

Sustainability and Erich Fromm's Contribution to the Social-Ecological Transformation.

An Environmental Psychologist's Perspective on the Annual Conference 2022 of the International Erich Fromm Society

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Abstract The irrational response of humanity to the social-ecological crises of our time is challenging psychology to find explanations and propose interventions. The Annual Conference 2022 of the International Erich Fromm Society at Hofgeismar, Germany, from June 3–5, 2022, aimed to address these very questions by reintroducing the work of Erich Fromm to the context. In this article, I reflect upon the course of the conference. I report on contributions based on the work of Erich Fromm, his concept of social character, and his transformation theory. At the same time, I introduce the reader to the discipline of environmental psychology, the psychological discipline currently dealing most extensively with the link between human behavior and ecological crises. Closer investigating both perspectives, I could find fundamental differences in terms of psychological reception of the problem background, common explanatory models, and psychology-informed suggestions for practical interventions. I encourage dialogue between both research traditions to strengthen psychological theory building and conduct meaningful and impactful research in light of the large-scale social-ecological challenges of our time.

Introduction

After the first presentation at the Annual Conference 2022 of the International Erich Fromm Society, one audience member shared their state of mind with speaker Ernst Ulrich von Weizsäcker¹ and all other attendants: «I am in doomsday mood,» she said before asking, «What shall we do now?»

The conference *The Sustainable Society Future Conference — Acting for Change* took place at the Protestant Academy Hofgeismar, Germany, from June 3–5, 2022. Gathering approximately 80 participants, it aimed to explore jointly the very question that the participant had just asked: After years of knowing about intensifying ecological and social crises, how can it be possible that humans have not yet acted appropriately to the fundamental threats to human livelihoods and well-being — and are there still possibilities to change that? To foster reflections and discussions, invited speakers from the fields of natural sciences, economics, political science, psychology, education, and transformation research gave presentations, engaged in panel discussions, and moderated working groups with the attendants of the conference that consisted of interested academics, practitioners, and citizens. The conference language was German (direct quotations were translated by myself).

During the course of the conference, it became clear that others were occupied with similar thoughts as the aforementioned audience member: Speaker Ingolfur Blühdorn² compared the current state of the world to standing on the brink of a cliff; speaker Rainer Funk³ noted that the presentations, from his perspective, have awoken a sense of impending threat as well as feelings of anxiety; speaker Kora Kristof⁴ diagnosed a sense of explicit hopelessness in

1 Ernst Ulrich von Weizsäcker is a professor of biology and author of numerous publications on globalization, environmental, and peace policies. He was the president of the University of Kassel and the Wuppertal Institute for Climate, Environment and Energy, co-president of the Club of Rome, and member of the German Bundestag.

2 Ingolf Blühdorn is a professor at the Institute for Social Change and Sustainability at the Vienna University of Economics and Business. His research and publications deal with the political and societal preconditions of sustainable societies.

3 Rainer Funk is a psychoanalyst and co-leader of the Erich Fromm Study Center at the International Psychoanalytic University Berlin. He was an assistant of Erich Fromm (1974–1980) and is his sole literary executor. He has been dealing with Fromm's work in his doctoral thesis and numerous publications and has been advancing Fromm's work as a member of the International Erich Fromm Society's advisory board and by building up the Erich Fromm Archive and the Erich Fromm Institute in Tübingen.

4 Kora Kristof is the head of the department of Sustainability Strategies, Sustainable Resource Use, and Instruments at the Federal Environment Agency, Germany. Her work

the room. Several speakers and members of the audience admitted to experiencing a feeling of powerlessness and lack of agency, some searching for those responsible for the situation we as humans are in as well as those who could be addressed to bring forward necessary change.

Since I first learned more about global ecological crises and their complex link to human behavior in an environmental psychology class at the University of Gothenburg in 2010, I am familiar with the same aforementioned questions. I have since worked in the field of environmental psychology as an academic researcher for several years at the Otto-von-Guericke University Magdeburg's Division of Environmental Psychology, conducting my doctoral thesis in that academic discipline. I have learned much about the magnitude of the challenges humans are facing and the complexity behind related human behavior and individual behavior change. More and more often, I have also been experiencing challenging emotions such as anxiety, despair, perplexity, lack of agency as a psychologist, academic researcher, citizen, and part-time activist when comparing the severity of the situation to what myself and the rest of humanity are (not) doing, pushing us closer and closer towards the metaphorical cliff.

However, throughout the annual conference in Hofgeismar, I noticed that many of the participants expressed their desire to act, to find answers and explore solutions, to find strength and hope, and to encourage themselves and others to keep a positive mindset. This I know as well. Despite of having gotten to know the *doomsday mood* state quite well, I am still curious to learn new perspectives on how the discipline of psychology can contribute to explaining the lack of appropriate large-scale action and how it can make a stronger impact in supporting large-scale societal and economic change. In recent years, during my time at the Erich Fromm Study Center at the International Psychoanalytic University Berlin, I have learned about the work of Erich Fromm, the famous psychoanalyst, social psychologist, and philosopher. I have learned that, as myself and the participants of the conference, Erich Fromm had also been driven by the desire to better understand human behavior that (potentially) leads to catastrophes. In *Beyond the Chains of Illusions*, Fromm (1962a, pp. 5–13) illustrated the impact that contemporary catastrophes made on him, first in his immediate personal environment (a suicide by an adored woman) and later on a large political scale (First and Second World War, amongst other wars and conflicts of his time). He described that he was asking himself the same question over and over again, as an adult as well as a grown man: «How is it possible?» (ibid., pp. 4–5). Not being able to find satisfying answers

in psychological, sociological, philosophical, and religious writings, Fromm developed his own approach of analytical social psychology that he applied to his academic research, his practice as a psychoanalyst, his popular writings as an author, and his civic and political engagement as a public figure of his time.

