Personal Sustainability

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Definition

During the last decade, the concept of personal sustainability and similar approaches, such as inner transition or inner transformation, have received increasing attention in sustainability science, education, policy, and practice. Personal sustainability is a highly transdisciplinary field and approach that deals with the human being and its relationality in the context of sustainable development. This applies particularly with regard to (1) human beings as bodily, conscious, and rational subjects, (2) their inner worlds, and above all (3) their relationships and interdependencies with the external world (see Parodi and Tamm 2018b).

As a conscious and rational subject (1), the *human being* is seen as a responsible and capable agent in the struggle for sustainable development. The human body is addressed, too, not only in terms of health but also as an essential condition and expression of human life. *Inner worlds* (2) include individual and collective mindsets, values, beliefs, attitudes, worldviews, emotions, and sensations and associated cognitive, emotional, and relational barriers and capacities (Wamsler 2020; Wamsler et al. 2020, 2021; cf. Hunecke 2023). These inner worlds must not only be described intersubjectively or scientifically from the outside, but essentially have to be explored and experienced individually. Those (inner) human dimensions are intrinsically linked to the *"outer" world* (3) in the context of sustainable development in many respects: as sustainable or unsustainable acting and behavior (e.g. consumption, lifestyles); or as affected by outer factors (e.g. climate anxiety); as drivers or barriers for adequate action; or as root causes for sustainability crises and deep leverage points for change – and as such as fundamental to the solutions to the world's greatest challenges (IPCC 2022a, 2022b; Wamsler and Bristow 2022).

Personal sustainability is thus about addressing inner human dimensions to enable a deepening and expansion of human consciousness, awareness and connectedness (to self, others, and nature) and to nourish inner human potential and capacities to care for a better, more sustainable life across individual, collective and system levels (Wamsler et al. 2021, 2022; cf. Hunecke 2023; Parodi 2018).

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Personal sustainability thus includes a profound shift in perspectives towards a more relational paradigm, by emphasizing and expanding interdependency and connectedness. It is based on the understanding that strengthening the relation and connectedness to ourselves, and the world we share, is leading to an increasing circle of identity, care, and responsibility, and hence to a more ethical, more prosocial, compassionate life – in alignment with what is needed for an (outer) sustainable development (Wamsler et al. 2021, 2022).

The concept of personal sustainability is immediately related to the concept of sustainable development. At least three relations can be differentiated (Parodi and Tamm 2018a, 2018b). First, personal sustainability is an integrated *part* of sustainable development that complements the current sustainability discourse, which is focused on outer aspects. Second, personal sustainability is a *condition* for sustainable development, as an outer sustainability transformation is not fully feasible without an inner transformation. And third, personal sustainability is an independent *end in itself* of sustainable development, which is important since it would contradict the idea to use personal sustainability as a mere instrument for "outer sustainability" purposes or achieving utilitarian aims.

To gain access to this too often ignored part of the sustainability discourse and efforts, academic concepts and methods, e.g. from psychology, anthropology, philosophy, neuroscience, behavioral economics, education, health sciences, and (micro)phenomenology, but also practical approaches of consciousness and relationship work such as contemplation and meditation techniques, perception exercises, and held conversations are applied. The academic and practical approaches are often interlinked and complementary.

The transdisciplinary character of personal sustainability relates to both the macro- and the micro-level. At the macro-level, relevant knowledge and competencies for personal sustainability are not only coming from scientific fields, but also from implicit and indigenous knowledge or contemplative and wisdom traditions. Acknowledging and integrating them is crucial. On the micro-level, personal sustainability condenses transdisciplinarity in one person: a scientific approach is combined with self-reflection, exploring and personal experience and action. In parallel, approaches with a similar focus, like *inner transformation*, *inner transition*, *inner change*, *personal development*, and *personal spheres of transformation* have been developed.

