Report

Integrating a sustainability perspective into psychology education
A review of the literature and some suggestions

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Summary

Both Agenda 2030, with its global goals for sustainable development, and GAP, the global action program on education for sustainable development (ESD) point at the importance of education for dealing with global sustainability issues such as climate change, global justice, peace, and migration. In accordance with the intentions of these high level agreements and policy documents, it has been decided that sustainability issues should be a part of the curriculum through the entire Swedish educational system, from preschool up to the college level. In the Higher Education Act it is stipulated that a sustainability perspective ought to be included in all forms of higher education. The aim of this report is to discuss, based on research about ESD and a national evaluation of how sustainability issues are included in higher education, how a sustainability perspective can be incorporated in psychology education at the university level. Three questions are in focus: What is sustainable development and how can we best define this complex concept? What is ESD and which are the most important perspectives in the research field of higher education for sustainable development? How can sustainability issues be integrated into courses in psychology and the psychology program? Concerning how to define sustainable development it is argued (in accordance with the recommendations by the evaluators of how sustainable development is included in higher education) that psychology should take the starting point in The Higher Education Act and its definition of sustainable development as containing of the three integrated and inseparable dimensions of ecology, social issues, and economy. It is not enough to focus, for instance, on social sustainability. UN’s global goals for sustainable development can be used to further concretize the content of the sustainability concept. Regarding what ESD is and what the most important perspectives is in the research field of higher education for sustainable development the focus in the report is on different competences for sustainable development. Researchers argue that students need to be supported in developing key competencies that can enable them to contribute to a more sustainable society. Taking on a competence perspective in education is about promoting the development of knowledge, skills, understandings, values, and purposes that are vital for becoming an active democratic citizen in a global society characterized by uncertainty, complexity, and conflicting interests. Finally, concerning how a sustainability perspective can be included in psychology education some concrete suggestions are presented in the end of the report, for instance: To focus on how psychological
knowledge can be used to work with the global sustainability goals. To let the students ponder about how psychological knowledge can promote different sustainability competencies of which some are more specifically related to psychology, such as an ability to constructively deal with negative emotions evoked by global sustainability problems and possible internal and external conflicts related to sustainability dilemmas. Finally, the importance of using pedagogical approaches such as problem-based learning, experiential learning, and transgressive learning as well as preparing psychology students to work with sustainability issues with people from different disciplinary backgrounds is emphasized.
1. Introduction

1.1 A short background
Both Agenda 2030, with its global goals for sustainable development, and GAP, the global action program on education for sustainable development (ESD) point at the importance of education for dealing with global sustainability problems such as climate change, global justice, peace, and migration (UNESCO, 2014; UN, 2015). These programs also emphasize the need for “positive societal transformation” which includes “empowering learners of any age, in any education setting, to transform themselves and the society they live in” (UNESCO 2014 p. 12). Already in a declaration from the UN conference in Rio, 1992, it was stated that all people have the right to learn about sustainable development and that it is especially vital to focus on young people (UNEP, 1992). People should have the opportunity to attain competences in making well-grounded choices and taking personal and professional responsibility regarding these issues.

In accordance with the intentions of these high level agreements and policy documents, it has been decided that sustainability issues should be a part of the curriculum through the entire Swedish educational system, from preschool up to the college level (SOU, 2004). In the Higher Education Act it is stipulated that a sustainability perspective ought to be included in all forms of higher education (1992: 1434). Thus, higher education is supposed to promote sustainable development so that both people living today and in the future are guaranteed a healthy and good environment, economic and social welfare, as well as justice (1 chap. 5 §).

1.2 The evaluation of the higher education sector’s work with sustainable development
In March 2016 the Swedish government gave the Swedish Higher Education Authority (UKÄ) an assignment to evaluate efforts made by universities and university colleges to promote sustainable development. On the Swedish government’s homepage the following is stated:

I vår globaliserade värld är det allt viktigare att ha kunskap om och förståelse för hur vi påverkar vår omvärld och våra medmänniskor. Våra studenter måste till exempel ges möjlighet att diskutera och reflektera över hur deras framtida yrkesroller kan påverka samhället när det gäller miljö, välfärd och rättvisa … (http://www.regeringen.se/pressmeddelanden/2016/03/hogskolans-arbete-med-hallbar-utveckling-ska-utvarderas/)
UKÄ completed their assignment in the fall of 2017 in the form of a thematic evaluation that focuses on the educational part of higher education institutions’ work with sustainability issues (UKÄ, 2017). The evaluation is based on self-evaluations by the higher education institutes where they describe their efforts to promote sustainable development in their education. Based on an assessment by a panel of experts UKÄ placed each higher education institution into one out of two assessment levels: either that the institution has a well-developed process for working with sustainability issues, or that the institutions’ work concerning sustainable development is in need of development.

