prescription about other people and the

world 'out there' entails coming back to face ourselves as the key psychological and cultural root of the sustainability predicament. Reed's Oscillation Theory [7–9] is intended to help people to do that, and to do it *in context*, to help us find our place in the context. Developed at the Grubb Institute over more than twenty years' research and consultancy on human-organisation relations it: describes 1. the profoundly experiential learning process that individuals — and perhaps societies — have to go through in order to transform themselves, gain a sense of purpose and fulfilment in a larger system, and thereby, to feel themselves compelled to change their behaviour; 2. how individual experience and collective beliefs interrelate to both help and hinder this developmental process; and 3. how failure to engage in this process can lead to personal, social and ecological disintegration.

Before describing the oscillation dynamic and its implications for sustainability, some clarification on 'internal' and 'external' dimensions of human systems is necessary.

## 2. The dimensions of human systems

According to Koestler [10], human beings are 'Janus-faced' holons, looking inwards to their own integrity and outwards to the sustainability of the wider system(s) of which they are parts, on which they depend and which they map out for themselves through beliefs and meanings. They are *both* biological *and* cultural, *both* physical *and* psychological, *both* individual *and* social. Fig. 1, adapted from Wilber's "four quadrant" schema" [11] illustrates this, giving primacy to no single dimension. (Wilber applies his schema to all types of system).

All dimensions in Fig. 1 are necessary for any human system to function effectively and sustainably. Exclude one and the whole becomes dysfunctional, partial and distorted.

The *individual–exterior* dimension represents what can be seen of an individual system by an external observer, e.g. the structure of the physical body, and their behaviour. The *individual–interior* dimension, however, cannot. It is the psychological world of drives, experiences, intentionality, personal meanings and values, etc. Psychological impulses are 'in the mind' of the individual. They are not visible and can only be *experienced* by the person concerned. Meanings and values do not arise spontaneously. They are gleaned from the cultural *collective–interior* environment of beliefs, norms, meanings, values, theories, and so on. Individuals organise, express and seek fulfilment of their *inner* impulses by way of the cultural resources that are accessible to them. Humans necessarily draw on cultural resources to make experience meaningful. As Reed [7] describes it, we engage in inner 'symbolic activity' as a pre-requisite to engaging in effective 'work activity' in the outside world. Humans are therefore culturally dependent. Social, economic and political exchange and interaction, in debate, institutions, books or ritual, for example, are *collective–exterior* phenomena. They are external relations informed by the meanings experienced and brought to the situation by the actors concerned. They are *not* the meanings and beliefs themselves — political, religious or otherwise. What is visible of, say,

	<b>interior ('in-the-mind')</b>	<b>exterior ('in-the-context')</b>
<b>individual</b>	<p><b>Q1.</b></p> <p>intention; volition            motivation; choice;            subjective; invisible;            psychological; emotional            experiential...</p>	<p><b>Q3.</b></p> <p>individual behaviour            &amp; expression;            objective; visible;            biological;            material...</p>
<b>collective</b>	<p><b>Q2.</b></p> <p>shared frameworks of            interpretation &amp; meaning;            (inter)subjective; invisible;            cultural/symbolic,            e.g. religious and            political <i>ideologies</i>,  <i>values, beliefs....</i></p>	<p><b>Q4.</b></p> <p>group expression; effects on            context (eg. of behaviour);            (inter)objective; visible;            social, ecological,            economic, institutional            structures; political  <i>expression, relations,</i>  <i>debate, etc...</i></p>

Fig. 1. ... The dimensions of human beings showing qualities for each quadrant (Q). All quadrants necessarily inter-penetrate each other and are mutually dependent (adapted from Wilber [11]).

a ritual or a transaction tells us nothing about underlying meaning and motive. To assume it does is to act on assumption. To find meaning, we must ask the actors, get to know their culture, get 'inside their heads', get to know something of their symbolic worlds in quadrant 2. Analogously, neither observing another person's behaviour nor exploring interpretations of it will allow the observer to enter into their *first-hand experience*. Even responses to direct questioning are mediated by language, theories and other frameworks. No one can directly know another's experience. None of this would be possible at all without the physiology of the body — biological functions and ecological processes (Quadrant 3).

A systemic approach to policy decisions entails taking interrelations of *all* quadrants into account. The case of 'mad cow disease' in the UK provides an illustration. A hypothesised cause of the disease was the policy decision (Q2), and individual decisions of farmers (Q1), to allow cows to be fed animal substances (Q3). This was made on the basis of beliefs and values (Q1 and 2) that this would boost economic productivity (Q4). Adverse biological effects in the cows (Q3), have been passed onto humans (Q3). This generated anger and dismay in some quarters, denial and defence in others (Q1 and 2), consequences on the economy (Q4), and on farmers' livelihoods (Q3 and 4), and eventual changes in beliefs (Q1 and 2) surrounding

cow fodder, animal welfare, eating habits, and the trustworthiness and competence of policy-makers (Q2). Further interrelationships could also be drawn out.

A key challenge in formulating policy for sustainability is, firstly, to identify the systems it is serving, secondly, those on which it depends and, thirdly, to maintain the symbiotic balance between the two.

### 3. 'External sustainability'

To contribute to, and receive from, the larger whole, the system must be ready to subordinate its own purposes to those of the whole, and to depend on it... At the same time, to retain its identity, the system must be ready to defend its own boundary and perhaps to compete for scarce resources [12:54].

