

# Psychology of Ecological Crises and Eco-Self Transformation

## A Guide to the Psychology of Sustainable Living

### Preview - Overview

#### *Preview*

This book responds to the observation of radical ecologists and ecopsychologists that our present approaches to environmental change are widely limited to technological, behavioural and cognitive strategies, and lack a deep understanding of the complex psychological and sociocultural interrelationships that underpin human perception and behaviour. Using the results obtained from a research project, an extensive literature review, and our professional experience as a psychotherapists and educators the authors suggest that the current dominant theories and practices of environmental education, and other change practices, are limited in their effectiveness. This is because they fail to provide a deep understanding of the unconscious emotional and psychosocial forces that prevent most people in modern societies from developing a coherent and stable sense of self. This self-deficit, then, predictably manifests as experiences of disconnectedness from nature, as anthropocentric worldviews, and as destructive and uncaring feelings and behaviour towards the natural environment and human beings (themselves and others).

The need to acknowledge the value of the existing theories and practices of environmental and sustainability education, and the proposed necessity to integrate the abovementioned perspectives, has led to the proposition that a shift from the dominance of ego-self consciousness to a fully developed eco-self consciousness can be framed as the following six-stage process that involves:

- manipulated eco-self consciousness based on the application of behaviourism;
- learned eco-self consciousness based on the application of cognitive psychology;
- participative eco-self consciousness based on deconstructionist postmodern psychology;
- deep eco-self consciousness based on the application of depth psychology;
- holistic eco-self consciousness based on the application of holistic and psychosomatic thinking; and
- eco-self consciousness based on transpersonal psychology and processes facilitating felt experiences of body-mind and person-planet unity.

The book proceeds with a discussion of key issues related to areas such as social ecology, deep ecology, ecofeminism, Education for Sustainable Development, and Education for Sustainability and concludes with the tentative formulation of key aspects of an *Education for Sustainable Living* (ESL), an interdisciplinary approach to personal and planetary healing based on an extended set of physio-emotional, psychosocial, and environmental sustainability indicators. This approach

integrates social ecology thinking, learning ecology, and transformative education, and has a special focus on practices facilitating the deepening of people's sense of a personal and transpersonal self. The study concludes with a summary of the main findings and thoughts on possible sustainable and unsustainable futures.

## ***Overview***

Synopses of the 12 chapters are provided below:

### **Chapter 1: The Project**

In this chapter, we explore ways of making sense of our ecological crises, outline underlying assumptions, and outline the parameters of this study. We also define the scientific framework, highlight the need to employ a transpersonal research approach, and describe the research methodology and the philosophical and psychological epistemology employed in this study. The particular philosophical disciplines that will be applied to deepen our understanding of the complex nature of our ecological crises and of sustainable living include social ecology, phenomenology, perspectivism, hermeneutics, ecological philosophy, and relational and esoteric thinking.

The key psychological disciplines used by various authors to deepen our understanding of environmental concerns include:

- behaviourist psychology
- cognitive psychology
- environmental psychology
- postmodern psychology
- depth psychology
- transpersonal psychology
- psychosomatic/holistic psychology

### **Chapter 2: Notions of Consciousness and Self**

In this chapter, we provide an outline of some important models of consciousness, views on the notion 'self' relevant to this study, and a brief synopsis of key aspects of our Western hegemonic experience of ego-self consciousness.

### **Chapter 3: Manipulated Eco-Self Consciousness (Stage 1)**

At this point of the discussion, we present a comprehensive description of what is conceptualised in this study as the first stage of an eco-self consciousness transformation. This level of consciousness, called here 'manipulated eco-self consciousness', is based on the application of behaviourist technologies now used by behaviourally informed environmentalists to influence people to adopt more environmentally sustainable behaviours. In the chapter we also briefly describe these technologies and examine their usefulness when viewed from within the behaviourist paradigm.

### **Chapter 4: Learned Eco-Self Consciousness (Stage 2)**

Here we describe a form of consciousness based on the notions of learning, perception, and knowledge, and the processing, storage, and retrieval of information. Environmental education and education for sustainable development – disciplines based largely on cognitive psychology – assume that sustainable development and sustainability can be achieved by:

- changing our behaviour through provision of knowledge and insights into ecological issues;
- teaching people to use practices such as recycling, the wise use of resources, etc;

- applying a social-reformist approach to ecological change;
- continuing to work within the paradigm of economic growth;
- applying a technological approach to ecology that promises quick fixes;
- teaching students about ecological issues without questioning the values of modernity;
- applying an approach to environmental education based on cognition and conventional science;
- using an approach to education that is discipline-based, that works with abstract and theoretical problems, and that stays within the paradigm of conventional modern schooling;
- teaching environmental education in schools and by using teachers primarily as dispensers of factual knowledge; and by
- using predefined curricula based on the work of professionals committed to research that employs the conventional scientific paradigm.