The result of the evaluation shows that in total, only about a quarter of the higher education institutions received the assessment of “a well-developed process”. Unfortunately, Örebro University was not among the institutions that reached this level. Örebro University did not fulfill the requirements when it comes to the two aspect areas, “governance and organization” (the institution’s overall goals for sustainable development and systematic follow-up) and “environment, resources and areas” (to guarantee staff competence and interaction with students and the labor market). Örebro University’s work with “design, implementation and outcomes” was, however, considered satisfactory. This third aspect area concerns how sustainability issues are concretely included in education at the institution and is most relevant for university departments and subject areas/scientific disciplines to work with. Although the evaluators judged more than two thirds of the higher education institutions to have a well-developed process in regards to this aspect area, they point out that this area still needs to be developed.

The first criticism concerns that it is not clear how many subject areas/scientific disciplines that are working with sustainability issues and how many students in all that are offered a sustainability perspective in their education at each institution (UKÄ, 2017). This is due to the fact that the evaluators only asked higher institutions to give examples of programs that integrate sustainable development and that the institutions were free to choose whichever examples they liked. Many therefore gave examples from teacher education and engineering programs, where sustainable development is included in the national learning objectives. For example, Örebro University was not required to give examples of how psychology works with sustainability issues. The evaluators noticed that many of the smaller institutions that focus specifically on nursing and social work (including therapy), and
therefore were forced to give examples from these subject areas, had a tendency to connect sustainable development with social sustainability only. For instance, they focused on health as an important aspect of sustainability, which is a too limited approach according to the evaluators. Sustainable development concerns the integration of social, ecological and socio-economic aspects and this needs to be taken account of in higher education (UKÄ, 2017). Here, the Karolinska Institute (KI) is seen as a good example and is also one of few institutions that specifically mention psychology and sustainable development.

Another weak point mentioned by the evaluators is that there is a tendency for higher education institutions to focus mainly on teaching content and to not focus that much on teaching/educational approaches, at least this is not apparent in their self-evaluations (UKÄ, 2017). Since many researchers in the scientific field of education for sustainable development claim that teaching about these issues, due to their extreme complexity, demand new pedagogical approaches (see section 5) this is a problematic aspect. In addition, the evaluators conclude that there is room for improvement concerning follow-up work at the department level and to show in a more clear way in what way the sustainability issues that are included in education are based on scientific knowledge and research. Furthermore, although multidisciplinary, and even transdisciplinary courses, on sustainability issues are important, there is a risk that these issues become separated from more everyday education if they only take the form of courses outside the traditional scientific disciplines. This could lead to that only students who are already knowable and interested in these issues take part of these courses. The evaluators point out that sustainability issues needs to be integrated in all higher education. Finally, also at institutions that have overarching goals for including sustainability issues in education, the evaluation indicates that these have not always been implemented and transformed into goals and learning objectives at a program level. To summarize, also for higher education institutes that are judged to have a satisfactory work concerning the aspect area of “design, implementation and outcomes” there is room, and need, for further improvement, not least at the level of specific subject areas/scientific disciplines and their courses and programs. Work on sustainability issues in higher education is a continuous process that never ends.

1.3 Aim of this report
Taking departure in the fact that the evaluators of how sustainability issues are included into higher education conclude that this work needs to be
clearer and take on a higher pace, the psychology department at Örebro University, represented by its director, commissioned a smaller evaluation about how sustainability issues can be included in psychology education; in both the professional psychology program and freestanding courses. In this report the result of this evaluation is presented.

The aim is to discuss, based on research about education for sustainable development and the evaluation of how sustainability issues are included in higher education, how the psychology discipline at Örebro University, but also at other universities in Sweden, can integrate sustainable development into their courses and the psychology program. Hopefully, this report will also be of use for other scientific disciplines and other actors who are interested in higher education for sustainable development. Three questions are in focus:

1. What is sustainable development and how can we best define this complex concept?
2. What is education for sustainable development and which are the most important perspectives in the research field of higher education for sustainable development?
3. How can sustainability issues be integrated into courses in psychology and the psychology program?

