Psychologists and Sustainability

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While the five articles on *Psychologists and Sustainability* in the *Psychology in the Public Forum* section of AP for May 2000 were more than welcome, the authors actually failed to highlight the most important role for psychologists in this area. That role is to develop the organizational arrangements, job descriptions, ways of thinking (especially systems analysis), social accounting tools, and staff-appraisal systems that are necessary if we humans are to act on the available information in such a way as to enable our species to survive.

In his scene-setting article, Oskamp assembled data illustrating how our plunge toward self-annihilation is accelerating exponentially. But the single most striking statistic indicating the scale of the change that is needed – not cited by Oskamp – is that it would require five back-up planets engaged in nothing but agriculture for the present population of our planet to live as we Westerns do (Wackernagel and Rees, 1996). And Oskamp understates the conclusion. *The social transformation that is required if our species is to survive is as great as the difference between hunter-gather and agricultural society.* It probably means getting rid of our motor cars, our "defense" system, our banking and insurance systems, and our chemical- and energy-intensive agriculture. Furthermore, just as no one in a hunter-gatherer society could envisage what an agricultural society would look like, there is no prospect of anyone in our present society generating a meaningful blueprint for a sustainable society.

What we need is a societal learning and management system which stimulates *pervasive* innovation and concerted action in the long-term public interest.

Although most readers will feel that designing such a system is not a task for psychologists, it was precisely with this problem that both Adam Smith (who has been nominated as "Scotland's greatest psychologist") and psychologist Fred Hayek were preoccupied.

Unfortunately, as Lane (1991) and I (1995) have shown, the market-based societal management system they advocated does not, and cannot, work. Among other things, it

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does not take account of much important information (such as that relating to sustainability), does not deliver high quality of life, does not stimulate or reward much worthwhile innovation, and does not tend toward efficiency. On the contrary, it absorbs huge quantities of natural and human resources.

Smith and Hayek set out to design a system which would coordinate and empower information which is widely dispersed in the hearts and heads of billions of people … ie a societal learning and management system which would facilitate the evolution of goals, innovate, and learn without anyone having to know anything very much and, especially, without any small group being able to dominate the agenda.

Milbrath (1989) has perhaps more than others underlined the importance of restraining our culturally endemic preoccupation with dominance (including dominion over nature) – particularly because dominators usually win in the short term yet march us toward extinction over the longer term.

Actually, we do know something about how to run non-hierarchical, innovative, learning organizations. For example, in the course of what Kanter (1985) calls "parallel organization activity", people work in non-hierarchical relationships and deploy talents generally overlooked by their organizations. Their organizations innovate and learn *without the information having to pass through hierarchical structures to commanders*.

In reality, however, psychologists have done little to articulate the multiple talents which are required to create cultures of enterprise, to study how diverse talents combine to create emergent properties of groups, organizations, and societies, or to generate ways of thinking about emergent properties of groups. Yet group properties cannot be predicted or identified by summing the properties of the individuals within them any more than the properties of copper sulfate can be predicted by summing the properties of copper, sulfur, and oxygen.

What, then, are key features to be possessed by a learning society which will stimulate the identification of numerous problems (and problem definitions), the collection of relevant information, and the kind of innovation, monitoring, and revision that is required to move toward a sustainable society?

Stern (AP, same issue) notes that there is considerable public support for values and activities which would make for sustainability. But our work in the educational area shows that public support on its own is insufficient: the level of support for educational activities which would nurture the high-level competencies that are required to promote societal change far exceeds that for values related to sustainability. Yet our educational institutions still generally fail to nurture such qualities (Raven, 1994). It follows that our problems do not stem from inappropriate public priorities or values but from an inability to design institutions which deliver desired benefits.

Actually, its worse than that. Not only can we not *get* what we want and need from our society, most of us daily find ourselves constrained to *do* many things we know to be wrong.

While it is easy to attribute failures to act in accord with the perceived long term needs of the planet to "capitalism" and assumed-to-be-natural economic determinants of behavior, it is less easy to attribute the failures of the educational system to such causes.

Schools' failure to deliver publicly desired benefits is partly attributable to psychologists' failure to develop the concepts and tools that are required to nurture, and give people credit for, diverse talents. But it is *mainly* due to our failure to develop more appropriate organizational arrangements and, more specifically, to use psychological data to illuminate the hidden systems processes which prevent well-intentioned public action delivering desired benefits and thereafter designing the (psychological) tools needed to intervene in those processes.

While Stern cites a number of studies documenting support for values related to sustainability, he fails to mention research (such as that of Nelson, 1986) showing that most people quail at the thought of taking significant action. They sense that any actions they could take would not cumulate to produce the necessary changes in society; that the effects of their actions would be negated by the reactions of the rest of the system.

So common sense is not an adequate guide to action. Instead, a crucial competence required by many members of our society is the ability to engage in *systems* analysis, systems experimentation, and systems learning.

One important conclusion from our work in the educational area is that, while key personnel in an appropriate societal learning and management system are our public servants, we need to radically rethink our expectations of them. Their primary task is to release a ferment of experimentation, innovation, and learning. It is *not* to do the bidding of politicians! As Mill observed, the job of elected representatives is "not to govern – a task for which they are eminently unsuited – but to make visible to everyone who did everything". Why? Because exposing peoples' behavior to the public gaze helps to ensure that they act in the public interest. Unfortunately there is so much to be done that even the task of exposing what everyone is doing to the public gaze could not possibly be undertaken by any small group of elected representatives. So, not only do we need new understandings of the role of public servants, we also need new forms of (participative) democracy to oversee their work.

Unexpectedly, then, we find that the way forward is centrally dependent on psychologists contributing new insights into (i) the organizational arrangements required to run our society in such a way as to promote the clarification of goals and how they are to be achieved, (ii) the competencies to be possessed by those involved in these re-designed organizations, and (iii) the procedures that are required to ensure that those concerned do indeed perform their re-defined roles in ways which are likely to be in the long-term public interest.

I have outlined the necessary arrangements and roles in my *New Wealth of Nations*. The book's title forges a link to Smith. But here the sub-title is perhaps equally important. It is: *The Societal Learning Arrangements Needed for a Sustainable Society*. Readers may also be interested in our forthcoming *Competence in the Learning Society*.

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