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Political psychology and global sustainable development: An interdisciplinary take on protecting the environment, improving public health, and transforming conflicts

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Abstract:

To achieve the Sustainable Development Goals, the 2030 Agenda, interdisciplinary effort is necessary. This article discusses the contribution political psychology can make, with a focus on specific impact factors of political psychology, such as social norms, framing, and contextualisation. The article shows how these are applied across disciplines and across several Sustainable Development Goals, mainly the ones related to the environment, to health, and to peace. It argues that to achieve the 2030 Agenda, change must go beyond the individual level and beyond isolated goals. Interventions should therefore combine impact factors of psychology with structural measures from other disciplines.

Keywords: sustainable development; political psychology; international public law; framing; social norms; systemic approach; campaigning & social marketing; environmental economy; arts & culture; conflict transformation; dilemma of the commons

Politische Psychologie und globale nachhaltige Entwicklung: ein interdisziplinärer Blick auf Umweltschutz, öffentliche Gesundheit und Konflikttransformation

Abstract:

Um die nachhaltigen Entwicklungsziele der Agenda 2030 zu erreichen, sind interdisziplinäre Anstrengungen notwendig. Dieser Artikel diskutiert den Beitrag, welchen die politische Psychologie dazu leisten kann, mit Fokus auf spezifischen Wirkungsfaktoren wie sozialen Normen, Framing und Kontextualisierung. Der Artikel zeigt, wie diese über Disziplinen und über nachhaltige Entwicklungsziele hinweg angewendet werden, insbesondere in den Bereichen Umweltschutz, Gesundheits- und Friedensförderung. Er argumentiert, dass es zum Erreichen der Agenda 2030 einen Wandel über die individuelle Ebene und über isolierte Ziele hinaus braucht. Interventionen sollten daher psychologische Wirkungsfaktoren mit strukturellen Maßnahmen aus anderen Disziplinen kombinieren.

Schlüsselbegriffe: Nachhaltige Entwicklung; Politische Psychologie; Völkerrecht; Framing; Soziale Normen; Systemischer Ansatz; Kampagnen & Sozialmarketing; Umweltökonomie; Kunst und Kultur; Konflikttransformation; Gemeingut-Dilemma

Zusammenfassung auf

Deutsch

Politische Psychologie ist sowohl eine interdisziplinäre als auch eine «inter-psychologische» Disziplin, welche auf Erkenntnisse verschiedener Schulen wie soziale und klinische Psychologie zurückgreift. Ebenso vielfältig sind die Anwendungsgebiete. Dieser Artikel ergründet, inwiefern politische Psychologie zum Erreichen der nachhaltigen Entwicklungsziele (SDGs), der Agenda 2030, beitragen kann. Der Fokus des Artikels liegt auf Umweltschutz, öffentlicher Gesundheit und Konflikttransformation, da diese Gebiete nachhaltiger Entwicklung häufig Gegenstand psychologischer Interventionen sind. Zum Erreichen der Agenda 2030 ist es aufgrund der starken Abhängigkeiten der Ziele voneinander jedoch wichtig, bei Maßnahmen über isolierte SDGs und Disziplinen hinaus zu denken. Den Schwerpunkt des Artikels bilden somit drei übergreifende Wirkungsfaktoren: soziale Normen, Narrative und Kontextualisierung. Diese Wirkungsfaktoren kommen in Interventionen zu allen drei genannten Gebieten zum Einsatz, haben über das individuelle Level hinausgehendes Potential, und weisen im Bereich der nachhaltigen Entwicklung starke Überschneidungen mit anderen Disziplinen wie Recht, Ökonomie, Ethnologie und Kunst auf. So erhalten soziale Normen ihren sichtbarsten Ausdruck durch Gesetzgebung, Regulierungen und Völkerrecht. Mit sozialen Normen verwandte Konzepte wie Rituale und Kultur werden diskutiert. Der Abschnitt zu Narrativen behandelt verschiedene Formen von Framing, Metaphern und Sinngebung. Sachverhalte können durch unterschiedliche Akzentuierungen unterschiedliche Assoziationen, Einstellungen und Handlungsimpulse auslösen – ein Effekt, welchen man sich u.a. in Kampagnen und Konflikttransformation zunutze macht. Kontextualisierung schließlich bedeutet, dass Interventionen immer den jeweiligen Kontext in Betracht ziehen müssen, wie es v.a. in interkultureller Psy-