### **Chapter 5: Participatory Eco-Self Consciousness (Stage 3)**

Here we conceptualise a postmodern approach to environmental education (education for sustainability) as the third stage of our proposed framework for self-transformation. Education for sustainability goes beyond other approaches to environmental education by:

- addressing our general crisis of modernity;
- focusing on a critique of the notion of right or wrong information;
- emphasising the economic, social, political and cultural underpinnings of our ecological crises; and by
- proposing process-oriented, interdisciplinary, and empowering attitudes and practices in environmental education.

This deconstructionist, postmodern approach to environmental education has produced a learning environment that enables students to focus on local agendas and learn about the natural environment in an experiential and self-empowering manner.

### **Chapter 6: Deep Eco-Consciousness (Stage 4)**

In this chapter, we describe stage four of the model of self-transformation. The focus at this stage of consciousness transformation is on broadening and deepening our understanding of our ecological crises from a number of depth psychology perspectives. At this level of consciousness, we conceptualise that many key aspects of our ecological crises are predictable outcomes of stalled self-development, with its associated body-mind splits, typically experienced by people living in both modern and deconstructionist postmodern societies. This lack of self-development is commonly encountered in cultural environments that neglect the essential needs for emotional safety, adequate nurturing, body contact, and mirroring.

### **Chapter 7: Holistic Eco-Self Consciousness (Stage 5)**

Here we describe stage five of the proposed six-stage system of self-transformation. Key aspects of ecological degradation are perceived as manifestations of the dominant egocentric consciousness experienced in Western societies. Whereas conventional environmentalism focuses mainly on issues such as air and water pollution, waste control, greenhouse emissions, loss of biodiversity, salinisation, and population control, a holistic and perspectivist view of our ecological crises suggests that ecological issues such as psychosomatic illnesses, new colonialist adventures, and terrorism are predictable manifestations of the currently dominant level of egocentric consciousness. The metaphors of separation, pollution/waste, growth/excess, and exhaustion are used to examine the synergies between these aspects of our ecological crises, and as a logical

continuation of this undertaking. The notion of sustainability is explored in its physio-emotional, psychosocial, environmental, and institutional aspects.

### **Chapter 8: Person-Planet Unity Consciousness (Stage 6)**

In this chapter we describe the ‘last’ stage in our proposed system of self-transformation, which we call person-planet unity consciousness. In this stage we expand our consciousness by moving beyond intellectual meaning-making and construct worldviews based on a felt sense and direct experience of person-planet unity.

In this chapter, we also present the last of three distressed character structures that we believe need to be recognised when constructing a holistic understanding of our ecological crises. This structure, called here the schizoid-terrorising condition, is at the heart of our difficulty in experiencing a felt sense of person-planet unity, and prevents us from experiencing a simultaneousness of personal and transpersonal, self-experiences. The chapter concludes with a depth psychology interpretation of the phenomenon of terrorism, a phenomenon that, together with imperial state terrorism, is currently a major source of ecological degradation and unsustainable living for many people worldwide.

### **Chapter 9: Placing the Six-Stage Model in Larger Frameworks**

In this chapter, we explore the relevance of the six-stage model of consciousness transformation in relation to some existing systems of cultural development. We also examine the limitations of approaches to change based on behaviourism, cognitive, and postmodern psychologies, and present a critical examination of some of the concepts held by deep ecologists, ecofeminists and postmodern environmentalists.

### **Chapter 10: From Sustainable Development to Sustainable Living**

Here we examine a number of important limitations of the currently dominant concept of sustainable development, and formulate key issues of the more inclusive notion of sustainable living. The triple-bottom-line (economic, social, and environmental) approach to sustainability is modified by emphasising physio-emotional, psychosocial, environmental, and institutional sustainability. Sustainability indicators and objectives are critically reviewed, and the currently used ESD indicator framework is significantly enhanced by proposing that new sets of indicators be included in its social sustainability section.

This chapter concludes with our proposal to conceptualise an epistemology and approach to the kind of research needed for a ‘science of sustainable living’, which we are calling ‘Sustainology’. We compare this approach with our current epistemology and dominant ways of doing research based on conventional Western science.

### **Chapter 11: Education for Sustainable Living**

In this chapter, we focus on practical applications needed to enable people to experience both a strong personal self and a transpersonal self, and to enhance their ability to live sustainably. We provide a brief overview of existing ecopsychology and ecotherapy practices, outline important approaches to transformative learning, and present courses that we have developed in conjunction with this study to facilitate physio-emotional, psychosocial, and environmental sustainability. These courses focus on key issues of sustainable living, such as the psychological background of ecological crises, on the synergies of cancer and what has been called ‘earth cancer’, and on attention deficit disorder (ADD) and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). They provide processes designed to identify the areas in which people lack physio-emotional, psychosocial and environmental sustainability, and assist participants in deepening a felt sense of body-mind and person-planet unity.

## **Chapter 12: Summary and Conclusions**

Here we summarise our key conclusions from existing knowledge, from the hermeneutic reinterpretation of relevant texts, from clinical observations, and from the knowledge held by research participants. We provide suggestions for remedial action, and offer some thoughts on possible future developments.

Wagstaffe, 17 April 2008