SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES ON HUMAN DEVELOPMENT

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Contents

Summary

This article focuses on how psychological science can be used to maintain and elicit desirable behaviors. It discusses human motivation, decision-making, attitudinal changes, long-term versus short-term goals, group process, leadership, communication and change process. Attitude change is presented as a three-stage process: unfreezing, moving, and refreezing, and attempts to change an attitude are described in terms of source, message, and receiver characteristics. An attitude change is the result of either central or peripheral processing. Because people's capacity to process information may be limited, attitude change interventions need to incorporate such limitations. In order to change individual attitude and behavior, community leadership, local media, and local social organizations need to be involved, and the evaluation of interventions themselves requires a thorough analysis of organizational psychology. Leadership has two dimensions, one concerning the initiation and maintenance of structure and the other concerning socio-emotional needs. Effective leadership changes as organizations change. When an organization is small, the structure is loose, and personal relationships are the rule. As the organization matures, there is a greater emphasis on structural matters.

1. Introduction

Achieving sustainable development will require people to behave in certain ways, and because psychology is the study of human behavior, the judicious application of the principles discovered by psychologists can help make sustainable development a reality. Psychologists have described numerous ways in which behaviors can be elicited and maintained, and just as such principles have been applied to social issues ranging from

the reduction of racism to the prevention of disease, they can be applied to achieving sustainable development.

Psychology is traditionally defined as the study of human thought, feeling, and behavior; however, because sustainable development is an outcome, the result of behavior, this article focuses on how psychological science can be used to maintain and elicit desirable behaviors. Psychologists study the human condition from a wide variety of perspectives ranging from the biological to the near sociological. These different perspectives have been combined into what has been called a bio-psycho-social approach which recognizes the importance of biological predispositions, individual psychological variables, and social factors as influences on human thought, feeling, and behavior. Although this article focuses on the individual and social components of this approach as it pertains to sustainable development, it does so with the recognition that biological factors can play roles in such processes.

The diversity of influences on human behavior is also an important part of contemporary work in public health and epidemiology, and the present analysis shares much with this work. For example, combating a disease such as AIDS requires eliciting and maintaining certain individual behaviors such as safe-sex practices. Nevertheless, although the behavior of individuals is the immediate cause of the spread of the disease, the focus of efforts to control AIDS runs the gamut from those targeted at the local level to those targeted at the national or even international level. Similarly, if sustainable development is viewed as a collective result of individual behaviors, interventions must be targeted at broader levels than the individual despite the fact that the individual is the immediate cause of such behaviors. Another characteristic the present analysis shares with a public health approach is an emphasis on prevention. Just as it is easier to prevent heart disease than it is to cure it, it is easier to establish behaviors conducive to sustainable development than it is to change behaviors that make sustainable development less likely. Therefore, the present analysis also concerns how behaviors develop and how they are maintained.

Developing, eliciting, and maintaining the behaviors promoting sustainable development can be discussed in terms of a vast array of factors. The theoretical basis of the present analysis is research in social and personality psychology, broadly defined. This theoretical basis is complemented by more applied research in consumer, community, and organizational psychology. The present analysis describes those factors that research and theory suggest are the most important, with the understanding that this description is not exhaustive.

As you decide how to apply the principles described herein, keep in mind the fact that causal relationships in the social sciences tend to be more probabilistic than in some other disciplines. For example, for most purposes, one can predict quite accurately what will happen when certain chemicals are combined, whereas how a particular attitude change intervention effects an individual may be difficult to predict precisely. Nevertheless, reasonably accurate predictions can be made when interventions are targeted toward many people or when the impacts of numerous interventions are being evaluated. Furthermore, because policy makers and practitioners are typically concerned with such broad influences, a probabilistic model of causality poses no serious

problems.

The similarities between the cultural contexts within which psychological principles have been studied and those in which they are to be applied also need to be considered. The vast majority of psychological research has been conducted in industrialized Western countries and describes the behavior of people in these countries. Psychologists have become increasingly sensitive to this limitation and have begun to examine the implications this cultural context has for the generalizability of the conclusions they draw. To date, such cross-cultural research has suggested that many of the principles found in studies of westerners may also apply to members of other cultures. Nonetheless, readers need to be cautious as they consider how the psychological dynamics described herein might be applied to non-Western societies. Although many principles may be consistent across diverse cultures, how they manifest themselves may vary considerably.

2. Motivation

Motivation is broadly defined as the impetus for behavior, the energizing force that underlies what people do and think. In the first half of the twentieth century, the dominant approach to motivation emphasized the fulfillment of biological needs. People were presumed to be little more than complicated animals, prisoners of internal desires to slate their thirst, sate their hunger, and satisfy their sexual urges. Although contemporary approaches to motivation recognize the importance of these biological needs, other considerations have come to the fore, and the two most important of these are people's needs for a sense of prediction and control over their environments and their needs for belongingness, to feel connected with other people.

This change in emphasis away from biological urges also reflects a change form deficit approaches models (people are motivated to avoid negative states) to competence or asset models (people are motivated to achieve positive states). Rather than assuming that people are motivated primarily by fear or apprehension, present approaches assume that people are motivated by desires to interact effectively with their environments, both physical and social.

Needs for prediction and control take various forms, pride in a job well-done, the sense of satisfaction that occurs when a plan is realized, the ability to anticipate and deal with societal changes, and so forth. For sustainable development to become a reality, the policies and practices that promote sustainable development need to incorporate these needs. For example, individual business owners need to able to keep pace with changing rules and regulations regarding waste disposal. If people can not understand what they are supposed to do because the regulatory climate is too complicated and changes too quickly, they will ignore or even subvert such regulation.

One way to enhance people's sense of control is through their participation in the decision-making process. People are more committed to decisions and policies that they feel they had some hand in shaping. Such increased commitment occurs for many reasons, but one important reason is that participation provides a sense of control over one's destiny. Too many sensible and beneficial policies have failed because the general

population has viewed them as unjustified infringements on their freedom. Admittedly, by definition, regulation entails restriction, but the way in which new policies are introduced can have dramatic effect on compliance. This issue is also discussed in the section on attitude change.

People's belongingness motives are another core motive, and they mesh ideally with the promotion of sustainable development. Assuming that sustainable development requires people to look beyond their own lives and recognize the interdependence of their goals and the goals of others, people's need for connectedness promotes the adoption of this perspective. Admittedly, research on belongingness has focused on the establishment of personal relationships per se; however, the call of the collective can be quite strong, and sustainable development is by definition a collective outcome.

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Biographical Sketch

Dr. John Nezlek is professor of psychology at the College of William and Mary, USA. He holds a M.A. and a Ph.D. in Psychology from University of Rochester, New York. His primary research interest is the study of naturally occurring social interaction, i.e., the social events that constitute people's day-to-day social lives. He has focused on individual differences in interaction, within-person effects, and interactions of between- and within-person effects. A complementary, and more recent interest is the study of day-to-day variability in psychological states, with an emphasis on reactivity to daily events. Another area of interest is the nature of unconscious attitudes and beliefs and the relationships between such attitudes and beliefs and constructs that exist at the conscious level. He has examined relationships between unconscious prejudice and individual differences in personality constructs such as rigid thinking, authoritarianism, and conscious prejudice.