2. What is sustainable development?

2.1 Sustainable development: An elusive concept?
The most common definition of sustainable development (SD) is the Bruntland Commission’s view of SD as “development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (WCED, 1987, p. 43). Already in this report three main aspects of sustainable development were introduced, namely the economic, the ecological/environmental, and the social dimensions. In order to reach a sustainable society all of these three dimensions need to be integrated. The economic dimension is about the use and allocation of common recourses and the dispersion of wealth, the ecological dimension is about taking into account the vulnerability of ecological systems and the taken for granted ecosystem services. Social sustainability is perhaps the broadest of these three dimensions and can refer to anything from public health to justice, inclusion and participation in society (see Gustavsson, 2008).
Although The Bruntland definition of SD is still the most common, it is important to know that it has been heavily criticised. First, it is often claimed that the concept is too vague, so elusive that it can include almost everything. This can lead to it becoming an “empty” concept and that it can be used as a PR-trick or as an excuse to continue business as usual (Huckle & Wals, 2015). This vagueness can also result in that it becomes hard to work with SD in for instance higher education; an aspect that was mentioned by some of the higher education institutions evaluated by UKÄ (UKÄ, 2017).

Second, some researchers claim that the SD concept is too idealistic concerning the possibility to smoothly integrate the three dimensions, economy, ecology, and social aspects (Huckle & Wals, 2015). This criticism is quite often related to the use of the word “development”. The basic thought in the Bruntland definition is that economic development is a prerequisite for handling social and ecological sustainability. Others, however, doubt that it is possible to combine a constant growing economy with ecological and social sustainability. They argue that the economic dimension becomes too strong and that the human centeredness of the sustainability concept fails to include other living beings (Huckle & Wals, 2015; Kopnina, 2012). Therefore, more and more stakeholders, even at the UN-level, now argue that we need to aim for a more profound societal transformation if we would like to deal with the global sustainability problems that are present in our word (UNESCO, 2014; see also Boström et al., 2018). The view on how radical this transformation ought to be, however, differ from one actor to another.

2.2 UN’s global sustainable development goals

Since many of the intentions and goals stemming from the Bruntland report, such as Agenda 2000, have not been reached, at the UN meeting in Rio de Janeiro in 2012 (Rio+20) the heads of states and governments agreed that it was necessary to come up with new global development goals. In 2015 Agenda 2030 was introduce and it contains 17 global sustainable development goals (see www.un.org). The global goals aim at eradicating poverty and hunger, realizing human rights for all, achieving gender equality and empowerment for all women and girls, as well as ensuring lasting protection for the planet and its natural resources (see Figure 1). The global goals are integrated and should be seen as a whole; they should be seen as inseparable. The goals try to take into account, and balance, the three dimensions of
sustainable development: the economic, social and ecological/environmental. Still, a problem such as climate change also points to the potential conflicts between these dimensions. For instance, we could disagree on how serious this threat is, compared to other societal problems, or we could argue about who should bear the economic costs of climate change (Ojala, 2013).

Figure 1. UN Global Sustainable Development Goals

Quality education is highlighted by UN and UNESCO as the key to achieving the 17 goals (see UKÄ, 2017). This is the case since for the goals to be reached, every actor in society needs to do their part: governments, the public sector, the private sector, civil society and every human being (Rieckmann, 2017). The Global Action Program (GAP) on education for sustainable development can be seen as a tool that contributes to all global goals, not just to the educational objective (goal 4). GAP is a UNESCO program that aims to generate and scale-up ESD in order to accelerate progress towards sustainable development (https://en.unesco.org/gap). According to GAP there is a need to reorient education so that everyone has the opportunity to acquire competencies to contribute to a sustainable future.

The global goals can also be seen as a way to concretize the concept of sustainable development and can be used as a starting point to work with these issues in for instance education (Rieckmann, 2017). The experts involved in the evaluation of higher education for sustainable development
recommend letting the global sustainability goals be the concrete content and goals of education around sustainability issues (UKÄ, 2017).

3. What is education for sustainable development (ESD)?

3.1 International and national agreements
What then is education for sustainable development? The UN organ UNESCO has a special responsibility for education for sustainable development (ESD) and they describe this area as follows:

Education for sustainable development empowers learners to take informed decisions and responsible actions for environmental integrity, economic viability and a just society, for present and future generations, while respecting cultural diversity. It is about lifelong learning, and is an integral part of quality education. ESD is holistic and transformational education which addresses learning content and outcomes, pedagogy and the learning environment. It achieves its purpose by transforming society (http://en.unesco.org/themes/education-sustainable-development/what-is-esd).

