

What does Education for Sustainability have to do with Psychology?

"Psychology is the scientific study of human behaviour and mental functioning. Psychologists are interested in how people think, feel and act – from interactions between neurons to interactions between people." <http://www.southampton.ac.uk/psychology/>

Understanding human minds and behaviour must be placed in 21st Century context – a century in which human well-being must be achieved in the face of environmental challenges, urban living and more consumer-based societies. Topic areas of relevance to sustainability already in the Psychology curriculum include:

- Well-being: mental well-being; stress; environmental factors as a cause of psychological distress e.g. toxic hazards, urban pollution levels; benefits of companion animals
- Development: with over half of the world's population in cities, what does this separation from the natural world impact children's development? How does being socially defined as "consumers" affect children's development? How do children's interactions with the environment and animals affect their development?
- Learning: how can we apply operant learning principles to learning greener behaviours (positive and negative reinforcers)? Are we predisposed to learn (un)sustainable behaviours? – babies learn skills important for survival (eating and walking), but living sustainably may be fundamental to species survival. Are some behaviours that were adaptive for our ancestors not well-matched to today's context? What are the consequences of non-sustainable self-gratifying behaviours for future generations?
- Cognition: heuristics e.g. availability heuristic (behaviour and perceived risk based on vivid personal experience or lack of); risk assessment and environmental hazards; resource consumption and distribution, commons and self-interest
- Self: identity and the natural environment; connectedness to nature
- Environment and humans: how humans affect the environment and how the environment can affect us, our health and well-being; solving complex environmental problems in the pursuit of individual well-being within a larger society; common property resource management; the effect of environmental stress on human performance
- Human behaviour: how to increase sustainable behaviour in individuals; decision-making and choice; human behaviour as the main cause of environmental problems – the mismatch between perceived human needs and environmental capacity; social groups
- Urban living: the disconnect created by urban living, eroding the ecologically-connected sense of self with which we are born, leaving us developmentally

Key skills for psychologists which sustainability teaching cultivates: communication; critical thinking; flexibility; problem-solving; synthesis of different opinions, theory and data; interdisciplinarity; teamwork; research methods; scientific integrity

Find out more: Contact Julia Kendal (j.kendal@soton.ac.uk) for more information including case studies on teaching sustainability in this area.