chologie und systemischen Ansätzen praktiziert wird. Die Bedeutung der eng damit zusammenhängenden Konzepte Komplexität und Interkonnektivität für globale nachhaltige Entwicklung wird aufgezeigt, ebenso wie die Beliebtheit, welche derartige Konzepte im aktuellen interdisziplinären und insbesondere wirtschaftswissenschaftlichen Diskurs zu nachhaltiger Entwicklung genießen. So können sie zur Erklärung von Externalitäten dienen: ökologische und soziale Kosten für die Allgemeinheit spiegeln sich nicht in Marktpreisen wider, wenn der Kontext ökonomischen Handelns nicht berücksichtigt wird. Interaktionen und Zielkonflikte zwischen verschiedenen SDGs sind ein weiteres Beispiel dafür, dass es zum Erreichen nachhaltiger Entwicklung systemische statt isolierter Ansätze braucht. Auf die Vorstellung dieser drei Wirkungsfaktoren folgt die Präsentation der genannten psychologischen Anwendungsgebiete im Bereich der nachhaltigen Entwicklung, z.B. Maßnahmen zur Verhaltensänderung im Umwelt- und Gesundheitsbereich (SDGs 3, 6, 12-15). Derartige Maßnahmen beinhalten Sozialmarketing, Kampagnen und «Nudging», einen Begriff aus der Verhaltensökonomie. Sie gehen oft mit strukturellen Maßnahmen, wie veränderten Anreizen, einher. Relativ viel Raum nimmt die Analyse von Gemeingut-Dilemmata ein. Anhand dieser – wo individuelle Verhaltensvorteile im Widerspruch zum kollektiven und langfristigen Nutzen stehen, z.B. im Bereich der Regenwaldabholzung – lassen sich die drei oben aufgeführten Wirkungsfaktoren darstellen. Ein weiteres Anwendungsgebiet ist die Konflikttransformation (SDG 16). Dieses beinhaltet Mediation, Vergangenheitsbewältigung sowie den Umgang mit kollektiven Traumata. Hier finden insbesondere Techniken aus der klinischen Psychologie Anwendung. Auch innerhalb der politikwissenschaftlichen Konfliktforschung nehmen psychologische Konzepte an Bedeutung zu. Als eine Anwendungsform psychologischer Konzepte werden Kunstinterventionen in Konfliktkontexten disku-

tiert. Über individuelle Verhaltensänderung hinausgehende Interventionen in allen Anwendungsgebieten verknüpfen meistens psychologische Wirkungskfaktoren mit Maßnahmen aus anderen Disziplinen, wie beispielsweise der Umweltökonomie. Dies erscheint insbesondere im Hinblick auf die Agenda 2030 opportun: Um die zu ihrem Erreichen nötige gesellschaftliche Transformation zu gewährleisten, müssen Maßnahmen auf verschiedenen Ebenen gleichzeitig ansetzen. Die politische Psychologie hat dabei eine wichtige komplementäre Rolle zu spielen, darf aber gleichzeitig nicht als Ersatz für strukturelle Veränderungen dienen. Möglichkeiten und Grenzen des Einsatzes psychologischer Wirkungskfaktoren über Disziplinen und isolierte SDGs hinweg werden diskutiert.

1. Introduction

Political psychology is commonly defined as dealing with the interaction of subjective attitudes, motivations, and behavioural volition on the one hand and societal power relations on the other hand (Moser, 2001). The Professional Association of German Psychologists (BDPP, 2018) defines it as being interdisciplinary, overlapping not only with political science, but also a range of further disciplines. As a consequence, working groups on political psychology are often not located within psychology, but other disciplines (see IPSA, 2019). Working fields mentioned by the BDPP (2018) are political participation, civic education, and conflict transformation. Additional working fields listed by Hilgers (2007) include environmental behaviour, mediation, campaigning, propaganda, overcoming resistance to political reforms, and political communication. Given the heterogeneous nature of areas where psychology and politics interact, I consider political psychology not only an interdisciplinary, but also an inter-psychological discipline, drawing from

social psychology as well as from, e.g., clinical psychology.

