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Psychosocial dynamics of progress

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Definition

The psychosocial dynamics of human societies concern relationships: between people and with other things or entities, both physical and metaphysical. They describe the ways in which social conditions affect individual psychology and behaviour and vice-versa, and how perceptions, expectations and values influence the meanings of life events and social situations, and so affect people's emotional responses. They shape how people see the world and their place in it, and so how they behave, affecting their personal lives and, collectively, the societies in which they live. Psychosocial dynamics are fundamentally important to how human progress is conceptualised and measured.

Description

The psychosocial dynamics of progress and development reflect the complexity of human societies and relationships, and the importance of subjective, cultural factors (including moral and spiritual values) to quality of life. They expose the limitations of orthodox models and indicators (which emphasise objective, material and structural factors) and recent efforts to develop subjective measures of progress (notably happiness and life satisfaction). They challenge the widely held view that equates progress with modernisation and that Western nations represent the leading edge of progress.

The psychosocial-dynamics perspective was first outlined in a paper (Eckersley 2009) on the usefulness of population measures of subjective wellbeing. The topic has subsequently been discussed and developed, including empirically, in other publications relating to progress, the future, and population health and wellbeing (Eckersley, 2013, 2016, 2019; Randle and Eckersley, 2015; Randle et al., 2017).

The psychosocial perspective emerged within the context of growing interest in measuring the progress of societies (Eckersley, 2016). The debate about progress has focused on adequacy of economic indicators, notably per capita income or GDP (Gross Domestic Product), as measures of a nation's performance, relative to both the past and to other countries. Other widely used indicators in making international comparisons include health (measured as life expectancy), education, human rights, governance (including political freedom and corruption), and inequality.

Generally speaking, these indicators, whether used singly or aggregated, place Western liberal democracies at the leading edge of progress, and present them as models of development for less developed nations. The best known is the Human Development Index, which is based on life expectancy, literacy and educational enrolment, and per capita income. Western nations occupied eight of the top ten positions and 17 of the top twenty in 2017 (UNDP, 2018). The story is much the

same with most other indices. Only when environmental indicators, such as the ecological footprint, are included does this order change significantly (Eckersley, 2016).

The recent research into progress indicators has focused attention on subjective wellbeing. Commonly measured as self-reported life satisfaction or happiness, subjective wellbeing is believed to capture important subjective elements of progress that objective indicators do not. However, measuring life satisfaction or happiness does not fundamentally alter the dominant view of progress. For example, World Happiness Report scores are strongly correlated with the Human Development Index (Helliwell et al., 2013).

On the face of it, such associations seem persuasive. But subjective-wellbeing indicators fail to capture fully the more intangible psychosocial dynamics of ways of living. For example, growth in per capita income does not simply make people materially richer, liberating them from scarcity and hardship, and freeing them to live as they wish, as the orthodox view assumes. Instead, it is associated with other, cultural changes, such as increasing materialism, which impact profoundly on wellbeing. Materialism – giving priority to money and what it buys – is associated with lower life satisfaction, happiness and vitality, and higher depression and anxiety; less prosocial and cooperative behaviours, and more antisocial and competitive behaviours; and more environmentally damaging and unsustainable choices and lifestyles (Twenge and Kasser, 2013).

Similarly, individualism and freedom, once seen as liberating human potential, are now increasingly linked to a heightened sense of risk, insecurity, uncertainty; a lack of clear frames of reference; a shift from intrinsic to extrinsic values and goals; increased, even unrealistic, expectations; an excess of freedom and choice; and the construal of the self as independent and separate from others (Eckersley, 2006, 2011, 2016).

These cultural shifts lead to an unrelenting need to make the most of one's life, to fashion identity and meaning increasingly from personal achievements, possessions and lifestyles, and less from shared cultural traditions and beliefs. This focus distracts people from what is most important to wellbeing: the quality of their relationships with each other and the world, which, ideally, contribute to a deep and enduring sense of intrinsic worth and existential certainty.

The psychosocial dynamics of progress reflect - in a way conventional models of progress do not - an important dimension of human societies as complex adaptive systems (Eckersley, 2016). These systems are dynamic and self-organising, governed by feedback and driven by often multiple and diffuse interactions between their components. Change in one part of the system can cause changes, often non-linear and unpredictable, in other parts. Such systems show emergence: characteristics 'emerge' from the collective behaviour of the whole system, not from the behaviour of its individual components. In other words, the whole is more than the sum of its parts. Rather than deterministic one-to-one relationships between 'causes' and 'effects', there are many possible paths between them.

These complex-systems dynamics are revealed by surveys and studies of people's deep concerns about their personal lives, their societies, the world, and the future. These perceptions may be intangible and at odds with objective conditions, but they are important to quality of life, with implications for both individual wellbeing and societal functioning.

For example, a 2013 survey investigated the perceived probability of future threats to humanity in four Western nations: the US, UK, Canada and Australia (Randle and Eckersley, 2015). Overall, across the four countries, 54% of people rated the risk of 'our way of life ending' within the next 100 years at 50% or greater, while 24% rated the risk of 'humans being wiped out' at 50% or greater. Reflecting

a widespread, shared concern for humanity, the responses were relatively uniform across countries, age groups, gender and education level.