The necessary dependence between human society and bio-ecological 'nature' is illustrated in general terms in Fig. 2 (adapted from Wilden [13]). 'Nature' refers here to 'bio-ecological processes'.

Survival of human beings and society clearly depend on functional bio-ecological ('external') processes. The latter are not ultimately dependent on humans. Natural 'life-support systems' are likely to continue in some form with or without humans. Notwithstanding human responsibility for the terrifying extinction of species on Earth (and possibly from the whole universe!), it is fear about the sustainability of the human species — and the extent to which humans are undermining nature's capacity to sustain it — that is the main driver of environmental research, policy and advocacy. As the 'Inevitable Rule' states, "the system that destroys its environment destroys itself" [14:86].

To believe, however well intentioned, that nature's sustainability per se requires humans is to underestimate its adaptability and resilience. It also exaggerates the

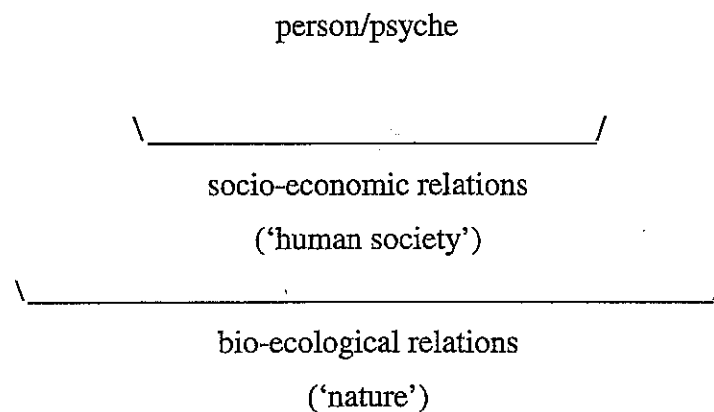


Fig. 2. Existence of human relations depends on bio-ecological relations (adapted from Wilden [13]).

importance and potency of humans as far as bio-physical processes are concerned. We are not that powerful. The significance of the interior faculties of humans — quadrants 1 and 2 — has, however, been underestimated. They underpin our behaviour and, therefore, the impacts that we have on ecology and on our own societies. They are part and parcel of human ecological and social relations and must be recognised as such if sustainable development is to become a reality. More frequently than we care to acknowledge, external problems are a function of deeper psychological and cultural factors. It is nothing short of myopic, therefore, that so few resources are dedicated to research on the psychology and culture of consumerism and sustainability.

Humans share the same essential physical needs as most species. These are not sufficient, however, to *satisfy* a human life. They do not quell human desire. This has been recognised for thousands of years: “Human beings cannot live on bread alone...” [15]. Amongst the writers suggesting that, following satisfaction of physical needs, people then seek it through ever subtler and less tangible routes, are Maslow, in his now famous ‘hierarchy of needs’ [16] and Adam Smith. Smith also hinted at the unsustainable implications of continuing to pursue satisfaction through consumption and material acquisition, however imaginative it may be. He said that, though ‘profitable speculation’ generates ‘comfort and improvement’, “the nature of this growth is that it is at once undirected and infinitely self-generating in the endless demand for all the useless things in the world” [17].

We will consume a great deal of the world before realising that money and material goods can never ultimately satisfy. In marketing jargon, they can only temporarily ‘satisfice’. This is why it is vital to explore the human striving for satisfaction — *the experience of ‘internal sustainability’* — and what might help us achieve it.

#### 4. ‘Internal sustainability’

The search for *internal sustainability* implies the search for *meaningful and fulfilled experience in life*. Having established the physical and relational prerequisites for this (quadrants 3 and 4) we can now go on to explore the psychological and cultural dimensions (quadrants 1 and 2).

##### 4.1. *Cultural dimensions*

All people require frames of reference through which to interpret their experience (and everything else) and to make it meaningful. Politics, philosophies and religions all provide such frameworks of belief, theory, values and norms. Some frameworks are more prevalent and legitimate in society than others. As such, these are the ones that a person is most likely to encounter as an option for meaning-making. This is no guarantee, of course, that these frameworks are either the most adequate or that they will be experienced as such. It simply means that they are the most widespread. Neither will any *particular* framework, even if it has once been experienced as adequate, necessarily remain so forever.

Both quadrant 1 experience and quadrant 2 cultural frameworks, such as world-views and ideologies, are unseen and interior to the *individual* and the *collective* respectively. The projected effects of these internal dimensions manifest socially, economically, ecologically and in other external ways. It is effects that we actually see. Flags, emblems, religious icons, political parties and arguments that arise about them are *products* of conviction, belief and identity in the minds and feelings of people. They are expressions of conviction, not the convictions themselves. The latter are reinforced, or otherwise influenced, when people respond in different ways to the forms and expressions they have created. Even the meaning of symbols shared by individuals in the same social milieu — e.g. political, religious or business institutions — can be experienced in quite different ways by each person. This results in the misunderstandings and re-negotiation of meaning so common within institutions and society [18]. Internal meanings and their externalised expressions are, therefore, perpetually interacting with each other. They are mutually dependent and constitutive.