Applying psychological impact factors across disciplines may be particularly relevant when it comes to global sustainable development: to achieve the 2030 Agenda, a societal “transformation” will be necessary (Independent Group of Scientists appointed by the Secretary General, 2019, p. 21). This involves overcoming isolated approaches in favour of holistic measures. This article will therefore examine some impact factors of political psychology with interdisciplinary relevance, with a focus on how these are applied within the realm of sustainable development. The article is structured as follows: In section 2, I will introduce global sustainable development and the 2030 Agenda, the so-called Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). I will put a focus on those SDGs which are most often targeted by psychosocial interventions. In section 3, I will describe some impact factors which are particularly relevant regarding such interventions. The focus will lie on their definition and their background. I will also give interdisciplinary examples on why those impact factors are important to sustainable development, beyond psychosocial interventions. In section 4, I will show how psychology is used regarding some specific SDGs, often in conjunction with elements from other disciplines. In section 5, I will discuss strengths and weaknesses of political psychology applications with regard to achieving the 2030 Agenda, across SDGs. I will argue that effective interventions are interdisciplinary, combining psychological impact factors with measures from other disciplines.

2. Global sustainable development

In 2015, the United Nations General Assembly agreed on the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, with 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The aim of the world community is to achieve those goals until 2030, with countries being responsible for their national implementation. It aims at bringing economic development and the social and environmental aspects of sustainability together. The goals span a wide variety of topics, from economic growth to food security, from public health to biodiversity, from gender equality to peace and security. Global sustainable development is, thus, not only linked with development co-operation, but also with, e.g., trade policy, financial policy, and agriculture. The goals are not to be achieved in isolation: improving food security at the cost of biodiversity loss would not be a step towards achieving the SDGs, neither would economic growth at the cost of climate change. Global progress on the different goals is seen as a multiplication, not an addition – meaning that huge progress on one goal without any progress on another goal results in no progress on the 2030 Agenda (Messerli, 2020). Also, each country needs to take into account its global impact. This means, e.g., that industrialized countries need to take measures to reduce their “spillover-effects”, the externalized costs of their globally connected production and consumption (Sachs, Schmidt-Traub, Kroll et al., 2019). Whereas developing countries often have deficits on the achievement of economic and social SDGs, industrialized countries often have ones on the achievement of the environmental ones – accordingly, both need to get equally active (Messerli, 2020). The 2030 Agenda is, thus, indivisible and universal, and intends to overcome “sectoral approaches and siloed policies” (Breu, Bergöb, Ebner et al., 2021, p. 184).

In practice, however, actors involved in sustainable development so far treat the

goals mostly in isolation and work, e.g., either on climate change or on peace policy – even if transversality of topics (“mainstreaming”) is currently increasing, with financial actors also taking into account implications of monetary policies on climate change, to give just one example. For this reason, also in this article, the focus will lie on only a selection of SDGs. The SDGs treated here are those where the human factor, e.g., behaviour, is thought to play a major role and which are, thus, rather often targeted by psychosocial interventions. This does not preclude other SDGs from not benefiting from psychology – after all, human factors play a role in all 17 of the SDGs.

Human behaviour is thought to play a major role in the SDGs on health (SDG 3), on clean water, sanitation, and hygiene (“WASH”; SDG 6), on sustainable consumption and production (SDG 12), on climate action (SDG 13), and on biodiversity (SDGs 14 & 15). To put it into a nutshell, in the SDGs dealing with public health and the environment. Those issues are targeted with a range of interventions from health psychology, environmental psychology, social psychology, behavioural economics, communication sciences, and social marketing. Most often, the goal is the change of individual behaviour – e.g., washing hands or driving less. Common interventions are communication campaigns and “nudging”, as I will elaborate below.

Another SDG which is often worked on by psychologists is the SDG 16, “Peace and Justice”. It is commonly regarded to include most aspects of human security, such as peace policy, conflict mediation, human rights, prevention of violent extremism, and transitional justice/“Dealing with the Past”. The latter is a holistic approach on truth, justice, reconciliation, and memory in post-conflict societies, including legal, educational, historical, and artistic measures as well as dealing with collective and individual traumas. As I will elaborate below, many clinical psychologists have been working on such topics, and many approaches to

human security have been influenced by clinical psychology.

3. Overarching impact factors of political psychology and their interdisciplinary relevance in achieving global sustainable development