Furthermore, how people react to the possibility of catastrophic futures will shape how effectively humanity deals with them. People can respond very differently to the same perception of threat (Randle and Eckersley, 2015), illustrating the complex dynamics of human societies. Possible responses include: nihilism (the loss of belief in a social or moral order; decadence rules), fundamentalism (the retreat to certain belief; dogma rules), and activism (the transformation of belief; hope rules). The categories are, in reality, fuzzy, with subtle to extreme expressions; they are not mutually exclusive, but can overlap, co-exist and change over time in individuals and groups. In the above survey, 78% of people agreed 'we need to transform our worldview and way of life if we are to create a better future for the world' (activism); 48% agreed that 'the world's future looks grim so we have to focus on looking after ourselves and those we love' (nihilism); and 36% (47% in the US) agreed that 'we are facing a final conflict between good and evil in the world' (fundamentalism).

The same survey also asked about levels of concern over a wide range of personal and societal issues (Randle et al., 2017). Overall, 49% of people were moderately or seriously concerned about the personal issues, with health, wellbeing and financial concerns topping the ranking. An average of 41% were moderately or seriously concerned about societal issues, with the state of national politics, the breakdown of moral values and corruption among the top concerns, ranking ahead of economic and environmental matters. Being concerned, especially about personal issues, was associated with personal stress (but, interestingly, in both positive and negative ways).

Another study investigated 'societal unease', defined as 'a latent concern among citizens in contemporary western countries about the precarious state of society' (Steenvoorden, 2015). This concern arose from the 'perceived unmanageable deterioration' of five fundamental aspects of society: distrust in human capability to improve things, loss of ideology, decline of political power, decline of community, and socio-economic vulnerability. Societal unease was only weakly related to personal happiness, proving, the author says, that 'high levels of private contentment are not to be mistaken for public contentment'. Similar survey findings are reported in Eckersley (2019).

A third survey reveals a related psychosocial dynamic. Finland, like other Nordic countries, usually ranks high in international comparisons of progress and development, and its education system is regarded as one of the best in the world. Yet a study of changes in students' fears for the future since the 1980s found that while fears about war, terrorism and environmental disasters fell, and those about work and education did not change substantially, more personal fears rose, including fears relating to failure and making wrong choices, future family and partnerships, loneliness, accidents and, especially, health and death (Lindfors et al., 2012).

The authors conclude that perceptions of risk have become more individualised, so supporting late-modernist theory. They note that adolescents' images of the future act as a mirror of the times, reflecting the values and ethos of society and its social and cultural norms and their changes over time. 'Cultural and societal changes, including emphasis on individual choice and increased uncertainty, seem to create perceptions of uneasiness and insecurity in young people's transitions to adulthood'. Similarly, the four-nation study cited above found young people were the most concerned about personal issues, notably existential and relational (eg, family relationships, friendships, failure, loneliness, emptiness), and the most stressed (Randle et al., 2017).

Young people best reflect the characteristics of the times because they are growing up in them (Eckersley, 2011). Their health is an important predictor of future population health because many of the attitudes and behaviours - and even the illnesses - that determine adult health have their

origins in early life. Young people also have the most to gain – or lose – from how well progress is defined and measured; if their health and wellbeing are not improving, it is hard to claim life overall is getting better.

Contrary to the usual narrative that young people's health is continuing to improve in line with historic trends, with declining mortality and high levels of self-reported health and happiness, it is arguable that their health and wellbeing have declined in the developed world (with implications for developing regions) (Eckersley, 2011). This situation partly reflects chronic, physical conditions, especially those associated with increasing obesity, which have led to predictions of a decline in life expectancy. However, it rests more on the growing burden of mental illness in youth, which appears to have increased markedly in many Western nations since the middle of the 20th Century, a time when, by conventional standards, human societies made so much progress. Socio-economic factors, such as social class and family structure, are not the main drivers of these trends in mental health (Eckersley, 2011). The causes appear to be more existential and relational than material and structural, often linked to factors associated with rising materialism and individualism.

The psychosocial-dynamics perspective suggests that the central social challenge confronting the developed world is not primarily a poverty of the means to the end of 'the good life' as it is currently defined and pursued; it is a poverty of the end itself. In other words, giving the disadvantaged and marginalised the opportunities and privileges of the majority, however much it will help them, will not solve the problems of progress and wellbeing.

This perspective is relevant and applicable to other important scientific and political questions, including the role of health and wellbeing as an important dynamic in societal functioning - a cause as well as a consequence of social changes – through effects on population resilience, morale and vitality (Eckersley, 2010). This dynamic may well influence how well humanity responds to global threats such as climate change.

The perspective also contributes to a parallel, but now converging, debate over sustainable development (Eckersley, 2016). It challenges the legitimacy of the dominant narrative of material progress (which gives priority to economic growth and a rising standard of living), and supports the alternative narrative of sustainability (which seeks to balance social, environmental and economic priorities and goals to achieve a high, equitable and lasting quality of life). The contest between the two narratives has been framed largely in economic and environmental terms, and the social aspects have been under-estimated. The psychosocial perspective can help to rectify this oversight, highlighting the extent to which Western, high-consumption lifestyles are detrimental to sustainable development.

Humanity faces a growing gap between the politics and science of progress, between what is being done to address the challenges and threats, and what research now shows needs to be done (Eckersley, 2019). Researchers, policy-makers and leaders need to pay more attention to the psychosocial dynamics of modern life and people's situation, not only to their biophysical and socio-economic dimensions. Unless they do this, humanity will limit its choices and options and fail to develop responses which meet the problems it faces. Research into human progress needs to create the conceptual space for a transformation in worldviews, beliefs and values as profound as that which gave rise to modernity (Eckersley, 2016).

Cross-references

Consumer society

Economic growth

Happiness

Health

Human development

Human Development Index

Life satisfaction

Materialism

Post-materialism

Social change

Subjective well-being

Sustainable development

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