#### 4.2. *Psychological dimensions*

Jacques Lacan, the psychoanalyst, made the important distinction between need, demand and desire. *Need* equates with physical survival and sustainability. This need has to be satisfied by consuming and assimilating elements from the physical environment or the organism dies. Consumption is necessary for existence. For human beings — and perhaps some other species too — consumption for physical survival is not sufficient to bring about satisfaction. *Desire* or, in the terminology of Reed's Oscillation Theory, '*in-needness*' continues as a perpetual, intangible craving for 'something more' that will provide meaningfulness and fullness. It does not refer to desire for something in particular but to *the experience itself* [19,20]. "The impossibility of satisfying such a desire...is like trying to find a hole to fill up a hole" [21:23]. Nevertheless, no amount of rationalisation will fill the existential gap and the search to satisfy it.

The experience of in-needness or desire is projected into the outside world onto objects — such as goods, other people, gods, beliefs, ideologies. Desire then takes on tangible form through these objects which come to be seen as promising to fill the sense of lack. Actually, they are no more than symbols or metaphors for the experience of fulfilment that is desired. This does not prevent the person identifying so closely with the object concerned that sometimes whole lives can be dedicated to pursuing them. In Lacan's terms, they have become *demands*. The objects themselves can never ultimately provide satisfaction because it is not really the object that is desired but an experience — internal and 'in the mind' — that the object represents. This would become clear were we to pause and reflect on our experience once any particular object of desire has been attained. At this point, when the demand for it ceases, the object soon loses its appeal, invariably fails to come up to expectations, and becomes an ordinary object. The desire passes onto another object, which we then demand instead. In spite of countless experiences of this sort in everyone's life, we nevertheless, continue to believe that we will eventually find the object of

desire the attainment of which will finally satisfy. And we expend enormous amounts of energy pursuing them through much of our lives [22].

The drive to satisfy 'in-needness' results in the possibility to learn through engaging in one's experience of the oscillation process, described below. Although it always implies a feeling of incompleteness because no thing, person or idea can ever ultimately satisfy, it spurs us on. It brings us into contact and relation with each other and the world around us. Through relationship we seek to satisfy this in-needness. It is the foundation of human feelings, motivation and action — love, hate, trust, greed, generosity, hope, power and others. All of these are means by which we may try to find what we want, or think we want. The actual feelings experienced depend upon whether I seek to satisfy my in-needness by working alongside others or being in conflict with them [8].

In-needness is the ultimate stimulus behind human creativity as realised in action and intentions — a work of art, a family, a business, sport, an institution, running an economy, a society, planning a war. The sense of in-needness, desire, is always present. To create a sustainable society and ecology for ourselves, then we must look at the ways that we seek to satisfy our in-needness and the effects that these have. The search for experiential satisfaction is a search for *inner sustainability*. When we seek well-being and a sense of *feeling real* in our lives through material acquisition a vicious circle is established that threatens to consume our life-support systems leading to long-term outer unsustainability.

A less resource-intensive alternative is to seek it by focussing more on inner psychological, emotional and spiritual development. Though ultimate satisfaction may never be attainable, the process of engaging consciously in the experiential learning of oscillation can bring us progressively into touch with ourselves, with our connectedness to other people and the world in general, and with what we depend upon psychologically. As a person becomes aware of the oscillation process in their life, they come closer to finding a sense of purpose and role in the world, and better able to express this through their work. In other words, they come more closely engaged with what is necessary for their own development.

##### 5. Oscillation dynamics: learning to develop sustainably from the inside out

Bruce Reed first presented his Oscillation Theory in *The Dynamics of Religion* [7].<sup>1</sup> It describes a process of experiential learning through which human beings seek to satisfy the perpetual *experience* of 'in-needness', or desire, that pervades their lives. It indicates how human beings can better exercise choices by understanding their own experience of this process — firstly, by identifying their values and, secondly, learning how to realise them better in their day to day lives. Given the dynamic relationship between inner experience and outer environment [9], real transformations in society can only occur to the extent that persons experience the need to

<sup>1</sup> Other versions are available in Reed [8] and Maiteny and Reed [9].

transform themselves and their values to the degree that they also feel impelled to change their behaviour as a necessary consequence. Ability and willingness to engage with experiential psycho-emotional realities is a pre-condition for this and, therefore, for the well-being of society.

The term 'oscillation' refers to:

...the alternation of periods of autonomous activity and periods of physical or symbolic contact with sources of renewal. For most people, the ordering of everyday life provides for regular cycles of oscillation. Each day includes periods when we address ourselves to the problems of living, and periods when we are fed and cared for, relax, reflect and sleep. Similarly, for many, the week and the year provide occasions for more complete disengagement from the problems of living, in the weekend break and the annual holiday [8:4].

It is onto this base-line, with its regularised opportunities for disengagement, that the oscillation demanded by specific challenges and experiences is superimposed [7:15].

Three important features of the oscillation process, that facilitate or hinder personal, and consequently societal, transformation, are:

...the search for someone or something on whom to depend; the frequent fear of, and resistance to, disengagement and acknowledgement of helplessness, particularly in adults; and the emergence of new ideas and new constructs of the self and world which take place in the period of disengagement [7:15].

Most of the following is drawn from the three references above [7–9]. It aims to show the dynamics linking outer social and ecological conditions, and inner human psychology, particularly the need for a sense of meaning, belonging and satisfaction, and how engaging in experience of the latter is a key to sustaining the former.

