

Key Concepts in Processes of Sustainability Transformation

BELIEF SYSTEMS

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DEFINITION

A belief system relates to mutually supporting beliefs within an individual (Tuli, 2013). Belief systems represent the individual's "beliefs, sets, expectancies, or hypotheses, conscious and unconscious, held as true at a given time" (Conway, 1985, p.13 based on Rokeach, 1960). They are also referred to as frames of reference (Mezirow, 1990, p.1). Individuals hold beliefs and belief systems that form the basis of common beliefs in groups (Bandura 2006). These common beliefs in turn form to belief systems, which are essential components of what we call culture (Tuli, 2013). More specifically, beliefs are the building elements of values and norms, all embedded in the wider societal context of paradigms and ethics. Beliefs, values, and norms are shaped in social interaction and relate to each other differently depending on the context. This also means that the belief systems of individuals and their respective groups are a constituting element of cultures or social contexts and thereby key in understanding how societies function. Belief in itself can be understood as a "mental state, representational in character, taking a proposition (either true or false) as its content and involved, together with motivational factors, in the direction and control of voluntary behaviour" (Honderich, 2005).

CONTEXT

In research practice, belief systems are used as a key concept in psychological research, as they are seen as essential for individuals' actions (Bandura, 1993). In a sustainability science context, beliefs have gained increasing attention in terms of understanding pro-environmental behaviour. For instance, the New Environmental Paradigm (NEP) scale essentially builds on environmental beliefs humanity has created about nature (Dunlap et al., 2000). Beliefs and belief systems are also seen as a deep leverage point for sustainability, as they fundamentally shape current and future behavior (Abson, et al. 2017).

RELEVANCE

The crisis of unsustainability we face is deeply connected to beliefs systems, which are unfavourable for sustainability. These beliefs relate to 'being very rich' or 'owning many things make you happy', even though research has shown differently. At the same time, belief systems favourable for sustainability, involve sharing products and services, community work or caring for the environment. These are very relevant in understanding and contributing to cultural transformations to sustainability. Even though pro-environmental behaviour has been researched intensively, the belief systems specifically related to sustainability transformations have not been analysed in depth to a great extent. Thus, we need to better understand how and which belief systems can contribute to sustainability transformations, as well as how belief systems, which are unfavourable for sustainability, can be transformed.

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