In his psychological and sociological analyses, Fromm linked conscious, unconscious, and macro-societal factors, including certain aspects of the work of Sigmund Freud and Karl Marx (see 1962a, pp. 88–134). Fromm described Freud's psychoanalysis to be helpful in challenging the conscious reasons that humans would often provide to explain their behavior. Freud's studies of the unconscious would hint at the existence of unconscious (suppressed) motivations due to defense mechanisms that can occur when humans avoid confronting painful reality. Marx' social criticism enabled Fromm to expand Freud's work on the individual unconscious, alleging the existence of a «social unconscious» (*ibid.*, p. 70). Fromm described how Marx's theories allowed for a thorough analysis of the ideologies, taboos, and restrictions imposed by the socio-economic system of a class or society and a potential uncovering of respective unconscious motivations. During the course of his career, Fromm (e.g., 1941a, 1955a, 1968a, 1973a, 1976a) diagnosed many features of the socio-economic system of the dominant industrialized nations and related practices (i.e., human behavior) to be harmful to humans and their environments, adverse to human mental health, and hindering humans from reaching their full potential from a radical-humanist standpoint. In his writings but also in his political engagement, for example, for the US Socialist Party and in the anti-nuclear and peace movements during the 1950s and 1960s, Fromm was outspoken about what he perceived as problematic, formulating social criticism and developing an alternative model of a sane society.

Arriving at the conference in Hofgeismar, I was aware that Fromm had explicitly dealt with questions of social-ecological crises, radical-humanist models of alternative societies, and questions of societal transformation in at least three of his books: In *The Sane Society* (Fromm 1955a), his analyses focused on the consumerism of the dominant industrialized societies of the time, diagnosing a «pathology of normality» (pp. 12–21). In *The Revolution of Hope* (Fromm 1968a), he warned of a fully mechanized, technology-driven society that would alienate humans from themselves and each other. In *To Have or to Be?* (Fromm 1976a), he contrasted contemporary lifestyles and societies that focus on principles of consumerism and material possession with lifestyles and a model of society based on principles of radical humanism. I had made the experience that reading Erich Fromm means to be constantly surprised by the acuteness, actuality, and transferability of his analyses and predictions to current phenomena. However, although already foreseeable at Fromm's time,

social-ecological crises have since further escalated, changed their shape, and become even more complex and time-critical, driven by megatrends such as global warming, globalization, digitization, expansion of international trade, new political confrontations, etc. Numerous fields of scientific research are currently dealing with related challenges, and various forms of theories and practical engagement have emerged.

An announced focus of the annual conference of the International Erich Fromm Society was to apply the work of Erich Fromm to large-scale social-ecological crises and social-ecological transformation, thereby re-introducing Fromm into current debates. With a degree in the field of environmental psychology, I was curious how renowned experts on Erich Fromm would locate his work within the interdisciplinary discourse and how they would apply his theories to current large-scale social and ecological crises. Furthermore, I was curious whether scholars (and practitioners) with backgrounds in environmental psychology and the analytical social psychology of Erich Fromm could potentially learn from each other. Hence, in this article, I will reflect on the course of the conference while introducing the reader to the main concepts of environmental psychology and Erich Fromm in the given context. I will point to fundamental differences between the two approaches but also to possible links that I could spot. To introduce the reader to the discipline of environmental psychology, I will describe the main characteristics and historical developments of the field in the next section. In the subsequent main section of the article, I will reflect upon the course and contents of the Annual Conference 2022 of the International Erich Fromm Society before discussing the findings and offering conclusions in the final section.

Psychology's involvement with large-scale ecological crises: A brief introduction to the discipline of environmental psychology

During my academic career, I have observed psychologists from the discipline of social psychology but also from disciplines such as political psychology, cultural psychology, work- and organizational psychology, and critical psychology to work on large-scale social and societal questions. When it comes to large-scale *ecological* crises, environmental psychology is the psychological discipline most involved with the matter. Environmental psychology is concerned with the interplay between humans and their environment (Steg et al. 2018, p. 1). Research and practice in this tradition follows a broad understanding of the concept of environment, incorporating, for example, built, natural, and social matters. The discipline has an applied and interdisciplinary orientation (cf.

Gifford 2007; Steg et al. 2018). Researchers are often engaging with practical challenges and practitioners, consulting interdisciplinary knowledge, and applying and modifying interdisciplinary theories and methods. The discipline has strong ties with applied social psychology and links to theories and methods from, for example, health psychology, architectural psychology, sociology, psychological acceptance research, marketing research, and action research.

Looking back at its history since the 1960s (cf. *ibid.*), early activities focused mostly on how specific aspects of human environments influence human thinking, feeling, and behavior. Examples of this line of research until today include, for example, the influence of landscape and nature, architectural design, (new) technologies, and environmental stressors such as noise exposure or crowding on human well-being, cognitive performance, attitudes (e.g., towards policies), or decision-making processes (e.g., mediation or participation processes). As large-scale awareness of ecological crises has been rising more and more in science and society — first in the 1970s and 1980s, and even more so since the beginning of the 21st century — environmental psychologists have become more and more involved in exploring the (often adverse) influence of human behavior on their environment. In the arena of environmental protection, the scope has reached from investigating local matters such as on-site littering, vandalism, or depletion of local common resources (e.g., overfishing, overuse of rangeland, water resources, etc.) up to global ecological challenges of our time (e.g., depletion of fossil resources, global warming, and climate change). In this regard, environmental psychologists are orienting their research strongly towards practical applicability, informing themselves about the practical background of the matter of interest and suggesting or carrying out practical interventions.