This is not a trivial matter. Human induced ecological and social deterioration arises due to cultural constructions — beliefs and worldviews — about well-being. We *believe* such-and-such activities will bring satisfaction. These, in turn, are expressions of inner psychological needs, desires and demands. It is vital, therefore, to bring psychological questions into research and policy on sustainable development.

Only behavioural change that is meaningful to the individuals will itself be sustainable in the long term. The more it promises to satisfy the inner existential yearnings, the more meaningful it will be. And the less satisfaction of the yearnings is believed to result from consumption of physical resources, the more ecologically sustainable it will be.

5.1. *The phases of the oscillation process (Fig. 3)*

Oscillation Theory describes the essential process involved in a person: 1. making sense of their experience in a meaningful way; 2. finding contexts in which to express this through activity in the world; and 3. coping with the crises that ensue when they feel that meaning and purpose in their life is deteriorating. The phases are termed Intra-dependence, Regression to Extra-dependence, Extra-dependence and Transformation to Intra-dependence. This is not a circular process as it never precisely repeats itself. It is a dynamic, constantly changing and potentially developmental process. It should be visualised metaphorically as an oscillating curve, constantly changing shape and dimension as the person moves through time and as feelings change (Fig. 3).

The term dependence is used here in a distinct way. It describes the experience of having someone or something on which one can rely and have confidence. It has connotations of 'dependability'. As Frankl's powerful personal account of life in Nazi death-camps has shown, this sense of something meaningful and dependable inside oneself, which no-one can take away, can make the difference between psycho-emotional survival and alienation, desperation and destruction [23].

Psychological dependence is as natural a condition of life as dependence on bio-ecological processes. All people experience it unconsciously. They have to in order to function, although how it is expressed varies at different times in relation to different persons and objects. Babies are orientated towards their mothers, materialists to

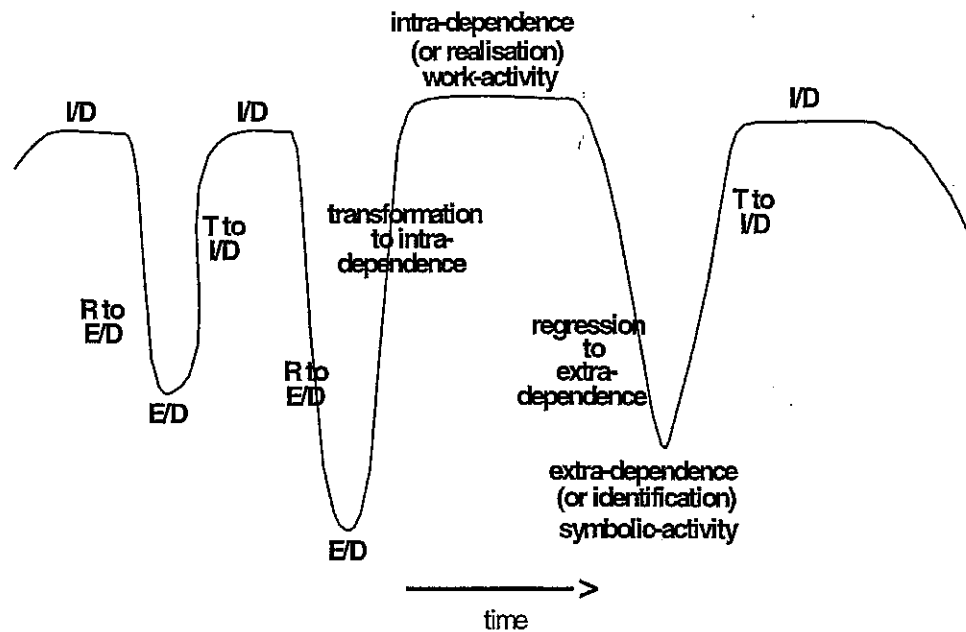


Fig. 3. The oscillation process (adapted from Reed [7,8]).

their bank balances and goods, environmentalists to nature, individualists to themselves, and everyone, in their own ways, to their preferred framework, theory or belief (often implicit) through which they make sense of the world — and without which nothing would make any sense at all.

#### 5.1.1. *Intra-dependence, or realisation*

As people go about their day-to-day affairs they generally try to express in behaviour and activity what they consider themselves to be, or to be becoming, and to do so from a position of integrity. To succeed in this difficult task, they have to be self-reliant, able to depend on themselves and the meanings and values they 'stand for', that they embody and which inform their behaviour.

The original term, 'intra-dependence' [7], was coined because meaningful action depends on a person being able to depend on themselves and express the beliefs, meanings, gods, myths, heroes, etc, which they have internalised. It is not always easy, however, to 'walk the talk'! As the saying goes, "if you want to know what is really important to someone, look at what they do, not what they say".

The state of intra-dependence manifests in actual outward behaviour, in contexts where persons relate to one another to achieve things and to satisfy their in-needness. It is where creative thought is realised and grounded in intentions, actions and achievements — e.g. through a picture, a poem, an opera, a home, a business, sport, in running an economy and in planning a war (hence the more recent term 'realisation' [8]). Being dynamic, the experience of intra-dependence is affected both by variations in external context, and questions and doubts about the inner world of the person. In intra-dependence, they cannot avoid displaying something of what they really are, here-and-now.

If we live in an increasingly unsustainable society as a result of human behaviour, this expresses something of our true collective values and priorities (i.e. our culture), whatever we might *claim* to the contrary. In Lacan's sense, we demand this deterioration because, we cannot conceive ways to achieve individual satisfaction other than through the routes that are causing the collective problems.