Background

Sustainable development as global guiding principle has been present in the political acting and scientific discourses for more than 30 years (Dixson-Declève et al. 2022; Schultz et al. 2008; WCED 1987). But, despite wide-ranging actions at trans-

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national, national, and sub-national levels, sustainability problems like poverty, unequal income, climate change, environmental pollution, exploitation of natural resources, the massive loss of biodiversity and fertile grounds are still getting worse and challenges are increasing globally. Policy approaches as well as new technologies have failed so far to generate change at anywhere near the rate, scale, or depth that is needed (IPCC 2022a, 2022b). At the same time, the knowledge required for a sustainable development has increased massively over the past 30 years – in all dimensions: system knowledge, target knowledge, and practical knowledge. From a natural-scientific and technical point of view, we have known what to do for decades. But the gap between knowledge and action is increasing dramatically.

So, what's going wrong? If one looks at (un)sustainable development as a cultural phenomenon, where culture and cultural change is carried out in the interplay between the collective and the individual (Hansen 2011), one can recognize that almost all effort for sustainable development so far has been located at the *collective* side of culture (technology, legislations, rules, economic mechanisms, political strategies, etc.). This focus on collective and outer aspects is part of modern societies' scientific and mechanistic worldview – and, as a result, climate change, loss of biodiversity, and other sustainability problems are generally framed as *outer* – technical or political challenges which are addressed with a "fix-it mindset", and less as a matter of human consciousness, worldviews, associated disconnectedness, and alienation (Leichenko and O'Brien 2019).

While the role of individuals and their inner worlds were initially largely ignored, over the past two decades they have been increasingly considered in the sustainability discourse, but from an external, and instrumental perspective (e.g. nudging). Inner, and relational perspectives, capabilities, and interdependencies remain largely ignored however (Parodi 2011; Wamsler et al. 2022). This, in turn, narrows the possibilities for deeper change that requires tackling the human and inner root causes of global challenges. Put together, personal sustainability involves a change of perspective and as such is not an alternative but a complement and should be an integrative part to the common discourses, theories and practices of sustainable development.

As for etymology, the term *personal sustainability* is translated from the German term *Personale Nachhaltigkeit*. It was invented and introduced in 2008 in the course of the formation of the School of Sustainability at the Karlsruhe Institute of Technology as a search term and working title for new ways of understanding, teaching and practicing sustainable development (Parodi 2011; Parodi and Tamm 2018b). The attribute *personal* seemed to be best suited to describe the intended focus on human, individual, and inner human aspects of sustainable development. Thereby the term *person* describes a human being as a relational individual in its specific character of being conscious, responsible, and able to act reasonably. In this sense, *personal sustainability* is also always to be thought of as *trans*personal sustainability.

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Although personal sustainability is a new field of transdisciplinary research, it has antecedents and roots in earlier fields and concepts. At the least, *sustainability science, environmental psychology, behavioral economics, systems theory, human ecology*, and *socio-ecological research* have to be mentioned here. *Deep ecology* (Naess 1972) and *ecopsychology* (Roszak et al. 1995) can be seen as precursors of a kind. Another practice- and change-oriented root lies in the field of *sustainable* or *ethical leadership* and at the interface between arts and sciences in the context of sustainable development. Finally, in the sphere of the ecological movement and community-building there are a lot of efforts that bring together ecology and personality, as well as communal and individual sustainable development (e.g. Joubert and Alfred 2007).

Debate and criticism

Personal sustainability is still an emerging field of transdisciplinary sustainability science and action, and still a search term for a huge field of unexplored phenomena and interdependencies. the publication *Personal Sustainability* (Parodi and Tamm 2018a) was a first important step to grasp and map the research field, and it was accompanied by further advances, reviews, and theoretical developments (Wamsler et al. 2021, 2022). The latter include, for instance, "the inner–outer transformation model" (Wamsler et al. 2022), "the three spheres of transformation model", and conceptual reflections on paradigm shifts in consciousness from an I–I, I–it to an I–We World (Parodi 2018; Siegel 2022). The number of publications on personal sustainability and related discourses is growing rapidly, and researchers' networks like the international *Inner Transition Group* conduct cooperative research and produce collective publications; they also exchange ideas on related teaching tools (Woiwode et al. 2021).

A recent literature review systematizes the current linkages between inner and outer transformation in different research disciplines (Wamsler et al. 2021). It shows that in *psychology*, mental health and related applied sciences (including leadership, personal, and adult development), diverse context-sensitive frameworks have been developed for understanding individuals, their (cognitive) drivers, and the motivations that can influence sustainability. However, they tend to give little consideration to wider societal or systemic issues. Related exceptions come predominantly from the field of environmental psychology.