UNESCO has pointed out that ESD should not be a separate subject but ought to be included in all subject areas and all education, both in basic education and higher education. Furthermore, value issues ought to be discussed in ESD, and critical thinking, ability to deal with complex problems and dilemmas, and problem solving should be in focus (UKÄ, 2017).

As already mentioned in the introduction, in Sweden ESD is a part of the whole educational system from preschool to the university level. All higher education institutions, by law, are demanded to include sustainability issues into their education. The Baltic countries together have agreed upon an action program for ESD and regarding higher education, the program emphasizes that the goal is that students should obtain skills and competencies concerning sustainability issues that are relevant for future work life and for the students’ future roles as decision makers (Baltic 21E, 2002). More and more it has been recognized that in order to be able to reach a future sustainable society we need people who are able to “transform both themselves and society” (Fazey et al., 2018; Michaels, 2017).

3.2 Three sub-dimensions of sustainable development in higher education
Higher education for sustainable development contains three layers or sub-parts: content, competencies and pedagogical approaches. Regarding the content of ESD in accordance with the international agreements mentioned
above the focus during recent years has become UN’s global sustainability goals. In 2017 a report was launched about how education can help realize these goals (Rieckmann, 2017). According to this report ESD should aim at developing cognitive, socio-emotional and behavioral learning outcomes so that students will become able to deal with the specific challenges of each goal. Specific learning objective for each goal are also presented. These are formulated on a general level and are suited for all age groups, learning settings and national contexts. However, the author points out that in their more specific and concrete implementation the objectives need to be tailored to the specific learning context at hand.

Regarding **competencies** researchers argue that students need to be supported in developing key competencies that can enable them to contribute to sustainable development (Barth et al., 2007; Michels, 2017; Rieckmann, 2012; Wals, 2007; Wiek et al., 2011). In this regard, it is vital to acknowledge that the conceptualizations of “sustainability competencies” in the ESD field vary from more deterministic ones to more holistic ones. However, the most common view seems to be to perceive sustainability competence as a holistic, contextual, relational, and emergent thing (Wals, 2015). The concept “emergent” concerns that we cannot tell for sure what a sustainable future will look like; we can only tell what is unsustainable today. Hence, what seems to be in focus when discussing sustainability competencies is: “the complex combination of knowledge, skills, understandings, values, and purposes” (Biesta, 2015, p. 676–677). In the next section of this report more specific competencies are described.

Regarding **pedagogical approaches** some ESD-researchers, and also the experts in UKÄ’s evaluation, argue that the complex and value laden nature of ESD demands not only the development of specific sustainability competencies but also innovative pedagogical approaches (Rieckmann, 2017; UKÄ, 2017). In Rieckmann’s report about how to include the global goals for sustainable development into educational effort it is stated that:

What ESD requires is a shift from teaching to learning. It asks for an action-oriented, transformative pedagogy, which supports self-directed learning, participation and collaboration, problem-orientation, inter- and transdisciplinarity and the linking of formal and informal learning. Only such pedagogical approaches make possible the development of the key competencies needed for promoting sustainable development (Rieckman, 2017, p. 7).
In section 4.3 some of these pedagogical approaches considered to be of specific interest regarding including sustainable development into psychology education are described.

4. Sustainability competencies

4.1 Action competence
Global sustainability problems are anchored both in ordinary people’s life styles and in the socio-economic structure of society and therefore ESD should assist people to act both at a personal and a societal level; ESD should promote action competence (Jensen & Schnack, 1997). Action-competence is about developing competencies that are vital for becoming an active democratic citizen in a global society characterized by uncertainty, complexity, and conflicting interests (Mogensen & Schnack, 2010). Researchers involved in the action competence approach often criticize educational models focusing on behavior modification. Instead, this approach’s goal is to promote competencies to deal in an active way with complex problems.

The concept of action competence consists of four different components: besides focusing on knowledge/insight about the problems and giving the students action experiences, it also includes agency and motivation and visions of the future (Jensen & Schnack, 1997). It is argued that in order to lessen pessimism and/or indifference, it is vital to help students to envision alternative, more sustainable futures and promote an “optimistic vision of potential, a search for solutions and a positive direction” (Mogensen & Schnack, 2010, p. 71).