Eventually, inner feelings of uneasiness always emerge and we begin to doubt the integrity and meaningfulness of what we are doing. We become unsure of the truth of our habits of seeing the world — habits that have become 'second nature'. We can respond to this predicament in two ways. We can try and maintain a false sense of security (or sustainability) by denying our inner experience, pretending it does not exist, and defending ourselves with rationalisations and arguments. Or we can choose to let ourselves become uncomfortable, accepting our limitations and looking for support. This is *not* weakness but a choice that opens up opportunities for experiential learning and development — though it by no means feels like this at the time.

If we live in an increasingly dysfunctional society, it is because second nature economic and materialistic habits of thought — or paradigms — about the route to well-being are failing to deliver the goods in real life. On the contrary, symptoms of both psychological and social instability are on the increase — anxiety, alienation, meaninglessness, fragmentation, insecurity, fatigue, not to mention widening gaps

between rich and poor and the erosion of support networks of family and social relations.

Both individuals and collectives respond emotionally to breakdowns in second-nature 'certainties' with fear and even panic. If this experience is recognised as a necessary phase in development, we can then move on to work with the next experiential phase of the oscillation process.

#### 5.1.2. *Regression to extra-dependence*

Like dependence, 'regression' is a word that can embarrass. This is because neither word has generally been understood as *a state of mind or experience*. The psychoanalyst, D. W. Winnicott saw 'regression' as a feature of normal life and development [24].

The long-term, cumulative consequences of avoiding these experiences can have profound consequences for the sustainability of social and other 'external' relations. When psychological and emotional 'garbage' is left untreated, and clogs up in the person, it eventually spills over into other interactions and relationships. Over time it accumulates, resulting in distress and unrest wherever human experience is involved — e.g. in organisational, social, political, community and ecological contexts [9].

Regression is a difficult experience to convey, but feelings are associated with it — fear, anxiety, loss, meaninglessness, difficulty in coping with one's life — which result in a sense of inner fragmentation and unsustainability. This can be so overwhelming that one is forced to let go of preconceived, 'second nature' images of oneself and the world. This is frightening, but not as risky as denial. Only then does one become receptive to new or familiar, but re-vitalised, myths, frameworks or theories that more adequately make sense of experience than the old ones. They are more dependable and help us feel more real and in touch with both inner and outer worlds by making them meaningful once more. Regression may entail a conscious decision, or the person may be triggered to remember — and feel — something of core importance and meaningfulness to them by a thought, a sound, a smell, a chance meeting, comment or a passage from a book.

Regression can take various forms and turn out to be creative, destructive or maintain the status quo in life. Functional or creative regression to dependence requires that the individual is willing to risk the anxieties of regression. It is by no means an escape from stress or danger but rather a means of re-engaging and re-assessing experience of situations where one found oneself incapable of acting *intra-dependently*. And to do so under safe conditions where there is freedom to be truthful rather than defensive.

Regression to extra-dependence, in sum, is like a rite of passage from one state to another. It entails a chaotic experience in which previous certainties dissipate, lose significance and cease to be dependable. There is a sense of fragmentation and confusion. Creative regression entails an ability, and decision, to place one's trust in a safe person or setting that facilitates: 1. letting go, or losing hold, of habitual ways of seeing the world and oneself; and 2. opportunities for reorientation and the establishment of new and meaningful constructions of oneself and of one's world.

It also requires what has been called the 'observing ego' [25] which, however overwhelming the emotional challenge, maintains awareness of what is occurring. If the observing ego is weak or absent, there is a risk that the person will not be able to take responsibility for their own development and seeks the protection of someone or something else on a more permanent basis. This can result in dependency, as opposed to healthy dependence, manifesting as ideological, political, religious or other fundamentalism.

Today's culture of materialism and individualism does not support or encourage introspection and dependence. Yet, increasing numbers of people are becoming disillusioned, stressed and unhappy with the real-life effects of dependence on values that stress economic gain and material acquisition as the primary source of meaning. The simultaneous boom in interest in personal and spiritual development suggests that crises of regression and dependence are reaching societal proportions. Viewed from oscillation, and other psychodynamic and systemic, perspectives increasing levels of psychological and social trauma and alienation are also symptomatic of such crises. For people experiencing this, there is often nowhere to go for support, where they feel 'safe' — actually or metaphorically. Many such cases exemplify dysfunctional regression to dependence which may be followed by despair and self-destruction. Internal sustainability breaks down altogether.

By contrast, we argue, creative regression often results in renewed vision and vigour as one emerges with a shifted perspective that is not just intellectual but fully experiential — a genuine paradigm shift!

The regression experience can be compared with the chaotic, liminal experience of '*rites de passage*' described by Victor Turner [26]. All cultures and societies have institutional means for helping individuals through such experiences: Religious group rituals, based on symbol, myth and meaning shared by participants', serve to renew and reinforce the sense of connectedness between people in a community. Shared belief and meaning is a sort of cultural 'glue' that makes sense of experience and relationships. It is vital to the process of social cohesion and sustainability, and personal responsibility for one's role within the social context. The *experience* of meaningfulness in ritualistic events can verge on the numinous (wherein loss of separateness is experienced) which adds to the sense of group identity and cohesion [27].