Contributions in the discipline of *behavioral economics* tend to focus on individuals (or consumers) and the cognitive, motivational, and contextual factors that affect their decisions and choices. Within this context, approaches are limited with respect to: (1) psychological mechanisms; (2) the emphasis on quantitative assessments (mostly via experiments); and (3) their instrumental approach (Wamsler et al. 2021, 4).

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Studies from *sustainability science* and *education* tend to emphasize the importance of systems change and the lack of individual agency due to structural constraints. They focus on systems analyses of wider socioeconomic structures, dynamics, and technology, often based on interdisciplinary and mixed-methods approaches. The role of individuals is, in this context, perceived to be of little importance (see *agent–system dichotomy*, Wamsler et al. 2021, 5).

At the same time, there is increasing recognition and associated *systems theory* that inner dimensions are deep leverage points for change (Ives et al. 2020; Wams-ler et al. 2021, 7-8). They are more difficult to influence, but lead to more substantial transformation, as it is from this level that the system's goals, structures, rules, and parameters emerge. Despite the urgent need to better link inner and outer approaches for sustainability and climate action, related knowledge is still scarce and fragmented (Meadows 1999, 7–8).

One central question in the current personal sustainability debate is the relevance of relations, connection, and interdependency. There is mounting evidence that the human story of separation, disconnection, and alienation is the underlying common thread of interlinked social, socioeconomic, and environmental crises and, in general, of today's global unsustainable way of life (Leichenko and O'Brien 2019; Wamsler and Bristow 2022; Wamsler et al. 2021). Separation, dualism, and disconnection form parts of the modern worldview – and are part of the success story of modern civilization: abstract thinking, science, predicting, controlling, and exploiting our environments via technology are achievements that allow and support wealth and security. At the same time, the massive and life-threatening destruction of the human environment and of humans' own basis of life is a direct consequence of this separation. The world seen as a pure object, free for human use and unrestrained access has led to the present excessive overuse and alienation. With the rise of science and technology, humans have become increasingly removed from nature, from each other, and even from themselves (Wamsler and Bristow 2022, 4–11). Climate change and all other sustainability problems can thus also be understood as an unintended – albeit deeply inscribed in culture – consequence, a subconscious manifestation of the globalized disconnected modern way of life, or, pointedly, of human *being* (Wamsler and Bristow 2022, 5).

In consequence, one crucial sustainability challenge is to "know thyself" (Niehaus et al. 2018, 51) to become aware of ourselves, our individual and collective inner worlds, worldviews, emotions, and attitudes. And then, to work on (reestablishing) our relations and connections to the world in and around us. In essence, personal sustainability work essentially means relationship work – regarding how we relate to ourselves, others, and the world at large.

For personal sustainability as a scientific endeavor, an important (transdisciplinary and methodological) question is about how to link and integrate knowledge from the increasing number of studies that look at personal sustainability

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topics, especially at the linkages between inner and outer (systems) change. However, related approaches are segregated across multiple disciplines that use heterogeneous terminology, with different ontological, epistemological, and ethical underpinnings. In addition, most studies adopt a narrow scope. They look at the link between individual and systems change from a one-directional perspective (Wamsler et al. 2021).

To actualize its transformative potential, personal sustainability has to become more inter- and transdisciplinary, and become common practice (e.g. in the course of relationship work). In addition, it is important to highlight that sustainability is *not only* a scientific endeavor. Engaging with inner human worlds requires introspection, self-perception, and experience that are to a high degree individually and not easily accessible for traditional scientific approaches.

Consequently, personal sustainability is also normative and programmatic, because (1) on the micro-level it is about experiencing and being involved, to perceive, feel, and be as a human being – and not only to think and learn about inner worlds from a scientific mediated third-person perspective; and (2) on a macro-level, following the proverb "You can't solve problems with the same mindset that created them". In fact, current worldviews and scientific approaches are at the root of our unsustainable way of live, and thus we have to challenge them – without ignoring or rejecting them completely.