The evaluators of the Swedish higher education system’s ability to integrate sustainable development into education agree with the above mentioned research and emphasize the need to help students develop action competence (UKÄ, 2017). This is in accordance with research from the US showing that it is important not to forget that these very complex issues can evoke feelings of hopelessness and helplessness and that this needs to be taken account of by educators also at a college level (Colby, Beaumont, Ehrlich & Corngold, 2007).

4.2 Key-competencies
In the last couple of years, SD researchers have conducted many studies dealing with key-competencies in regards to sustainability. Key-competences are general, cross cutting competencies that are context-independent,
and that encompass more specific competencies and skills (Rieckmann, 2017). Wiek and colleagues (2011) have written one of the most influential articles in this field, based on a structured review of research, and they have identified five key-competencies that are interlinked: anticipatory, normative, strategic, system-thinking and interpersonal competencies.

Wiek and colleagues (2011, p. 207) define anticipatory competence as “… the ability to collectively analyze, evaluate, and craft rich ‘pictures’ of the future related to sustainability issues and sustainability problem-solving frameworks.” Normative competence involves taking ethical dimensions into account, and concepts such as values, justice and equity are in focus. Strategic competence includes, for example, the ability to find realistic pathways to sustainable futures. Systems-thinking competence is the ability to “collectively analyze complex systems across different domains (society, environment, economy, etc.) and across different scales (local to global) …” (Wiek et al., 2011, p. 207). Interpersonal competence is about different skills to be able work together in fighting the sustainability problems such as communication skills, transcultural thinking, perspective taking and leadership. In their article Wiek and colleagues describe these competencies in detail.

4.3 Additional approaches to sustainability competencies

In addition to the key-competencies described above in a study with experts in sustainable development from different countries, Rieckmann (2012) found that dimensions such as skills to achieve change, and empowerment strategies, as well as competency to cope with and tolerate ambiguity, frustration, and uncertainty were mentioned frequently in relation to ESD practice. Closely related to anticipatory competence is the fact that one study showed that students in higher education emphasized one important aspect that they would like to focus on in ESD as being how to deal with the worrisome and sometimes even depressing aspects of global problems in a hopeful manner (Gardiner & Rieckmann, 2015). Therefore, one could argue that emotional aspects, especially anticipatory emotions of hope and worry, ought to be specific parts of ESD (Ojala, 2017). Emotional aspects are also of importance when it comes to normative competence since some researchers claim that this competence needs to be complemented with the more emotional concept of care (Tassone, O’Mahony, McKenna, Eppink & Wals, 2018).
If aiming for change and transformation of the current unsustainable order, the importance of critical thinking as a specific skill has been put forward (Riekmann, 2012; Thomas, 2009; Wals & Lenglet, 2016). In a post-truth world characterized by fake facts the ability to think critically and logically is pivotal. In addition, if we strive for transformation there is a need to learn more than how to do things we do today in a better way; we need a paradigm shift, which includes critical awareness and changing of unsustainable norms, habits, and structures (see Wals, 2010). This is a criticism of the focus on resilience and adaption that is quite common in relation to sustainability issues, and the researchers maintain instead that we should aim for transgressive learning and disruptive capacity building in order to deal with the sustainability challenges (Lotz-Sisitka, Wals, Kronlid & McGarry, 2015; Wals & Lenglet, 2016). However, again researchers have pointed out that this is also an emotional and socio-psychological process (Ojala, 2016). By rupturing the order of things, by disrupting, one also evokes negative emotions of worry, for instance. These feelings could be constructive forces in the learning process; however, educators should not dismiss the fact that they are also very hard to confront and deal with and therefore can be coped with in more or less constructive ways. In this regard, the need for critical emotional awareness as a SD and ESD competence has been argued for (Ojala, 2016, 2017). This is an ability to critically analyze and discuss emotional reactions and different emotion regulation strategies in relation to learning about, confronting, and working with sustainability problems; something that demands psychological knowledge.

In order to be able to obtain the sustainability competences two aspects have been emphasized: On the one hand, there is a need for more research about what sub-components that each competence contains of and, as already mentioned, many ESD researchers also argue that there is a need for, more or less, novel pedagogical approaches (Sterling, Glasser, Rieckmann, Warwick, & Miller, 2017).