Today, I would describe environmental psychology as a theoretically and methodologically diverse discipline of psychology that is constantly influenced by and adapting to real-world developments happening in various human environments. The discipline can contribute much to understanding the interaction between humans and their environment while integrating inter- and transdisciplinary perspectives. Furthermore, researchers from the discipline attempt to make a difference in practice beyond their research projects (e.g., in Germany, in policy consulting or engagement with the *Psychologists for Future* movement).

Despite all that, researchers from the community have recently raised voices of dissatisfaction with the limited impact that the discipline has made in terms of disappointing real-world developments in environmental protection and climate change mitigation (cf. Kühn and Bobeth 2022). From their view, in public debates and political and economic decision-making, perspectives from

environmental psychology would still be too neglected. Consequently, several researchers from the discipline have been calling for reorientation and theoretical and methodological enhancement. While the traditional focus of the discipline has long been on individual private-sphere behavior, researchers are looking, for example, more and more at the links between individual behavior and social movements and other macro developments in the socio-economic system (e.g., Amel et al. 2017). This suggests a general openness to new directions. From the perspective of environmental psychology, it seems to be a particularly good moment to introduce new stimulating impulses and foster fruitful exchange.

Annual Conference 2022 of the International Erich Fromm Society: A 3-step reflection

When engaging with environmentally significant behavior, we can often find a three-step pattern in applied research from environmental psychology. As a first step, environmental psychologists gather practical and technical knowledge to make themselves familiar with the practical problem of interest and its links to human behavior. As a second step, they analyze the factors that could explain why humans perform the behavior they had previously identified to be problematic and/or why they would not perform more environmentally friendly behaviors. As a third step, environmental psychologists develop suggestions for practical solutions (often referred to as *interventions*) based on (a) the most influential factors they had previously identified in the second step and (b) the background knowledge they had gathered in the first step.

In this section, these three steps will guide my reflection on the conference. I found them to be helpful in both reconstructing the course of the event and building the argument of my theoretical reflections. A side effect that I would welcome might be that the reader gains a more vivid image of how environmental psychologists typically approach their objects of investigation.

Step 1: Gathering knowledge about the practical background and options of behavior

The first step of a typical application-oriented environmental psychological analysis is concerned with learning more about the practical problem at hand and how human behavior technically contributes to the problem and/or could potentially mitigate the problem. Typically, such analyses build upon

the expertise of other disciplines such as environmental sciences, geography, or engineering to develop a thorough understanding of the practical problem at hand and how exactly this links to human behavior (e.g., calculating the environmental impact of different behaviors, identifying relevant stakeholders and target groups).

At the Annual Conference 2022 of the International Erich Fromm Society, the opening address of Kai Mosebach⁵, three subsequent presentations of the speakers Ernst Ulrich von Weizsäcker, Birgit Mahnkopf⁶, and Ingolfur Blühdorn, and a panel discussion with Birgit Mahnkopf and Ingolfur Blühdorn provided the participants with necessary interdisciplinary information about the problem context and behavioral options. One layer of knowledge the speakers addressed concerned basic knowledge about the manifold social and ecological challenges of our time. Kai Mosebach, for example, sketched out problems related to dwindling resources, global warming, loss of biodiversity, increasing urbanization, and social inequality. He also illustrated possible consequences such as the rise of sea levels, desertification, increased extreme-weather events, destruction of nature and ecosystems, human poverty and migration, as well as threats to the livelihoods of future generations. Ernst Ulrich von Weizsäcker enhanced the audience's understanding of problems related to loss of wildlife, energy consumption, handling of substances, the necessity of a circular economy, and digitization. Birgit Mahnkopf steered the audience's awareness towards the irreversibility of many of the current developments (e.g., extinction of species) and pointed out current peaks in the usage of resources such as oil, natural gas, water, fertile soil, and other critical raw materials such as sand and certain metals. She mentioned the concept of *planetary boundaries* (see Rockström et al. 2009), which aims to quantify the degree of endangerment of global ecological systems, and she emphasized the interconnectedness of many of the discussed phenomena. Ingolfur Blühdorn further enriched knowledge about the problem context with his hypothesis of *peak democracy*, questioning whether more democracy would promote more sustainability (while also refusing authoritarian pathways in that matter). He mentioned worrying macro-societal trends such as the rise of authoritarian

5 Kai Mosebach is a lecturer and researcher at the Ludwigshafen University of Business and Society. Having a diploma in politology, his work deals with health policy, health economics, and social epidemiology.

6 Birgit Mahnkopf is a professor emerita of European social policy at the Berlin School of Economics and Law. She has worked and published on the globalization of politics, the economy, and the society, industrial relations, and social-ecological transformation processes.

regimes, right-wing populism, more and more loss of trust in science, and the increasing prevalence of mental illnesses in Western democratic societies. Birgit Mahnkopf and other speakers shared their perception of a worrying rollback of some of the international social-ecological efforts as a consequence of the Russia-caused war in Ukraine.