The impact factors presented in this section are ones which play a role regarding all types of intervention mentioned. They are not only used in either behaviour change interventions (such as nudging or campaigning) or conflict transformation activities (such as mediation or collective memory processes) but play a role in both. This section focuses, thus, on impact factors which are not only relevant for achieving isolated SDGs. For example, self-efficacy plays a huge role in social psychology and its rather political applications, such as campaigning (Kammer, Niessen, Schmidt et al., 2016) and civic education (Niessen, 2019). However, as one hardly finds it in literature on conflict transformation, I will not deal with it in this article. As additional criteria, the impact factors chosen have the potential to contribute to sustainable development beyond the individual level and have some interdisciplinary relevance. For example, one may argue that the potential impact of self-efficacy-based interventions is quite limited regarding highly complex issues such as sustainable development. After all, individual activities do only have a limited effect on reducing climate change, for example, which makes it difficult to achieve a high self-efficacy in acting on it. The impact factors mentioned below are still not exhaustive. Social identity, values, and emotions, e.g., do all have some relevance for all the SDGs dealt with, have all some potential beyond the individual level, and are all applied in

highly interdisciplinary contexts, including economy, law, and arts. Whilst these impact factors have a huge impact across SDGs, it is still not straightforward to directly apply them in solutions on a large scale, e.g., due to inter-personal variance. Such impact factors are strongly interlinked with the factors dealt with and may be mentioned where appropriate but will not be at the core of this article.

The remainder of this section will go beyond the psychosocial interventions which served as a base to derive the impact factors. I will apply an interdisciplinary take on the impact factors, arguing that those factors could play a role for sustainable development beyond individual behaviour change and beyond looking at SDGs in isolation.

3.1 Social norms: Laws and treaties, rituals and culture

Social norms have a big role to play in sustainable development – no matter whether applied in campaigning for social change (Kammer, Niessen, Schmidt et al., 2016), in hygiene-promoting interventions in the global South (Harter, Mosch & Mosler, 2018), or in mediation (Hellmüller, Palmiano Federer & Pring, 2017). Social norms are defined as how one thinks others would behave in a given situation (descriptive social norms) or as what behaviour we think others would approve of (injunctive social norms; Cialdini, Demaine, Sagarin et al., 2006). Social norms are one of the strongest predictors of behaviour and of the acceptance of new regulations (Kammer, Niessen, Schmidt et al., 2016). The term “social norms” also implies why political psychology can be considered to be interdisciplinary. The most visible expression of social norms of any given country are its laws and regulations, after all. Norms which are negotiated within parliament or inter-governmental panels and implemented in courts or treaties, far away from the realm one would commonly consider as “psychological”. Such treaties include international conventions on bio-

diversity and on climate change. The SDGs themselves can be considered as universally agreed-on social norms, and any technique of making norms salient or appealing to norms, such as campaigning, can contribute to their achievement.

The link between social norms, law, and global sustainable development is particularly salient in the legal concept of “public morals”. This concept exists both in multilateral trade law (Cottier, 2020) and in human rights law (Perrone, 2014). In both cases, there is a strong link to sustainable development. For example, if sustainability can be considered to form part of a country’s public morals, that country is allowed to implement trade tariffs based on sustainability considerations (Cottier, 2020). The link is also evident in some national constitutions. The one of Bolivia, for example, refers explicitly to indigenous values about the environment (Lixinski, 2010). Consistent with the impact social norms can have on individual attitudes, international law has been shown to be able to shape national public attitudes (Wallace, 2013). When a state signs a treaty on sustainable development, this may, thus, also positively affect the attitudes of its citizens towards sustainability.

Social norms are also linked to rituals. Psychology has been dealing with rituals already for a long time, e.g., in the psychotherapeutic approaches of Carl Gustav Jung, of existential and of systemic therapy. More related to the SDGs, the role of rituals in armed conflict has often been studied (e.g., Davidheiser, 2006; Schirch, 2004; Whitehouse & McQuinn, 2012). On the one hand, rituals can function in highlighting norms and thereby increasing bonds among an ingroup (leading to increased motivation for combat), and, on the other hand, in providing a liminal transitional space, in which the usual norms do not apply and where solutions to a conflict, thus, may be found more easily (akin to a systemic “perturbation”). Accordingly, rituals may involve both functional/conservative and subversive elements at the same time (Brightman, 1999).

Social norms, as the foundation of a society and expression of its values, as an underlying psychological factor of the acceptance of laws, of social change, of political measures at large, are sometimes seen as equivalent to culture – e.g., when Fehr (2019) says that culture is the most important factor for change, determining what is possible and what is not. A similar definition of culture is shared by the constructivists within International Relations, especially regarding the study of norms (Reus-Smit, 2018). Gelfand (2018) also uses “social norms” and “culture” interchangeably, when she elaborates on the difference between tight and loose cultures. According to her, in response to extreme looseness (and resulting fears), humans gravitate towards tightness, which she uses to explain shifts towards radicalisation. Still, facing a crisis such as climate change, loose cultures will need to tighten up and to develop stronger social norms, according to her. In peace studies, cultural violence, i.e., norms that can be used to legitimize direct or structural violence, are one of three postulated forms of violence (Galtung, 1990). In environmental protection, the importance of indigenous cultural practices has been legally acknowledged in the Convention on Biological Diversity (Gafner-Rojas, 2020). Taboos, a specific normative expression of a culture’s underlying values, have been dealt with in mediation (Shapiro, 2016), hygiene behaviour in developing countries (Garg & Anand, 2015), and environmental decision-making (Daw, Coulthard, Cheung et al., 2015). They are dependent on framing and context (Daw, Coulthard, Cheung et al., 2015), the impact factors dealt with in the next sections.