All in all, despite advances, more interdisciplinary discourses, and theory and method formation, are needed to advance the transdisciplinary field of personal sustainability. This includes exploring aspects, phenomena, and practices of personal sustainability in diverse and new ways. The latter is linked to a call for a "personal sustainability science" that works in a connected way and includes more first-person research and methods such as micro-phenomenology. More investigation into different forms of education and practices is needed (Parodi and Tamm 2018a, Wamsler et al. 2021).

Current forms of implementation in higher education

In the context of transdisciplinary learning, personal sustainability puts emphasis on self-knowledge, relationship work, and people's potential as change agents to support individual, collective, and systems change. Courses in this field differ in their foci regarding: (1) the individual, collective, or system level; (2) their transdisciplinary and transformative substance: more cognition-, experience-, or action-oriented; and (3) their closeness to and occupation with sustainability science and concepts.

A review of evidence-based academic literature by Wamsler et al. (2022) suggests four interrelated categories of practices that can contribute to personal sustainabil-

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ity: (1) contemplative practices and interventions; (2) psychological- and cognitive–behavioral-based interventions; (3) transformative facilitation, communication, and coaching tools; and (4) transformational education and leadership approaches.

Over the past five years, scholars and practitioners have increasingly combined and adapted such practices for personal sustainability to develop transformative education and leadership approaches in higher education. They have combined complexity and systems and design thinking with various practices, and come up with a certain theory and pedagogy for linking inner and outer change (Wamsler et al. 2022). Transformative education is increasingly offered by universities all over the world, but only few explicitly address personal sustainability and inner transformation in a comprehensive way. One example comes from the Waterloo Institute for Social Innovation and Resilience (WISIR, Canada). Their "Decolonial Systems Thinking & Resilience" courses offer a series of seminars and professional development courses that help to foster the capacity for in-depth work and cross-cultural capabilities for broad, systemic change. Through decolonial practices and methodologies, these courses – held by a couple of scientific and Indigenous knowledge holders – support the cultivation of new skills and capacities required for sustainability transformations.

Another example, the "Sustainability and Inner Transformation" course at Lund University Centre for Sustainability Studies (LUCSUS, Sweden), runs every year over three months and includes lectures, seminars, councils, and a practice lab that are designed to explore the role of inner dimensions, to support individual, collective, and systems transformation toward sustainability. Knowledge, tools, and practices from sustainability science, social neuroscience, psychology, behavioral economics, contemplative studies, climate policy integration, and inner–outer transformation theories are systematically integrated. A further recent example from the University of Natural Resources and Life Sciences Vienna (Austria) consists of a course on "The Inner Dimension of Sustainability: The Role of Values, Emotions and Worldviews". Over two weeks, students explore the inner dimension of sustainability on both theoretical and practical levels.

At Karlsruhe Institute of Technology (KIT, Germany) there have been courses and seminars explicitly focused on personal sustainability since 2008. These courses address the individual and systemic level, are self-experience and relation-oriented, and link inner aspects closely to the common theory, concepts, and debates of sustainable development. Further courses at KIT, like transformative project seminars (since 2015), include self-experiments and address inner psychological resources of sustainable development.

In addition, the Principles for Responsible Management Education (PRME), a United Nations-supported initiative, engages worldwide in personal sustainability education and offers related train-the-trainer programs ("The Sustainability Mindset Action Lab").

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Aside from higher education, a growing number of private and nonprofit organizations offer or support adult development and leadership courses all over the world that include aspects of personal sustainability. Examples of organizations working in Africa, Asia, Latin America, Europe, the US, or Australia include The Work That Reconnects, Pacific Integral, The Inner Green Deal, The IDG Initiative; RTLWorks, and CChange. And an increasing number of guidelines provide an overview of different practices (Wamsler et al. 2022).

Overall, transdisciplinary settings are particularly fruitful for supporting sustainable development and associated education, as transdisciplinary methods have inherent didactic qualities (Dusseldorp and Beecroft 2012, 11–35). Personal sustainability can and should become an integrated part of related endeavors. Ivanova and Rimanoczy (2022) present examples across five continents and over 150 student voices depicting transformative experiences and shifts in mindsets. Put together, this shows that personal sustainability education is urgently needed and possible.

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