Another layer of knowledge concerns better understanding the links between such large-scale social and ecological challenges and human behavior. In this regard, Ernst Ulrich von Weizsäcker and other speakers pointed to the massive and exponentially growing impact that human activity has on ecological systems (cf. Steffen et al. 2011). However, from an environmental psychologist's standpoint, it would be important to investigate the links in more detail and to identify specific behaviors of relevance for more detailed psychological analyses. Such behaviors can include adverse behaviors that contribute to the challenge at hand but also alternative behaviors that would contribute to a solution. The speakers often addressed the general lifestyles, the standard of living, and consumption patterns of humans in the dominant industrialized nations on a more general level. Birgit Mahnkopf and others also addressed the problems that come with these nations' design of their economic system, pointing to the limitations of capitalism due to its constantly implemented growth logic. Ingolfur Blühdorn pointed out issues of the political system as democracies would currently struggle with authoritarian tendencies and right-wing populism. All of the speakers addressed the decision-making of influential actors in the political and economic system. For example, Birgit Mahnkopf criticized the *EU Green Deal* as being largely ineffective and pointed to misaligned political strategies and respective ineffective public communication. My impression from these presentations was that the speakers addressed this layer of knowledge at quite a broad level, mostly addressing *classes* of behavior. Less often did they point to concrete practices in citizens' everyday life (such as extensive meat consumption or fast fashion, as mentioned later on by speaker Burkhard Bierhoff⁷ at the conference's final panel).

I perceived the same tendency when the speakers suggested alternative behavioral strategies. Some examples were measures on the level of political decision-making, such as developing a more effective alternative to the EU Green Deal, regulation of competition, energy, and resource consumption, stopping militarization, and initiating fundamental social redistribution. Birgit Mahnkopf and others emphasized that solutions for the ecological challenges

7 Burkhard Bierhoff is a professor emeritus of education and a guest lecturer at the International Psychoanalytic University Berlin. He has worked and published on education and consumption psychology as well as on the analytical social psychology of Erich Fromm.

of our time would require decision-makers to address social and societal challenges in parallel. Ingolfur Blühdorn recommended that, in times of one crisis after another, decision-makers should still put an emphasis on thinking and considering their actions instead of reacting quickly but rather ineffectively. In terms of consumption and lifestyle changes, Birgit Mahnkopf and Ingolfur Blühdorn mentioned the necessity to dial back energy and resource consumption. This would imply accepting lower-consumption lifestyles such as in the 1970s (Burkhard Bierhoff illustrated this later on in his presentation by providing examples from his childhood and from lifestyles of *voluntary simplicity*). Ernst Ulrich von Weizsäcker emphasized that agents and concerned citizens need to stay optimistic in order to make movements toward more social and ecological sustainability more attractive for outsiders. He suggested the need for what he calls a *new enlightenment*, implying for people in the dominant industrialized nations to face the truth of the situation and engage with uncomfortable facts.

Notably, the accumulation of the above insights led to many expressions of emotional response by members of the audience and by the speakers themselves. As illustrated in the introduction, the participants of the conference expressed to experience feelings of anxiety, despair, perplexity, or powerlessness during the presentations and in the following discussions. Appeals to staying positive and the joint search for signs of hope and solutions that appeared in turns with the expression of negative emotions, from my point of view, underlined the complexity and sometimes contradicting nature of emotional responses that can occur when dealing with the topics at hand (see, e.g., Weintrobe 2013a).

Reflecting upon the insights of this step, the weight and variety of details mentioned during the presentations has emphasized once more that the challenges we are facing have an enormous complexity. Although this is barely a new insight, the speakers were very considerate in pointing out the magnitude, complexity, and interdependence of ecological and social or societal challenges. In line with this, the problems and suggested solutions that the speakers discussed are of such magnitude and urgency that they require comprehensive action on the political, economic, societal, and individual levels. The experiences we have made in the last years and decades imply that appealing to individual behavior change while not addressing socio-economic framework conditions has been either too ineffective, too slow, or not impactful enough in light of the enormous challenges at hand. In this respect, it was also notable how often the speakers mentioned that knowledge about the problems at hand, their possibly disastrous consequences, necessary actions, and appeals to behavior change have existed since the 1950s — while humans have constantly failed to take ap-

propriate action. In terms of choosing appropriate behaviors for psychological analyses, these insights seem to imply the necessity of a broad and large-scale approach. There seems to be a need for a better understanding of the psychology behind decision-making in politics, corporations, and communities, the psychology behind acceptance of or resistance to far-reaching policy measures and fundamental lifestyle changes on the societal level, and the psychology behind the formation and preservation of impactful social movements.

While there is certainly some research being done to investigate these types of human behavior on a rather large and intersectional scale, mainstream research of environmental psychology usually tends to focus on the *ecological* aspects of environmental problems and on specific human behaviors or classes of behavior, thereby drastically reducing the complexity for their research or practical activities. Furthermore, as mentioned above, research in the discipline has traditionally leaned most towards investigating the psychology behind the private-sphere behavior of individuals (e.g., consumption behavior as household members). Despite recent calls for broadening the scope, research from environmental psychology has been somewhat limited in terms of systematic implications of economic and societal macro-factors (cf. Kühn and Bobeth 2022). Those would include the role of ideologies, social inequalities and power, or social discourses in their investigations. In contrast, as stated in the previous section, combining insights from psychology, sociology, philosophy, and other disciplines, the research and practical activities of Erich Fromm have always aimed to address the macro level — which will be very relevant for the psychological analyses in the next step.