3.2 Narratives: Framing, metaphors, storytelling

Wehling (2016) claims that it is impossible to talk about political concepts such as sustainable development without the use of metaphors. According to her, this is linked to the way we “frame” political concepts,

i.e., the wording we use – each and every matter could also be “framed” in a different way. Different wordings activate different associations, attitudes, and perceived behavioural options, as many studies on framing and related concepts like cueing and priming have shown (also regarding sustainability, e.g., Bauer, Wilkie, Kim et al., 2012). Framing can be used in campaigning, with the goal to influence public opinion (Quattrone & Tversky, 1988). Metaphors are used in mediation (Shapiro, 2016), partly to make the inherent multi-perspectivity of each conflict evident and to enable indirect communication about issues. Both framing (Nisbet, 2009) and metaphors (Bentz, 2020) have also been argued to be especially important in communicating and educating about the complex issue of climate change, in the latter case through art. The most famous application of framing, namely losses vs. gains (“prospect theory”), can explain risk-taking in international conflicts (Farnham, 1994). Regarding environmental treaty design, Galbraith (2013) argues that an opt-out frame instead of an opt-in frame would have led to more states joining the International Court of Justice jurisdictional clause in the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change. Framing and metaphors also matter in environmental economy. For example, the economic method of “ecosystem services” valorises certain “services” done by ecosystems. Environmental economists are usually aware of the implications of the names given to different “services”, and that nature could be talked about also in a myriad of other ways (Sullivan & Hannis, 2015). Regarding the protection of the environment, Leyvraz (2019) argues that activating a values-centred frame may be particularly helpful. Such a frame may put the focus away from the fact that individual behaviour is unlikely to make a big difference and may instead guide action independent of the outcomes. This may be particularly relevant in developing countries, where external motivations such as laws and policies encouraging pro-environmental behaviour

are often lacking (Leyvraz, 2019). Given the fact that people in non-Western cultures tend to have a broader set of values (Haidt, 2012), there is also a bigger potential for value-centred framing.

Related aspects such as storytelling fall into the same category: events can be told in different ways, different connections can be highlighted, different “meanings” can be made (see also Morales, 2020). Attributing meaning to ones’ experiences has been found to be one of the most important buffers against traumatization in Holocaust survivors (Antonovsky, 1979; see also Frankl, 1946/2006). Storytelling plays a big role in trauma therapy, such as “Narrative Exposure Therapy” (NET; Schauer, Neuner & Elbert, 2011) or the ethno-systemic-narrative approach used by the International Organization for Migration (Losi, 2006), and can, thus, play a role also after so-called collective traumas. As Sium and Ritskes (2013, p. V) write regarding indigenous storytelling: “If stories are archives of collective pain, suffering and resistance, then to speak them is to heal; to believe in them is to reimagine the world”. A specific form of narratives are political myths. They are defined as stories which give meaning to specific societal action, as being emotional narratives, which interpret history selectively (Hein-Kirchner, 2007). Political myths can contribute to ethnopolitical conflict (Volkan, 2014; see also Ascherson, 1995). The relevance for further disciplines is evident, especially in post-conflict societies. For example, Lixinski (2015) argues that law can also play an important role in how countries in transition tell their story, by authorizing certain versions over others. The same applies to arts, by foregrounding the less authorized versions (Gomez, 2021). Narratives can go beyond the verbal: musical activities can also “tell” alternative histories of survival (Pilzer, 2015), or teach specific versions of history (Klenke & Jaques, 2021).