For Turner, functional society is a process of oscillation between experience of *communitas* (extra-dependence), usually in religious or quasi-religious events, and contexts within which purposeful work activity takes place. Our society is worryingly impoverished in this way. As Reed [7] points out, it emphasises and builds up intra-dependence whilst extra-dependent experience is neglected and impoverished. This phase of the oscillation process, and its significance for sustainability, is described next.

### 5.1.3. *Extra-dependence (or identification)*

As Reed [7:76] explains, in this phase, "the individual experiences relatedness to someone or something outside himself (sic) — a primal object — on whom he depends for life and well-being", hence the term '*extra-dependence*'. It is embodied

in myths, dreams, theories, religious symbols and revelations that carry profound meaning for the individual to the extent that they may even experience total identification and loss of a sense of separateness — hence, the alternative term ‘identification’.

It is through such cultural and theoretical frameworks that human beings construct, interpret, map, structure and generally make sense of their experience and relations. They then act according to these constructions. This being the case, Fig. 2 above requires an additional level — the domain of symbolic construction and interpretation. Humans live in cultural as well socio-economic and bio-ecological environments as shown in Fig. 4.

Effectively, these cultural frameworks are resources, external or ‘extra’ to the person, which are needed to maintain internal psychological integrity — to make experience and relations meaningful. Creative regression to dependence only occurs to the extent that people can identify something dependable to help them through the crisis, pain and loss of meaning. Those who have cultivated a rich, inner world of myth are more prepared for this [7].

In periods of regression, encouragement and inspiration may come from mythical characters — religious or political — or from philosophies or ideologies. The forms will vary but the dynamic remains the same. The meanings, values and qualities associated with our chosen ‘mythology’ make such good sense that we come to depend on them as a part relates to the whole. We may identify ourselves as economists, environmentalists, capitalists, Marxists, Moslems, Christians etc. Without such frameworks, confusion and lack of internal sustainability again appear on the horizon.

Acceptance of dependence involves the readiness to take responsibility for what is happening. As awareness grows of what or who is being sought (in the

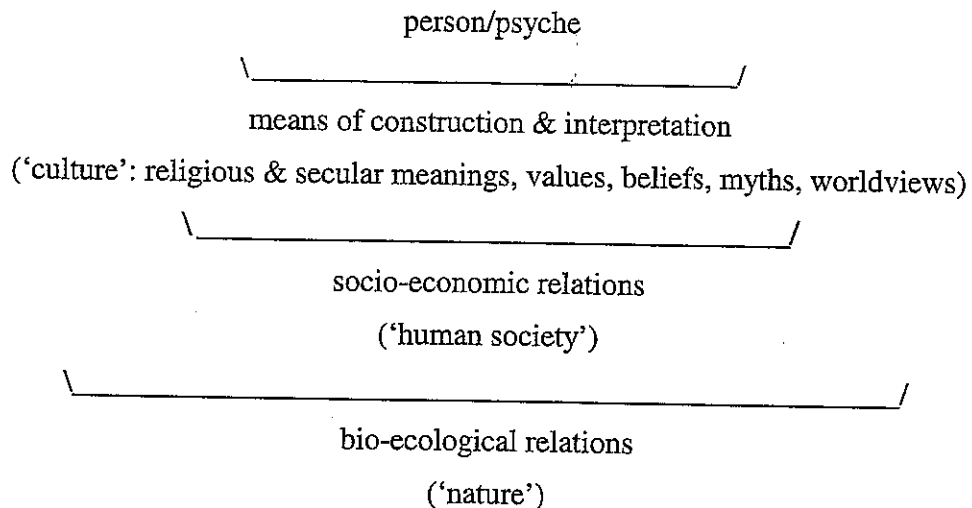


Fig. 4. Bio-ecological and socio-economic relations make sense only when symbolically and linguistically expressed (adapted from Wilden [14]).

imagination), the values and qualities of the thing or persons identified with become important in giving meaning to a person's life. Gradually, the shift of emphasis in the inner world begins to affect goals, motivations and behaviour in the external world. This paves the way for new action, and renewed enthusiasm and vigour.

This is where the interface between internal and external reality — and the role of the person in sustaining and developing the latter — begins to come into the picture again. Before describing this phase of the oscillation process, it is important to say something about the influence of cultural constructions on the bio-ecological systems that their bearers (i.e. people) physically depend on.

#### 5.1.4. *The need for cultural maps to match bio-ecological territories*

The fact that a particular cultural map is found to be internally functional to a person or society does not mean that it will necessarily be ecologically functional as well. The external socio-economic and bio-ecological impacts of our values, meanings, purposes and priorities can still be destructive. And some of these effects will be unforeseen and unimagined. Decisions made in the cultural sphere about what we should do and why — both individually and collectively are usually made on the basis of satisfying physical and psychological needs on the assumption, until recently, that ecological processes would look after themselves. The fact that we now realise they are having damaging impacts on ecological processes is forcing society to enter a kind of *collective regression* — a critical point and re-think at the most profound levels. There is growing awareness that the cultural constructions on which we base our lifestyles, strive to make sense of our lives, and satisfy our in-needness, are ecologically dysfunctional.

There is growing awareness that the condition of the socio-economic and bio-ecological spheres on which we humans depend has itself become dependent on the psycho-cultural sphere. This is illustrated in Fig. 5.