Step 2: Analyzing the psychology behind human behavior

The second step of a typical application-oriented environmental psychological analysis aims at understanding the psychology behind the previously identified behavior(s) of relevance. Applying psychological methods such as surveys, interviews, observation, and others (see Gifford 2016), environmental psychologists aim to identify important predictor variables of the behavior(s) of interest in the given context. A focus of psychological analyses has been on psychological predictor variables from action models (see, e.g., Klöckner 2013). Researchers usually investigate those by applying quantitative surveys and correlative methods of analysis. Some examples of typical predictor variables that environmental psychologists look at stem from the *theory of planned behavior* (Ajzen 1991) and the *norm activation model* (Schwartz and Howard 1981): Looking at the behavior of interest, they would investigate whether certain *atti-*

tudes would play a role. These are understood as a rational summary evaluation of the advantages and disadvantages a person perceives when thinking about the behavior. It is hereby supposed that people weigh the possibility that certain behavioral consequences could occur by how negative or positive that would be from their point of view (*expectancy-value-model*). Furthermore, environmental psychologists are interested in a person's *social norms*. Those can describe the social pressure a person feels to perform a behavior (e.g., perceived expectations of other people's judgments and how important these judgments would be for the person). Social norms can also have an informational character (e.g., observing other people's behavior to form an idea of what would be the appropriate behavior in a situation of uncertainty). Another typical predictor variable of interest is the *perceived behavioral control* which describes the degree of voluntary control that a person perceives to have on performing the behavior (evaluation of perceived fostering or hindering factors and the perceived influence of these factors related to the person's perceived own abilities). A person's *personal norm* is another predictor variable of interest. This variable describes the degree of internal moral obligation that a person feels to perform the behavior. Researchers often assume that such a feeling of obligation is an internalization of values that occurs during the socialization process. Researchers usually assume that this feeling has to be activated, for example, by knowledge about the link between the behavior and perceived consequences that threaten an important value, cues in the situational context, or social pressure. Oftentimes, researchers in environmental psychology suppose that the aforementioned predictor variables do not influence the behavior of interest directly but that they would influence forming a *behavioral intention*. The behavioral intention would mediate (fully or partly) the influence of the aforementioned predictor variables on whether the respective behavior is performed or not.

As can be seen, much of the research deals with explanatory models of human behavior that focus on conscious, rational decision-making. However, a long-discussed phenomenon within the discipline — that reminds us of the gap between knowledge and behavior related to large-scale crises mentioned in the last step of the reflection — is the so-called *attitude-behavior-gap* or *intention-behavior-gap* (see, e.g., Sheeran and Webb 2016). The term describes a gap in the predictive power when empirically investigating consciousness-based predictor variables of behavior. One additional predictor variable often considered for reoccurring types of behavior is *habits/routines*. Those are understood to occur as the result of an internalized link between frequently performed behaviors in a stable situational context. Researchers assume that there would be no need for conscious processing when humans would perceive the current situation to be similar to previously internalized

situations. In such cases, the perception of such a situation would trigger the behavior immediately and automatically.

In sum, research from environmental psychology tends to analyze human behavior based on cognitive explanatory models. Researchers usually include external factors as *perceptions* of these factors into models, while they usually neglect emotions and the role of unconscious processes. In terms of large-scale social-ecological transformation, they can give us a glimpse of the magnitude of the challenges: For example, in the dominant industrialized nations, we can expect the behavior of the majority of the population and people in power (social norms) to speak against relevant types of pro-environmental or pro-social behavior change. As another example, configurations of the infrastructure and legal system (perceived behavioral control, attitudes) might speak for performing adverse behaviors in many cases. Some examples could be car-friendly cities, subsidies for kerosene and other fossil fuels, cheap meat, or legal limitations to regulate markets.

At the Annual Conference 2022 of the International Erich Fromm Society, especially Rainer Funk, Burkhard Bierhoff, and Kai Mosebach offered psychological analyses in their presentations, mostly relating to the work of Erich Fromm. Rainer Funk started by introducing the audience to the fundamentals of Fromm's analytical social psychology (cf., e.g., Fromm 1955a, pp. 22–66). Fromm based his work on a specific conception of the human being. According to Fromm, being a part of nature physically while also being able to transcend nature mentally (e.g., as a result of consciousness, mental imagery, etc.), humans would be confronted with both physical- and psychology-based needs. Thus, Fromm assumed that all humans would be forced to fulfill basic needs beyond physical needs, such as dietary intake and excretion, sleep, or sexuality. To avoid insanity, they would need to have to fulfill psychological needs such as relatedness, self-efficacy, rootedness, a sense of self-identity, and having an orientation framework. Rainer Funk pointed out that, according to Fromm, there is barely any limit to *how* humans could fulfill these needs. Based on firm humanistic principles, Fromm evaluated need fulfillment strategies upon whether they would foster or hinder the development of the full human potential in terms of, for example, reason, objectivity, empathy, solidarity, thoughtfulness, imagery, creativity, and love. Fromm's belief was that all humans have an inherent drive for development and inner growth (*biophilia*), making them prone to loving, pro-social, and creative strategies of need fulfillment. However, whether humans would be able to follow up on that would depend heavily on the cultural and socio-economic context, technological possibilities, individual life events, and other factors. As mentioned in the previous section, Fromm diagnosed that the dominant forms of need fulfillment in the

industrialized nations would be adverse to humanistic human development. In many examples, humans would fulfill their needs for relatedness, self-efficacy, self-identity, etc., in a competing, hostile, or destructive way. In his late work *The Anatomy of Human Destructiveness*, Fromm (1973a, pp. 268–433) extensively deals with sadistic, narcissistic, and necrophiliac forms that human need fulfillment strategies can take, unmatched in the animal world. Rainer Funk pointed out that adverse need fulfillment strategies are most often due to unconscious motivations, often rationalized as being the reasonable, morally right, etc., thing to do on the conscious level.