3.3 Contextualisation: Complexity and interconnectedness

The concept of contextualisation is connected to the mentioned concept of multi-perspectivity. It means putting any given information into its context, and not to do any interventions without taking the context and the existing connections into account. In non-Western cultures, contextualisation plays a much larger role than in Northern America and Europe, which is why those cultures get also called high-context cultures (Hall, 1976). Regarding conflict transformation, studies showing the importance of context exist for a long time (see Keilson, 1992, on the role of context in the traumatization of Jewish orphans in World War II) and have laid the foundation for psychosocial interventions in the realm of transitional justice (Hamber, 2009). Culture, as defined in section 3.1, is seen as an important contextual factor (Geertz, 1973; Harter, Mosch & Mosler, 2018; Kammer, Niessen, Schmidt et al., 2016). Contextualisation is also one of the most important aspects of systemic thinking, which is often seen as the theoretical backbone of mediation (Duss-von Werdt, 2011).

In political contexts such as sustainable development, the main application of systemic thinking is that some of the world's biggest problems cannot be solved by fixing one piece in isolation from the others, i.e., without taking the whole "system" or the context into account (Meadows, Meadows & Randers, 2004). Thus, context matters also in campaigning (Kammer, Niessen, Schmidt et al., 2016), psychosocial interventions in development cooperation (Mosler & Contzen, 2016), latrine building in the global South (Harter, Mosch & Mosler, 2018), peace policy (Dietrich, 2011), emotionally-fuelled international conflict (Lindner, 2009), psychological suffering during and after human rights abuses (Becker, 2004), development economics (Stiglitz, 2002), environmental governance (Adger, Brown, Fairbrass et al., 2003), and the interpretation of international environmental treaties by

courts (Petersen, 2019). The importance of contextual information is also a reason behind the need for gender analyses in security sector reform (Ibrahim, Mbayo & McCarthy, 2015) and the need for conflict analyses in mediation (OSCE, 2019). Reducing complexity by omitting context has been argued to be at the heart of polarization and conflict (Papadopoulos, 2017), and trying to reduce complexity contradicting the dominant political myths after ethnopoliitical conflict to be the motivation behind heritage destruction (Assmann, 2018). In fact, acknowledging interdependence as well as embracing paradox and complexity are considered to be among the most important elements of both the "moral imagination" proposed by peace-studies veteran Lederach (2005) and of artistic performances aiming at conflict transformation (Cohen, Gutiérrez Varea & Walker, 2011). Similarly, Kagan (2015, p. 4) argues for arts to be relevant for addressing the complexities of climate change precisely because of their quality "to keep open the ambiguities, ambivalences, contradictions and creatively chaotic dimensions of reality". Social marketing, an interdisciplinary approach aiming at behaviour change and influenced mostly by social psychology, tries, as a very recent development, also to take systemic thinking into account and to achieve multi-level change for complex societal problems (Truong, Saunders & Dong, 2019). In development cooperation, one applies systemic thinking, e.g., in participatory workshops on trade-offs of different policies (Galafassi, Daw, Munyi et al., 2017). Fields like environmental economics or development studies are aware of the fact that issues like biodiversity loss can better be treated with systemic rather than sectoral approaches, reflected in terminology like "food systems". Further sustainability-related examples are provided by Ostrom (2009), who classifies common goods as complex socio-ecological systems needing context-based solutions, and Rockström, Steffen, Noone et al. (2009), warning about planetary boundaries and their interactions.

Raworth (2017) and Sterman (2012) both argue that also social and environmental externalities can be accounted for by systemic thinking. Externalities are mostly negative social and environmental “side effects” or “spillover-effects” not reflected in market prices – i.e., happening when the environmental and social context of economic action is not taken into account. Externalities play a big role with regard to the SDGs (Schmidt-Traub, Hoff & Bernlöhner, 2019) and feature prominently in the Sustainable Development Report (SDR) 2019 (Sachs, Schmidt-Traub, Kroll et al., 2019). In achieving the SDGs, embracing complexity is needed also besides classical externalities: the effects of the different SDG-targets on one another are highly contextual (Weitz, Carlsen, Nilsson & Skånberg, 2018). For this reason, the latest Global Sustainable Development Report (GSDR) puts its emphasis on interconnections and trade-offs across goals and targets and argues for a systemic approach: progress must be made on all the SDGs simultaneously, not on single ones at the cost of others (Independent Group of Scientists appointed by the Secretary-General, 2019). Evidently, also the global North and South are highly interconnected when it comes to sustainability (Messerli, 2020). Such insights may be combined with framing, as defined in section 3.2, and in so doing make negative distant external effects and trade-offs of actions more visible.

4. Current applications of psychology regarding specific SDGs

This section will give some examples of how psychology is applied regarding specific SDGs. The selected SDGs are the ones which are most often targeted by psychosocial interventions. The section shows some examples of interventions, which often make use of the selected and further impact

factors, in some cases in combination with methods from other disciplines.