5. Some examples of pedagogical approaches in ESD

5.1 The importance of real life experiences and transdisciplinary work
When it comes to pedagogical approaches in ESD it is often argued that these need to be grounded in different kinds of real life experiences in order to motivate students (Van Poeck, Goeminne & Vandenabeele, 2014; Tassone et al., 2018). Problem-based learning in which students work with real world problems, and the educator works as an facilitator for students’ own
knowledge gathering and inquiries concerning these problems is a way to fulfil this intention (see Thomas, 2009; Tassone et al., 2018). Experiential learning in which the starting point for the learning process is the students own earlier experiences is another (see Kolb, 1984; Sriskandarajah, Bawden, Blackmore, Tidball & Wals, 2010). These are also related to an in-vogue way of looking at sustainability issues as being “matters of concern” in which we all are seen as having specific emotional attachments to these problems; attachments that need to be verbalized in learning processes and used as a starting point for further learning (Van Poeck et al., 2014).

Due to their complexity, no single actor can deal with sustainability challenges on their own and therefore the importance of transdisciplinary learning has been emphasized by both the UKÄ-evaluators and ESD-researchers (Rickemann, 2017; Tassone et al., 2018; UKÄ, 2017). Ideally, higher education students from different scientific backgrounds and different professional programs should learn and work together when it comes to these issues. Basic knowledge from different disciplines needs to be integrated to solve the sustainability problems. This can be hard to handle in a university system that to a large extent is focused on separate disciplines, but is to a certain extent possible in professional programs, such as the professional program in psychology. Here, it can be mentioned that ESD-researchers have been picking up the pedagogical approach of social learning in which groups of diverse learners work and learn together (Wals, 2010). This can also be seen as a form of pluralistic learning that take into account the inevitable value conflicts that are related to the sustainability goals and aims to take up and discuss as many perspectives as possible in the educational setting. In this way skills are promoted that are vital for taking part in a democratic society (Englund, Öhman & Östman, 2008; Læssøe, 2010; Öhman, 2008), which could also be seen as a form of “Bildung”.

5.2 Transformative and complex learning
Since change and transformation of the current societal order has been emphasized at the highest level in recent years (UNESCO, 2014; UN, 2015) the need for the pedagogical approach of transformative learning has been put forward by ESD-researchers (Sterling, 2004; Wals, 2010). Meizerow (1978), who formulated this general pedagogical theory, argued that through critical reflection and a procedure of “perspective transformation,” students can change their ways of thinking about themselves. In the long run, life-style changes can also take place. Taylor (1998) developed this theory and pointed out that transformative learning is not only cognitive but
also social. ESD researchers combine these approaches and argue for the importance of transformative social learning. In this approach a communicative process, which ideally should include a diverse set of actors, can help actors to (a) critically examine one’s own values, habits, and norms (deconstruction), (b) listen to others (confrontation), and (c) co-construct new viewpoints, values, and action repertoires (reconstruction) (Wals, 2007, 2010). Thus, challenging learners with alternative ways of interpreting their experiences is an important part of transformative social learning. The aim is to break with unsustainable practices and create new, and more sustainable, ways of thinking and being.

Transformative learning can also take place through “transgressive learning”, which is often about learning through practice (see Barnett, 2004; Biesta, 2013, p. 74; hooks, 1994; Saarnivaara, Ellis & Kinnunen, 2012). People can transgress deeply held and taken-for-granted norms, norms that are unsustainable, by acting in surprising, creative, and boundary-crossing ways. By exploring the discrepancy between these material practices and pre-existing beliefs, people learn that a different way of thinking and being is achievable (Concepción & Thorson Eflin, 2009). These more practice based pedagogical approaches can also be combined with more reflective approaches such as reflexive monitoring in action, a methodology to encourage learning for change in multi-actor groups including appointed reflexive monitors who promote collective learning through, for instance, collective reflection on the results of actions (Arkesteijn, van Mierlo & Leeuwis, 2015; Fazey et al, 2018). Critical emotional awareness is another approach suggested, where actions and emotions evoked, and ways of dealing with these emotions, are pondered about in a critical and reflexive manner (Ojala, 2013, 2016, 2017).