In order to investigate the specific dynamics in a given society or class at a given time, Rainer Funk introduced the audience to Fromm's key concept of *social character* (see, e.g., Fromm 1941a, pp. 277-299, 1962a, pp. 63–88), a unique framework that links human behavior to both unconscious and societal processes. Following Freud, Fromm viewed an individual's character structure as a dynamic «system of strivings which underlie, but are not identical with, behavior» (Fromm 1947a, p. 54). Like Freud, he also assumed that individual differences in character structures would exist due to personal life circumstances, life events, etc. However, his innovation of the concept of character lies in the idea that there also would be *shared* character structures representative of members of groups of individuals, e.g., of nations, societies, or social classes:

«Like the individual character, the «social character» represents the specific way in which energy is canalized; it follows that if the energy of most people in a given society is canalized in the same direction, their motivations are the same, and furthermore, that they are receptive to the same ideas and ideals.» (Fromm 1962a, p. 77.)

According to Fromm, social character formation occurs within stable social structures over a longer period of time. This would be the case within the socio-economic framework conditions of a society with respective societal and economic structures, conditions of production, social norms, etc. In order for a society to function, the majority of its members would have to behave in ways that are required by the system to continue functioning. The energies of the members of the society would be shaped accordingly, making them «want[...] to act as they have to act» (Fromm 1962a, p. 79). Fromm saw humans as primarily social beings. Being dependent on relatedness to survive and stay sane, they would internalize what is necessary and desirable via socialization processes in the family and extra-familial educational contexts. Such internalized social character structures would form a powerful but often-unconscious driving force for human behavior.

Fromm has proposed specific social character types (for an illustration of several contemporary social character orientations, see Funk 2019, pp. 95–144). He made a general distinction between the *productive social character orientation* and *non-productive social character orientations* that he had identified in different societies of his time and previous times. The productive character orientation (see, e.g., Fromm 1947a, pp. 82–107) describes that humans would fulfill their needs by realizing their full inherent human growth and development potential, i.e., by being, active, loving, reasonable, and related to others and to reality. All other types of character orientations would fall into the category of non-productive social character orientations. Here, humans would fulfill their needs in ways that suppress or alienate them from their own inherent human growth potential, hampering human development from Fromm's humanistic point of view. Fromm himself (Fromm 1980a; Fromm and Maccoby 1970b) and, later on, researchers of the International Erich Fromm Society (1995) conducted larger empirical studies to explore different types of social character orientations in samples of the general population. In his presentation at the annual conference, Rainer Funk pointed out that researchers have seldom found the exact prototypes in reality. Instead, we would have to expect hybrid forms of character orientations within both societies and individuals. However, it would be very fruitful to investigate what drives a *majority* of people, i.e., identify megatrends, to understand the underlying motivation of human behavior within a society, class, or another form of a larger social group.

At the conference, Rainer Funk, Burkhard Bierhoff, and Kai Mosebach all applied the social character concept, pointing to prevalent social character structures of current societies within the dominant industrialized nations in order to understand why humans struggle with adapting their behavior and lifestyles to the large-scale social-ecological challenges at hand. Regarding this context, they put an emphasis on two social character orientations: The *marketing orientation* and the *ego orientation*. According to Fromm (see 1947a, pp. 67–82, 1976a, pp. 147–154), the marketing orientation would be typical for societies of market economies. Its main logic is that not only products, services, etc., but also humans would be oriented towards being attractive to the market. Hereby, the actual value would be less important than suitable marketing and sales strategies. Following this logic, it would be less important how humans actually are and what they actually do, but that they present themselves in an attractive way, show conformity to current demands, and stay flexible and free of bonds to be successful on the market and survive in competition. According to Fromm, humans would internalize this logic not only in terms of their professional careers and the job market but as a central

guiding principle for all spheres of their lives. Such an orientation towards success would require constant adaptation towards perceived external demands and judgment. Negative consequences for humans would include alienation from themselves and others, loss of a consistent sense of self-identity, loss of personal integrity and values, loss of authenticity in relations, loss of admission of negative emissions and general relevance of feelings, and loss of courage to think and act on their own terms.

Analyzing human behavior in relation to the social-ecological crises of our times, the speakers drew attention to several problems that they linked to the prevalence of marketing orientation. Burkhard Bierhoff pointed out that, according to Fromm, a major consequence of the aforementioned negative effects for humans would be an escape into excessive consumption. This would include a constant drive for purchasing new products but also for consumption of fun experiences such as movies, events, sex, or traveling for holidays. In the logic of markets, consumption would be a necessity to continue functioning. Burkhard Bierhoff described how companies would permanently influence consumers via suggestive marketing measures, implying needs that their products and services can supposedly help to fulfill. He diagnosed that there would barely be any effective regulations in place regarding who would be allowed to advertise (pointing to, e.g., energy and oil companies) and what (pointing to, e.g., *greenwashing*). In contrast, in light of dwindling natural resources and excessive emissions of greenhouse gases, abstaining from dispensable consumption and large-scale adoption of lifestyles of sufficiency would be necessary requirements to safeguard natural resources, ecosystems, and human livelihoods. Burkhard Bierhoff emphasized that the current phenomenon of hyper-consuming societies would be a relatively new phenomenon, and research has failed to show an improvement of human well-being through consumption on the premise that certain basic decent living conditions would be fulfilled. Despite that, based on the concept of social character, Rainer Funk, Burkhard Bierhoff, and Kai Mosebach all expressed to expect major resistance on the unconscious level within the population towards any suggestions of restrictions or reductions of consumption patterns, lifestyles, or prevalent (almost unlimited) offers to experience fun.