4.1 Environment, health, and behaviour change: Campaigning, nudging, and commons dilemmas (SDGs 3, 6, 12-15)

Most interventions developed by social psychologists or “social marketing”-experts in the field of sustainable development focus on individual behavioural change, mostly with foci on environmental or on health and hygiene behaviour (McKenzie-Mohr & Schultz, 2014; Mosler & Contzen, 2016; Mosler & Tobias, 2007). Norm-based “individual” behaviour change campaigns can still have a broad range, from targeting single villages in the global South with an interactive intervention involving local stakeholders (Harter, Mosch & Mosler, 2018) to targeting a whole country with a communication campaign accompanying structural measures (Kammer, Niessen, Schmidt et al., 2016). As mentioned, such campaigns can also increase the acceptance of new regulations by making social norms salient (Kammer, Niessen, Schmidt et al., 2016).

The relatively recent school of social psychology known as “behavioural economics” is known for its most famous intervention, “nudging” or “choice architecture” (i.e., changing frames or changing current “default-settings”, but otherwise letting people decide by themselves how to act; Thaler & Sunstein, 2009). Again, changing individual behaviour is the goal, and, in addition, this can be done on a large scale. It goes beyond classical social psychology, however, in making it explicit that regulatory measures, such as changing incentives, are also considered to be part of the game (Fehr, Kamm & Jäger, 2014). Changing incentives is also what most of environmental economy is about, e.g., by recommending tax incentives. Changing “routines”, i.e., changing the “default-settings”, the standard behaviour,

by a mixture of incentives and other regulations, and in line with both behavioural economics and the impact new regulations had on behaviour change in other domains (such as smoking), are also the rationale behind the “environmental routine”-approach by Kopatz (2016).

An issue playing a role both in biodiversity loss and climate change are so-called “commons dilemmas”, also called “tragedy of the commons”. The terms refer to a situation in a shared-resource system where individual users, acting independently according to their short-term self-interest, behave contrary to the common good of all users by depleting the shared resource through their collective action (usually with negative consequences for themselves in the long-term). It can be applied to scenarios such as land use and deforestation, a classic example is over-fishing. In complex cases, the negative effects are externalities: e.g., the effects of unsustainably produced monoculture imports are distant geographically (e.g., rain forests in South America) and/or temporally (such as climate change or biodiversity loss). “Commons dilemmas” are also an example where all three overarching impact factors mentioned above can play a role in the solution. Kopelman, Weber and Messick (2002) argue that frames are influencing cooperation in such dilemmas, that situational factors (i.e., context) matter, and that the cultural group (i.e., norms) is another critical factor. According to them, cooperation is best explained by perceived descriptive social norms – by the answer to the question “what would someone else do in my situation?”. Anderies, Janssen, Bousquet et al. (2011) show that following joint communication, people are sometimes willing to restrain voluntarily from over extracting resources and to use costly punishment to sanction others. Similar findings had been made by Ostrom (1999), who argued that successful commons are those governed by communities with collectively agreed rules and sanctions for breaking them (while highlighting that there is no panacea and

that any approach must fit the context; Ostrom, Janssen & Anderies, 2007). This is in line with a survey done among CEOs by UN Global Compact and Accenture (2013) – actors are often not against stricter rules regarding sustainability, as long as the same rules are valid for all and as the result is in the common interest. This may have implications for international negotiations on rules, sanctions and (dis)incentives regarding the management of global commons. Disincentives for overuse may be provided by internalizing external costs (“true cost economics”) and by legal remedies (Stavins, Zou, Brewer et al., 2014). In systemic terms, this would amount to “balancing feedback loops” (Meadows, 2008, p. 155); in environmental law, one would speak of the “polluter pays principle”.

4.2 Conflict transformation: Mediation, dealing with the past, and collective traumas (SDG 16)

Conflict transformation shows that also clinical and educational psychology have their place in political psychology. After all, it was mostly in clinical schools that the foundations for mediation and for dealing with traumas were laid. And it is next to legislation and architecture mostly in education that it is determined how countries deal with their violent past and with remembrance, what image of themselves countries want to project to future generations. Not coincidentally, one of the most prestigious centres on mediation, the Harvard International Negotiation Program, is led by a clinical psychologist (Shapiro, 2016). Within peace studies, there are approaches with a heavy dose of inputs from (mostly systemic and humanistic) clinical psychology, such as the Innsbruck approach (Dietrich, 2011). A range of clinical techniques, such as reframing-based paradoxical interventions from Frankl’s existential as well as systemic psychotherapy, have been used in transforming