The maps of meaning through which we have sought well-being — though perhaps decreasingly so in recent years — have become ecologically suicidal and — no ecology, no psychology! We face a challenge that the ecological anthropologist Roy Rappaport expresses as follows:

*(Homo sapiens)* is a species that lives and can only live in terms of meaning it itself must construct in a world without intrinsic meaning but subject to natural law. Its most profound problems flow from disconformities between law and meaning...There is nothing in the nature of human thought to prevent it from constructing self-destructive or even world-destroying errors [28:45–46].

There is nothing that can stop our 'second nature' from undermining 'first nature' bio-ecological processes. Nothing, that is, except ourselves. The mythical map, we have discovered, no longer suits the territory. But we can go nowhere unless we discover a new vision or bring to the surface values and awareness that have become hidden. The mythology of material accumulation is, however, tenacious in spite of general agreement that this is a major force driving us towards unsustainability of many types. Other mythologies carry much weaker legitimacy and are therefore relatively unavailable as replacements.

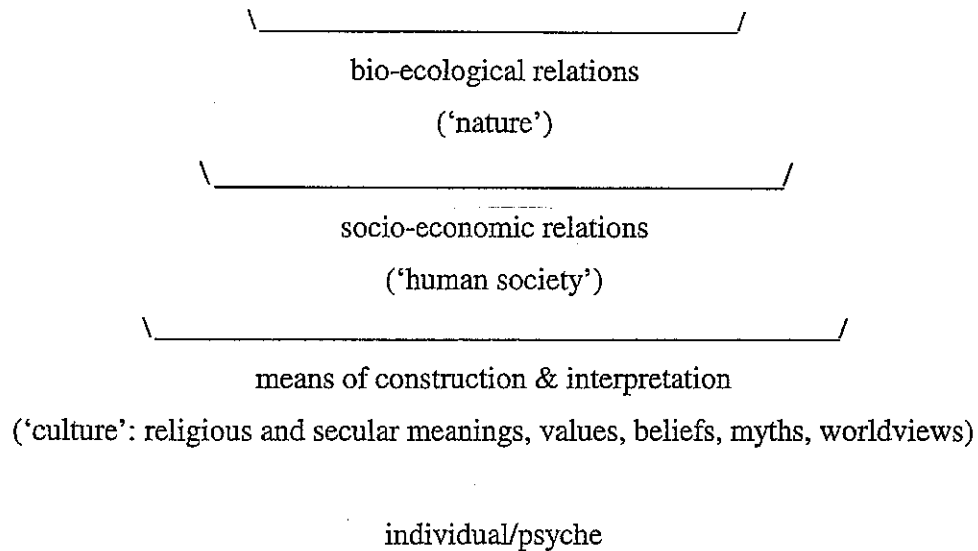


Fig. 5. The condition, though not the existence, of nature depends on society as expressed through culture, meaning and values (adapted from Wilden [14]).

The psychological, cultural, ecological and social dimensions of human life are clearly linked. New beliefs and meanings — including religious — that cause less ecological pressure will not emerge until seen as legitimate ways of seeking internal psychological sustainability. As suggested, this may already be beginning. Due to disillusionment with the promise of *Homo economicus*, for ecological and for other reasons, increasing numbers of people are seeking different mythologies, frameworks and theories to depend on. The more individuals who take responsibility for their own personal regression and development and find new ways to tackle it, the more legitimate such change will become to other individuals, setting up a positive feedback process.

Once political and business leaders take on board, *with conviction*, new ideas that could turn the tide of the ecological threat, the despair of the ‘risk society’ may become more hopeful.

Where people grasp their predicament intellectually but, perhaps out of fear, avoid grappling with its meaning and imperative for personal, experiential learning and change, dysfunction will continue. In D.W. Winnicott’s terms, experience will remain ‘frozen’, shallow and covered up until, in functional regression to dependence, people take full responsibility for the original difficulty. We can see this happening in current society, where beliefs, attitudes and meanings remain unchanged and are defended even in the most distressing moments of regression. This is precisely why they are dysfunctional. People in this situation become unable to respond in an adaptive manner to changing circumstances in the outside world and end up putting inappropriate, and potentially damaging, meanings and values

into practice in intra-dependence. The resulting mismatch between inner maps of the outer territory informs and legitimises maladaptive behaviour.

Even in environmental and sustainability circles, there appears to be a reluctance to engage with the psychological and experiential dimensions of the sustainability crisis. They tend to take a back seat, repeatedly attracting only token mentions at the back of otherwise influential publications such as von Weizsäcker et al's *Factor Four* [29]. These may be reasons why sustainability policy, research and education persist in trying to tackle the external dimensions of the predicament through technology, persuasion, incentive and regulation, to the virtual exclusion of its psychological and cultural roots.

#### 5.1.5. Transformation to intra-dependence

The experience of transformation is one of expectancy as a person seeks appropriate contexts in which they can express and put to work the new values, meanings and priorities that they have internalised. Whereas in extra-dependence all is symbolic activity, the imperative for *work activity* now takes over as the individual is faced with the realities of life in the family, society and ecology [7:82]. This phase provides the psychic space to learn how to express the symbolic through behaviour in the physical and social world. The movement is from the inside (psycho-cultural) to the outside (physico-social) and the meanings attributed to the inner world provide direction for behaviour. Whereas, the *values* associated with ecological sustainability may become significant in the experience of extra-dependence, after transformation to intra-dependence, the individual will *feel* impelled to find ways to actually achieve sustainability in practical everyday life. Having assimilated the desired values, people experience the challenge of finding ways to express the new vision. Meaningfulness and action come to mirror each other.