The ego orientation is a social character orientation that Rainer Funk has developed based on the theory of Erich Fromm in the recent two decades (early synonyms he used were *postmodern* or *I-am-me orientation*; see, e.g., Funk 2004, 2005, 2006, 2011a, 2011b, 2014). Funk has linked the ego orientation to principles of the ideology of neoliberalism and the new possibilities emerging from the advancement of digital technologies. According to Funk, the main characteristic is that humans would be striving for the dissolution of all

boundaries, obligations, and commitments. Aiming for limitless freedom and self-determination for themselves, they would also grant the freedom to strive for that to their fellow humans. Ego-oriented members of a society would try to eliminate restricting boundary conditions in the real world or try to escape from such conditions when possible. They would be striving to reconstruct reality, either by inventing their own reality or by choosing to participate in an available reconstruction (conditions of life, lifestyles, products, brands, etc.) that they perceive to suit them well. One major driving force behind these tendencies would be the wide-ranging economic practice of offering alternative realities in forms of, for example, lifestyles, emotions, sensations, etc., enabled and accelerated by new digital and electronic advancements. According to Funk, this character orientation has led to, for example, improvements of living conditions, creative innovations, and advanced human rights movements. However, it would also have alarming negative consequences for humans from a psychopathological (and humanistic) point of view. This would include the ability to live on one's own accord, loss of a consistent sense of self-identity, loss of the experience of authentic feelings, loss of relationship skills and ability to deal with conflict, loss of a sense of responsibility and duty, and indifference towards everything that does not *suit* oneself.

Rainer Funk, Burkhard Bierhoff, and Kai Mosebach referred to problems they perceived to be related to the prevalence of ego orientation in their analyses of current human behavior and social-ecological crises. All three (as well as Ingolfur Blühdorn in his earlier presentation) pointed out that the social-ecological transformation would require acknowledging and respecting limitations and boundaries, for example, by restricting one's own consumption, resource-intense travels, dietary choices, etc. Promoting such restrictions and limitations would contradict the strivings for dissolution of all boundaries characteristic of people with ego orientation. Furthermore, Rainer Funk pointed out that the reality of the current situation and taking necessary action would require a willingness to engage with negative emotions such as anxiety (cf. Weintrobe 2013b) as well as inner and social conflicts. Ego-orientated people, on the other hand, would strive to engage with positive emotions only, avoid conflicts, and tend to ignore or have a disinterest in unpleasant requirements of reality. While their enthusiasm to reconstruct reality could hypothetically help to find and foster creative solutions to the current challenges, Rainer Funk and Kai Mosebach also spoke on the difficulties deriving from relying too much on technology and artificial intelligence to find solutions. As pointed out before, digital technologies are assumed to foster ego orientation and to be of high attractiveness to ego-oriented individuals. Both speakers pointed out that reliance on machine thinking would be no suitable replacement for

humans' autonomy, own thinking, creativity, feelings, values, and interests. Finally, behavior change towards social-ecological transformation requires a certain degree of commitment and persistency, as pointed out by Rainer Funk and, earlier on, by Ingolfur Blühdorn. Ego-oriented individuals, however, would be prone to avoid such kinds of commitment. Instead, they would be able to switch effortlessly between staging very different kinds of behaviors and personalities in different contexts (similar to *avatars* in online or gaming environments).

The speakers also briefly touched upon other problematic aspects of further social character types developed by Erich Fromm. For example, Burkhard Bierhoff and others pointed to the loss of a sense of reality, the missing acknowledgment for own shortcomings and mistakes, and the blaming of others prevalent in the narcissistic character orientation (Fromm 2010 [1964], pp. 59–90). Rainer Funk discussed the human potential for (self-)destructiveness inherent in the character orientation of necrophilia (Fromm 1973a, pp. 325–433).

Altogether, the presentations of Rainer Funk, Burkhard Bierhoff, and Kai Mosebach clearly aimed to emphasize the relevance of marketing and ego orientation that they considered to be characteristic of today's societies of the dominant industrialized nations. They claimed that, due to these underlying, mostly unconscious character orientations, we can expect major resistance towards behavior change in the population despite behavioral intentions or verbalized agreement on the conscious level. In this respect, Kai Mosebach pointed to the relevance of information processing: From the perspective of Fromm (e.g., 1961a, pp. 17–30), comprehending facts of the current situation would not pose an intellectual problem to most humans. However, we can expect some humans who resist on an underlying motivational level to also resist on a cognitive level, for example, by developing forms of paranoid thinking (e.g., conspiracy theories), projective thinking, or fantasizing (e.g., *finger pointing* and *devil shifting*). In general, as Rainer Funk pointed out, we would also have to expect discourses in public and political debates to be heavily influenced by the dominant character orientations, reproducing ideas and ideologies that would reinforce the status quo of the socio-economic system and might hinder ideas towards necessary change to be adapted.