ethnopolitical conflict (Bar-Tal, Hameiri & Halperin, 2021). Within political science, literature on civil wars and ethnic conflict often focuses on psychological factors (e.g., Cedermann, Gleditsch & Buhaug, 2013; Petersen, 2002). Apart from that, some clinical psychologists got some reputation for work in conflict settings (Coleman & Deutsch, 2015; Lindner, 2009; Volkan, 2014), on human rights (Becker, 2004; Seu, 2012), on refugees (Papadopoulos, 2017), on transitional justice (Hamber, 2009), or on genocide (Staub, 2011), whilst some social psychologists have been working on violent extremism (Kruglanski, Gelfand, Bélanger et al., 2014).

The role of arts in collective commemoration processes and reconciliation has been worked on by Le Baron (2011), who argues that such approaches are particularly relevant wherever values play a role. Whilst art interventions in contexts of conflict are not strictly “psychological”, they share many of their overarching impact factors with political psychology, as well as the challenge of having impact mostly at the individual level whilst often targeting structural change. Art interventions in the social domain have been the subject of psychological studies and are often justified with psychological theories (Niessen, 2013). A factor which may be particularly relevant in conflict mediation is the capacity of arts to open a complementary dimension of reality, allowing for playful as-if exploration and transformation of the situation at hand (Niessen, 2013). The latter is reminiscent of the transitional space provided by rituals, as described in section 3.1.

5. Strengths and weaknesses of applying political psychology to achieve global sustainable development

Political psychology is, thus, applied within a range of SDGs. Most of the interventions target isolated SDGs and behaviour change at the individual or community level. Some interventions also target change on a larger societal level. The latter usually combine psychological elements with measures from other disciplines, such as economics. As shown in this article, this is less surprising than it may seem: one can find impact factors from political psychology in disciplines as diverse as international law, cultural anthropology, ethnomusicology, history, or communication science. Applying psychological impact factors across disciplines may be particularly relevant when it comes to global sustainable development: to achieve the 2030 Agenda, a societal “transformation” will be necessary (Independent Group of Scientists appointed by the Secretary General, 2019, p. 21). This involves overcoming isolated approaches, be it regarding SDGs or regarding disciplines, in favour of holistic measures. As shown, the impact factors described have the potential to contribute to this: they have the potential to be effective beyond the individual level and beyond isolated SDGs. This implies that an over-reliance on measures perceived to be psychological, such as awareness-raising campaigns, is not warranted, despite their current popularity among policymakers. On their own, the impact of such measures is limited: e.g., the consumption of sustainable products is far less dependent on how “aware” customers are than on the price of those products (which in turn depends on whether external public costs get internalized or not: e.g., whether non-sustainable means of production get subsidized or not, or whether there will be differentiated tariffs on imports

of products depending on their sustainable production). Across contexts, the decision for behaviour options also depends hugely on what is legal and what is not. Educative and campaign activities should, thus, not serve as a symbolic non-intrusive surrogate for multi-layer action. There is still an interaction between psychological and structural measures: the feasibility of regulations and the compliance with measures also depends on how accepted those are. Providing new sanitation infrastructure or technical innovation is useless if people are not convinced to use them. Impact factors from political psychology can, thus, help on various levels: they can shape the discourse and bring new regulatory options into public awareness, e.g., by making external and distant costs of current and local measures and behaviour visible through framing. They can help shifting frames from short-term gains to the global long-term interest and help creating awareness of trade-offs and interactions of different measures and goals. They can improve the acceptance of any measures, by making the associated social norms salient. Those effects apply across SDGs.

To get a more complete picture on how political psychology may contribute to the achievement of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, further research may be helpful. It may be particularly interesting to see how political psychology contributes to further SDGs, such as gender equality, life-long and inclusive education, or global partnerships. It may also be relevant to see how further impact factors, such as social identity, values, and emotions, fit into the puzzle and interact with the impact factors dealt with in this article. I have shown some examples of interdisciplinary measures demonstrating the presence of psychological impact factors, e.g., within economic, legal, or artistic interventions, throughout this paper. To develop interventions reaching beyond isolated SDGs remains a challenge. To keep the whole picture in mind remains, however, also a necessity if the goal of global transformation until 2030 is to be achieved.

Impact factors from political psychology, by their applicability across disciplines and SDGs, can contribute to this aim.

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