6. How can sustainability issues be included in psychology?

6.1 Some examples from Swedish psychology education

In the evaluation of how a sustainability perspective is integrated into higher education in Sweden it is pointed out that in health and social work oriented education it is common to give examples from social sustainability only (UKÅ, 2017). By having taken account of aspects such as health it is considered that one has fulfilled the demand to include sustainability issues into education. The evaluators are critical of this approach since sustainable development, as defined in general documents and the higher education act,
emphasizes that the three dimensions of economy, ecology and social sustainability need to be treated as integrated and inseparable. One example of an institution that seems to have succeeded with this is Karolinska Institutet (KI). In their self-evaluation they point out that education that sheds light on the interconnection between health, socioeconomic factors, and human impact on the environment/ecological system is pivotal for sustainable development in the long run. One concrete example of this integrated perspective is taken from a course in social psychology at the psychology program, in which social dilemmas, competition about natural resources and pro-social behavior are discussed.¹

How then can sustainability issues be included into psychology education? It is obvious that research about this topic is missing when searching for this theme in prominent academic journals in the field of higher education for sustainability. One unpublished report about psychology and sustainable development can be find online written by a psychology lecturer (junior) at The Linnaeus University when taking part of a course about ESD (Borgö, 2014). The first part of the report consists of a few suggestions about how knowledge about psychology can help people work with sustainability issues. For instance, group psychology and knowledge about conflict resolution can help people work with different groups of people about these value laden and complex issues. Motivation psychology can help people stay motivated when it comes to changing lifestyles. Moral psychology can be valuable since sustainability issues concerns new forms of responsibility and morality with its focus on responsibility for not only people close to us but also people living far away (spatial distance), living in the future (temporal distance), and animals and nature (see also Ojala, 2007). The report, however, does not mention more structured suggestions concerning pedagogical approaches.

Concerning recommendations on how the ecological dimension can be included in psychology education, research from the field of environmental psychology could be of use. In this applied field the focus is mostly on social psychological theories and concepts. In the basic social psychology course at Örebro University environmental problems are discussed in lectures. These are about, for instance, attitudes (how ambivalent attitudes can hinder pro-environmental behavior), altruism/empathy (how these concepts

¹ This is also the case at Örebro University and the course in social psychology.
can be extended to also include animals and perhaps also nature), and conflicts and conflict resolutions (how many environmental problems are social dilemmas and how these dilemmas can be solved).

However, it is also important to look beyond social psychology. Knowledge from many subfields of psychology can potentially be useful in working with sustainability issues. Health psychology is obvious since this subfield deals with health, which is a part of social sustainability. But in order to integrate this dimension with the other two sustainability perspectives the UKÄ-evaluators suggest that health issues can be discussed in relation to global challenges such as poverty, injustice, climate catastrophes and other ecological changes that have an impact on humans (UKÄ, 2017). In addition, developmental psychology can take up the new moral challenges that the sustainability problems confront humanity with. For instance, how these challenges affect moral development and well-being among young people (see Ojala, 2007). In personality psychology it can be discussed how different personality traits such as openness to new experiences, authoritarianism (RWA) and social dominance orientation (SDO) are related to pro-environmental engagement and climate change skepticism (Jylhä, 2016). Theories about emotion regulation strategies in emotion psychology and motivation can be utilized to understand how people cope psychologically with big threats such as climate change and war, but also in facing change (Ojala, 2013; Thearle & Weinreich-Haste, 1986). In positive psychology, a concept such as hope can be applied to how people deal with poverty and economic deprivation and so on. To conclude, psychological concepts and theories from many subfields are very relevant for developing the sustainability competencies presented in section 4 and for the possibility to reach the global sustainable development goals.

Finally, psychology can also give valuable knowledge to those who are interested in the pedagogical dimension of education for sustainable development by providing insights into how groups function from a social psychological perspective and how the emotional dimensions in transformative learning can be dealt with (see section 5).

What has been mentioned above concerns how psychology as a scientific field can contribute to the sustainability challenges that we stand before. This way of integrating sustainable development into higher education, in which each scientific subjects’ possible contribution to solving the global sustainability problems is emphasized and discussed, is one good way in which higher education can work with these issues (see UKÄ, 2017). This
approach also makes sure that sustainability is not one of many issues that are “bolted” onto an already crowded curriculum.

6.2 A concrete example – social psychology and positive psychology

In psychology at Örebro University the author of this report has worked more systematically with sustainability issues in two courses; a course in positive psychology for international students and a course in social psychology for students at both freestanding courses and the professional program. The layout follows the recommendations by the evaluators of sustainability in higher education in that it takes its starting point in the global goals for sustainable development. These goals are thus the content of sustainability in this educational approach. It is also related to pedagogical approaches such as problem-based learning and experiential learning since each student in the beginning of the course gets to choose two goals that are of particular interest for that person. This is hypothesized to increase motivation among the students and also promote learning. Thereafter, the students are supposed to formulate one specific problem per goal to work with during the course. The course starts with a brief run-through of the goals and the students get information about where to read more about them.