The world may look very different from the new perspective. It may demand changes in attitude or behaviour. It will almost certainly present challenges, not least because the real world is unlikely to correspond with the optimism experienced in extra-dependence. Reed [7:82] quotes Dahrendorf's Reith lectures in describing the experience of transformation:

...as we move from the world of goals and purposes to the world of action, the imperfections of men become as painfully evident as the obstreperousness of existing things [30].

This is part of the challenge of putting values into practice! Nevertheless, the transformation does provide the space for appreciating new possibilities and re-engaging with the external world with the benefit of new insight and energy. "It is like a butterfly working its way out of the remains of being a caterpillar, sunning itself on a twig to dry its wings, before launching into space" [9:15].

By this phase, the individual has begun to experience greater internal sustainability so tension decreases. If the shift occurs at a collective, cultural level in a way that also supports outer, structural sustainability, tension in society is also likely to subside.

If transformation into behaviour and action generates unbearable anxiety, often

due to the strength of attachment to the ideals, the risk emerges of dysfunctional transformation. This results from confusing the symbolic and ideological with the physical and social worlds, so *that ideas themselves come to be seen as the whole of reality*. The map, in other words, is again mistaken for the territory, with all the possible risks this involves for the sustainability of external systems. The pressure experienced internally — and often unconsciously — by the person (or society) can be so irresistible that priority is once again given to finding psychological security at any cost. This can manifest through the worst excesses of political power and fundamentalism, as one cultural identity seeks to overwhelm another.

## 6. Psychologically informed accountable action for sustainable development

### 6.1. In policy, research and education

In this paper we have described qualities that are intrinsic to sustainable development of people and society. Behavioural change that is, itself, sustainable cannot be achieved merely through communication campaigns, legislation, incentives and policies. The authoritarian regimes of pre-1990 eastern and central Europe certainly succeeded in changing behaviour. However, following their collapse, the explosion of frustrated desires that had been kept in check by coercive policy demonstrated that these changes had been largely superficial. Sustainability policy based solely on enticements and regulation is unlikely to be any more successful in bringing about long term changes in attitude and behaviour.

It is only if we who accept the arguments for sustainable development can see ourselves as key players in this drama that anything will be transformed. Our concern for outward change can only be effective to the extent that we ourselves are open to inward change. When persons experience policy as resonant with their inner convictions and values, behavioural change becomes the inevitable consequence and is more likely to be sustainable. Societal — and institutional — transformation occurs through personal transformation seen in the context of *experiencing* responsibility for one's role within it.

Reed's Oscillation Theory, developed through more than twenty years of organisational development work at the Grubb Institute is suggested as one model for understanding and facilitating such change and awareness of relatedness. Once a person has succeeded in working out how they can best contribute, with integrity and a sense of fullness, to the sustainability and purposes of the wider systems on which they depend, it can be said that they are acting 'in role' rather than individualistically [31]. This is a key to sustainability, both external and internal.

A systemic, or holistic, approach to sustainable development must pay more attention to the inner, psycho-cultural roots of behaviour, and how they translate into external impacts. Systemic thinkers [4,5,32,33] have argued long and hard for this on the basis of the multi-dimensionality of human systems. The approach is now beginning to gather legitimacy within academic research and policy communities [34,35].

## 6.2. *In personal and cultural change*

The desire for well-being, to fill the existential 'gap' in experience, appears to be an intrinsic feature of the human species. The main myth and assumption through which humans currently seek to satisfy this desire is consumerist materialism. This is clearly unsustainable. It has been estimated that the land area equivalent ('ecological footprint') required for each member of the world's population to live at the same standard as the average North American would be two and a half globes! [36].

The combined effects of psychological impulses and current cultural norms result in unsustainable choices of behaviour and lifestyle, in pursuit of happiness and well-being — a paradox that would be comical were it not so tragic.

External sustainability is contingent upon finding more non-material ways of seeking to satisfy desire. The growth in psycho-therapeutic, community-based and spiritual modes of development suggests that many people are beginning to explore such possibilities, perhaps prompted by disappointment with the adequacy of consumerism and economic growth to live up to their promise. The more individuals who shift focus in such ways, the more pressure is placed on 'second nature', secular-religious ideologies and belief in the economic 'bottom-line' of human development. Individuals who take responsibility for their own transformation support a feedback effect that further supports and hastens the pace of cultural change. This further legitimises individual change, and so on.

Which direction these changes will take is impossible to tell for sure. But one thing is certain — that a continued shift away from resource-intensive consumerism as the place to find satisfaction and well-being is bound to ease pressures on ecological systems. Perhaps a parallel shift towards more inner-directed and relationship orientated sources of meaning and value will also occur. If so, the integration of ecological and social sustainability with human psycho-cultural development could still become a reality.

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**Paul Maiteny** is a Research Consultant at The Grubb Institute of Behavioural Studies, a Lecturer on Environmental and Development Education at South Bank University and Associate Lecturer in Environmental Policy at the Open University. He is a Board Member of the Sociocybernetics Research Committee of the International Sociological Association (responsible for monitoring developments towards more systemic natural and social science).