

Psychology

PSYCHOLOGY AT THE UNIVERSITY OF BERN

Psychology, at the University of Bern, aims at describing and explaining human experience and behaviour and how they develop during the course of life, as well as the internal (e.g. motives), external (e.g. social norms), conscious, and unconscious forces that affect them. To do so, it uses empirical methods such as questionnaires, interviews, observations, and experiments.

How is psychology linked to sustainable development, and how has this influenced practice?

Attempts to understand human behaviour are closely related to the idea of influencing it. Aims might be to preserve a person's mental and physical integrity, to heal psychological suffering, to strengthen their resilience and self-efficacy, and to promote social inclusion. A number of sub-disciplines are derived from this emancipatory approach. Applied psychology, for example, focuses on applying psychological findings in practice – or preparing such findings so they can be used in practice – with the aim of contributing to the development and well-being of society, organizations, groups, and individuals [1].

The discourse on a theory of sustainability in psychology is closely linked to the relatively new subdiscipline of environmental psychology. This subdiscipline investigates interactions between people and their environment [2] by asking, for example: How do walks in nature affect well-being? It also examines the relationship between the environmental crisis and humans, viewing humans as causing the crisis, as being affected by it, and as having the potential to manage it [3]. Such research is also conducted within other subdisciplines, such as social, learning, and perceptual psychology. In addition to the analysis of the perception and assessment of sustainability, sub-disciplines of psychology also search for opportunities and conditions for action that promote sustainable individual and collective experience and behaviour in areas such as consumption, the world of work, or health. This includes reflection, within positive psychology, on what is "good" for people, humanity, and planet Earth [4]. Taking this emancipatory and socio-critical approach, actors in

environmental psychology today form networks and dedicate themselves to sustainability and equitable development in inter- and transdisciplinary ways.

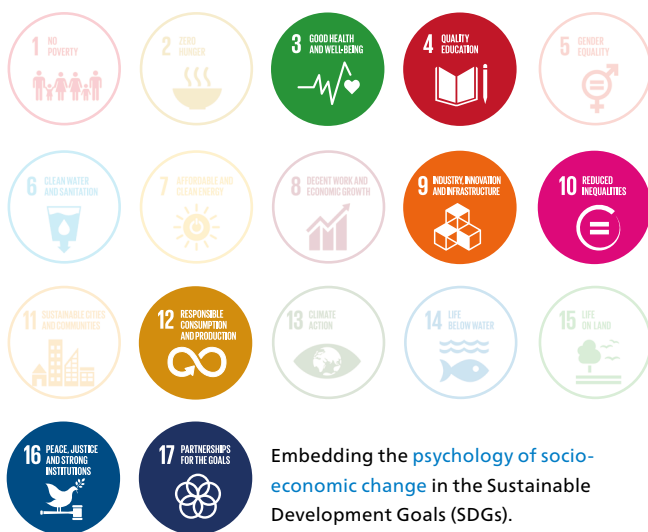
But other subdisciplines can also contribute to sustainable development. For example, clinical psychology can provide support for people experiencing "climate anxiety", and industrial and organizational psychology (also called "work psychology") can support activists in calling for sustainable social change. Along with behavioural economics, cognitive psychology can identify which decision-making landscapes lead to sustainable decisions.

However, an overarching psychology of sustainability is still underdeveloped [5]. It requires a systemic approach with closely linked theory and practice in inter- and transdisciplinary cooperation and research. The specific disciplinary contributions of psychology to such endeavours are its well-founded methods of analysis and data collection. Psychologists can reliably and validly survey attitudes, motives, and other phenomena that are not directly observable; they can also measure changes in behaviour or accompany and evaluate institutional changes. These competences are key, for example, in determining indicators and standards for the evaluation of sustainability and progress towards the SDGs.

Example: Promoting a sustainable lifestyle through a psychology of socio-economic change

A psychology of socio-economic change examines how people perceive sustainability-related issues, how these issues are best explained, and how sustainable behaviour is best promoted – with the ultimate aim of steering people's behaviour towards sustainability. For example, psychological analyses of factors influencing sustainable consumption behaviour [6,7] may examine issues around food, mobility, health, housing and urban development, waste, or energy (**SDG 12**). Endogenous factors such as attitudes, personal values, self-concept, or perception are at the core of an individual's relationship to sustainability. These factors are shaped in their interactions with exogenous factors of the social environment (social norms and relationships) and are also influenced by the structural framework of contextual factors (e.g. availability and

incentive systems). The exchange between the individual, social, and structural spheres influences environment-related decisions. Psychology identifies starting points in all three spheres for promoting environmentally sound behaviour, and often also tests corresponding interventions through experiments. Examples are suitable product design, changes in habit [8], environmental campaigns, effective incentives (e.g. nudges [9]), infrastructure, or a convincing corporate identity (**SDG 9**) – and, above all, environmental education (**SDG 3, SDG 4**). Psychology also addresses the areas of ethics, happiness, solidarity, identity, sufficiency, and evaluation, to gain insights that can contribute to a more just world (**SDG 10, SDG 16, SDG 17**).



How does the University of Bern's Institute of Psychology incorporate the topic of sustainability into research and teaching?

The Health Psychology department focuses on sustainable health behaviour. On the one hand, it looks at issues such as the use of mobile phones and healthy nutrition in the European context; on the other, it studies development cooperation through projects in the global South.

The Social Neuroscience and Social Psychology department conducts research on sustainable behaviour and its origins in the brain. The results of this research provide clues as to why people don't change their behaviour despite feeling concerned about the consequences of unsustainable behaviour. It also helps to develop interventions to motivate and strengthen sustainable action. In addition, this division examines sustainable career development and the issue of burn-out.

Finally, the Consumer Behaviour department offers various courses on sustainable behaviour and ways to achieve behaviour change (e.g. "social marketing").

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Further reading

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