In a second step the students are supposed to connect two sustainability competencies to each goal; competencies that they perceive as useful in working with the sustainability problems they have formulated. They need to choose the competencies from two scientific articles that they are given about this subject. Thereafter, they are required to relate at least five theories or concepts in social psychology/positive psychology to these competencies (one to two per competence). They should define all concept and argue how these can be used to promote each competence and therefore also be used in the process to solve the sustainability problems formulated, and in the long run contribute to the fulfillment of the UN goals. To take two examples: In order to be able to obtain the competence of critical thinking it could be good to know about errors in human thinking, such as the confirmation bias (social psychology), in order to be able to prevent them. In order to develop anticipatory competence it could be valuable to learn more about the concept of hope and how to promote it (positive psychology). Critical thinking could prevent fake facts about climate change and therefore contribute to the fight against this problem (goal 13). Anticipatory thinking is of use, for example, when it comes to fighting poverty where imagining more sustainable futures is an important step to solve the poverty problem (goal 1).
During the course the students are asked to think about how the theories and concepts presented can be used to work with the global goals for sustainable development and at the end of each lecture some minutes are saved so that the students can ponder about this issue and learn from each-other. In the end of the course at a mandatory seminar each student, in small groups of about four students, orally presents his/her assignment for about 10 minutes and thereafter the students discuss together for about 10 minutes and the teacher goes from one group to another listening, taking part in the discussions and helping out. This assignment is a way to both include sustainability issues in psychology education, but also a way to promote skills in applying psychology concepts to real world problems, which is also a part of the course objectives. This assignment also hopefully will show the students that psychologists and behavioral scientists after their exam can work in many more fields then perhaps many think about when they start studying psychology.

7. The way forward – some concrete suggestions

In this section of the report some concrete suggestions and recommendations about how psychology in Örebro (but also elsewhere) can continue working with integrating sustainability issues into education are given. References are not included since these suggestions are based on information that have already been written about in earlier parts of the report.

- As recommended by the evaluators of how sustainable development is included in higher education, psychology should take the starting point in The Higher Education Act and its definition of sustainable development as containing of the three integrated and inseparable dimensions of ecology, social issues and economy. It is not enough for psychology to focus on social sustainability. UN’s global goals for sustainable development can be used to further concretize the content of sustainability. One suggestion is that in every basic course, in for example developmental psychology, health psychology and so on, the responsible teachers should think about how to include these goals in education (see section 6 for some suggestions).

- In order to start up the work mentioned in the paragraph above a workshop that all teachers in psychology could take part of can be arranged. This can start with a lecture for about 45 minutes on
what education for a sustainable future is and some suggestions on how sustainability issues and psychology can be integrated. The present report and additional scientific articles can be a starting point for a discussion and work in small groups.

- In at least some courses, at all levels of psychology education, a sustainability perspective needs to be included in the syllabus and the course objectives. An advice is to start working with the basic courses in social psychology, that is part of most professional psychology program as well as freestanding courses. Social psychology includes concepts such as social dilemmas that deals with conflict between ecological, social and economic aspects of sustainability.

- Another suggestion is to let psychology students in one assignment work together across freestanding courses and the professional program with societal problems which they relate to sustainability issues. It can be seen as a progression in that the students in this assignment work together in groups of diverse learners which according to the educational literature can increase learning about sustainability issues (see section 5).

- Regarding the psychology program at Örebro University, in the fourth semester a new course in which the students should apply psychological theories and concepts on societal issues such as the environment, politics, religion and culture, has just started (spring term 2019). This course is an excellent opportunity to show progression concerning the inclusion of sustainability issues into psychology education. To let the students in a more advanced way see how the different dimensions of the sustainability concept are interrelated.

- It is also important that psychology students learn to work with students from other disciplines to learn how to work together with different sustainability problems. At Örebro University a one day sustainability conference where students from different programs and courses work with real-life sustainability problems and then pitch their solutions to local politicians is taking place once a year. Psychology students are still not taking part of this conference but the intention could be to include them in the future. This would be a progression from the assignments included in social psychology
and group psychology since this also include transdisciplinary learning, something that is considered pivotal in order to be able to later on be working with real sustainability problems (see section 5). A suggestion is that each student write a diary about this experience where they focuses on pros and cons of working together with people from different disciplines. These experiences can then be discussed at a seminar. This will enable both a deeper transdisciplinary learning process but it also can be directly related to social psychological concepts such as group dynamics. It also fits well with the goal of inter-professional competence in the professional program.
References


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