

Understanding social conflict: How to avoid talking past each other

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Abstract

Climate change, extensive migration, sustainable food chains or unfair democratic systems, are a few contemporary issues of our highly interconnected and globalized world. What all such sustainability concerns have in common; is that they are highly complex, crossing many spheres of human activities, and stretching over time and space. This also means that potential solutions require a high degree of social engineering which may lead to misunderstanding, confusion and conflicts. Borrowing from philosophy of science, evolutionary psychology and social theory, this presentation provides an interpretive framework for how to make sense of such emergent contradictions. The research utilizes a controversy that occurred around a publicly funded development project in the city of Gothenburg (Stadslandet / Urban-Rural-Gothenburg) to highlight this contingency. The aim of the research is to elucidate how the breakdown of communication occurs, whilst outlining ways to avoid talking past each other in the first place and ultimately aiding in addressing the identified sustainability issues.

The research propositions that thinking about sustainability differently, necessarily means paying attention to the communication that is used in framing sustainability problems. The need for a common problem formulation is not only paramount for communication but success as a whole. As we humans think and operate by the means of language; our words, our associations and our inferences are all influenced by the language(s) we have internalised. We understand reality through our learned nomenclature, belief system(s) and normalised set of values. When we interact with likeminded peers ('in-group') the exchange of ideas runs smoothly and efficiently and we can find common ground. However, when interacting with outsiders ('out-group') misunderstandings readily occur and the interaction deteriorates to antagonism and ostracisation. In such instances, we readily identify ill-intent in others' actions in order to explain differences in interpretation instead of a lack in articulation. By taking inspiration from scientific communication, the research not only outlines strategies that can be used to identify where the breakdown in communication occurs, but also outlines protocols of how to circumnavigate such issues in the first place.

Cite as

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