

OK, possibilities!

By Professor Jan Willem de Graaf

Professor of Brain and Technology, Saxion University of Applied Sciences, Deventer, Netherlands

OK, the point is clear: the human-technology symbiosis has brought us prosperity and adversity, and through the massive scaling that has arisen, we now face global problems (environment, climate, technological totalitarianism / technological iatrogenesis, lack of meaning) that we can't solve with our nearly 300,000 year old psycho-biological "hardware". We cannot leave it to the well-known murderous cocktail of multinationals, science and / or (populist) democracy either. But do we still have any chance?

The good news: Yes! (Behavioural change). The bad news: Yes! (Dan Brown-like scenarios). We will only consider the first yes. It is human behaviour that ultimately brought us to this non-future-proof position. There is no way back, but there are several possible ways ahead. If both the number of people on the planet were to shrink from now on, and we had better (future) energy conversion in favour of food, mobility and communication, the enormously large scale could be made sustainably manageable. That means no more technology for technology, and even less disruption for disruption, but everything geared to choices based on the central idea of future-sustainability. In this scenario, social science becomes the most central science, with psychology at its heart. Unfortunately, that is not in line with what we now count under social sciences and psychology. Why not?

The situation in science resembles the famous fool who loses his watch in a dark park and is subsequently approached by a police officer while he keeps searching under a lamppost. He says he is not looking in the dark, because he won't find anything there. However, in the light he has already found very valuable coins. The scientific method works well in exact science, but social scientists are often scorned by the public as quasi-scientists. But unfortunately, the real problems require more and more systematic understanding of how behavioural change can be achieved, both individually and in groups. This means that the humanities and social sciences must become a breeding ground for our greatest intellectual, creative and management talents. In other words, really smart people must no longer automatically opt for beta. They must first try to serve humanities or social sciences, to prevent our world wide behavioural problems.

"The English, Dutch, German and French literature from a hundred years ago offers more answers than a hundred years of social sciences."

But why is this necessary? Why can't we continue along the same lines in the social sciences? An example. In many prosperous regions, a decline in the (relatively) native (ie assimilated) population has been observed for decades. Therefore knowledge of psychological factors related to population growth (both positive and negative) should be neatly arranged in psychology books. Moreover, correlations with other fields (economics and biology) should also be charted unambiguously. However, the knowledge is there but stays useless because it has not been arranged anywhere.

In wartime, for example, there are nearly 120 boys born for every 100 girls born. In peace and prosperity, there are 101 boys for every 100 girls. In a serial monogamous society with low infant mortality, a couple need an average of 2.2 children to maintain the population. In The Netherlands, a couple has an average of 1.4 children and 0.6 in subsequent relationships, so there is a slight shrinkage. This type of knowledge as well as the psychological concepts that correlate with lower fertility in the higher welfare (class), is essential, but not applied and therefore not accessible. Now in terms of last week's puzzle: does prosperity make our world more predictable, more rational, and therefore more indifferent to our desire for children? The English, Dutch, German and French literature from a hundred years ago offers more answers than a hundred years of social sciences.