Reflecting upon the insights gathered in this step, we can observe fundamental differences between the psychological models that environmental psychologists tend to use to explain human behavior and the approach of Erich Fromm. Environmental psychologists have traditionally aimed mostly to explain intentional behavior (and routines) in the private sphere. While this certainly contributed to the detection of important psychological factors in this regard, researchers of the discipline might need to reorient to explain

other important types of behaviors that are relevant for understanding and mitigating the social-ecological crises (see step 1). Researchers of the discipline are currently making some efforts in this regard (cf. Kühn and Bobeth 2022). The conference speakers demonstrated that, for environmental psychologists, the work of Erich Fromm offers much interesting new insight to improve understanding of the factors behind human behavior in the context of the social-ecological crises of our time. Behavioral analyses from environmental psychology have strongly emphasized the importance of consciousness, rational factors, and intentions to explain behavior. Erich Fromm, on the other hand, aimed to explain how and why systemic and unconscious motivational factors might subvert the relevance of conscious factors. Fromm argued that strong unconscious driving forces would be the dominant factor behind human behavior, resulting largely from the type of need satisfaction that socio-economic framework conditions would imply. Based on that, he expected defense mechanisms — for example, observable in cognitive errors/biases and rationalizations — to heavily influence perceptions, thought processes, and, therefore, conscious human decision-making. It is quite obvious that this challenges the main assumptions of environmental psychologists' theoretical models and research paradigms.

Another interesting aspect of Fromm's explanatory model is its comprehensiveness, enabling researchers to comprehend very different types and classes of behavior by applying the same underlying theoretical assumptions. Environmental psychologists tend to focus on explaining behavior directed toward the goal of environmental protection, while there is no real consensus in the discipline on how to deal with the presence of conflicting goals. Fromm's work offers a promising approach to explain why humans might strive more for some kinds of goals than for others, depending on a person's (or society's) social character orientation. In turn, my impression is that researchers in the Frommian tradition could advance theory building in terms of the relationship between humans and their natural environment in contemporary societies. In this respect, research could investigate the meaning of nature and ecological systems for humans from a Frommian perspective more in-depth.

Finally, compared to Fromm's approach, mainstream theories and methods of environmental psychology currently tend to be quite positivistic. They largely ignore, for example, underlying ideological paradigms (e.g., those of capitalism and neoliberalism), the importance of the individual meaning of psychological concepts and their procedural character, the importance of social discourse, questions of power and inequality, or the need for social critique (cf. Kühn and Bobeth 2022). This is in line with activities in many other disciplines of psychology. Erich Fromm has been an outspoken critic of positivistic and

conformist trends within psychology (see, e.g., Fromm 1970a, pp. 1–29), and he has continually been using his platform as a public intellectual of his time to voice social criticism. One downside (especially in the current academic climate) is that the direct empirical evidence for several assumptions of Fromm's theory is still scarce and might require more systematic empirical research. This applies to basic assumptions of his theory (e.g., inherent primacy of the productive orientation) but also to context-specific inferences (e.g., here, the assumption of the links between the socio-economic system, resulting social character types, resulting unconscious motivations, and social-ecological behavior). Despite fundamentally different research paradigms, one similarity that I perceived is that researchers from both environmental psychology and the Frommian tradition share a motivation to apply their insights on the factors behind human behavior in practice, aiming to contribute to solving important contemporary challenges of humanity. This is very relevant for step 3.

Step 3: Proposing psychology-informed interventions

In the third and often final step of a typical application-oriented environmental psychological analysis, environmental psychologists develop suggestions for practical solutions, oftentimes referred to as *interventions*. They hereby view the insights about the most relevant psychological factor(s) they previously identified to influence the behavior(s) of interest as possible levers to promote change. For that, they link their new psychological insights back to the practical knowledge they had previously gained. Proposed interventions would address either psychological factors that sustain adverse behavior or psychological factors that would promote more desired behaviors. After that, environmental psychologists develop psychology-informed practical suggestions (e.g., for policy measures), often based on insights from action research (see, e.g., Osbaldiston and Schott 2012). In some cases, environmental psychologists conduct their research as field research and/or are involved in the implementation of practical suggestions. In such cases, accompanying, evaluating, and adapting change processes can be another important aspect of their research activity in this context.

Typical measures to influence consumption behavior aim to influence attitudes, moral and social norms, or perceived behavioral difficulty. Environmental psychologists routinely include the provision of information, for example, about the problem context and adverse behavior(s), about different types of alternative behaviors and how to perform them, information about measures of social comparison, or about moral implications of the topic. Additionally, typ-

ical suggestions include providing behavioral feedback, fostering goal setting and written or verbal commitment (pledges), installing reminders (*prompts*), or measures to foster social exchange and social norms (e.g., involving *block leaders* or *role models* as multipliers). Related to the structural level, typical interventions include infrastructural measures, regulations, rewards, or punishments. The goal here, again, is to influence psychological factors such as attitudes, norms, or perceived behavioral difficulty (*ibid.*). Empirical evaluations suggest that interventions based on insights from environmental psychology have made a difference in practice, typically in contexts such as recycling, energy conservation, or water conservation (e.g., Osbaldiston and Schott 2012, pp. 276–279). Most of such results suggest that the provision of information is a necessary but not a sufficient base to induce such consumption behavior change. While several combinations of measures often seem to be able to make a difference in the short-term, researchers could seldom find evidence for long-term effectiveness. In many cases, either effects declined over time, or researchers and practitioners did not systematically assess long-term effects to begin with (e.g., due to practical constraints).

During the presentations of Rainer Funk, Burkhard Bierhoff, and Kai Mosebach at the annual conference, it became clear that fostering behavior change based on insights from Frommian theory would follow a very different approach. Right at the beginning of his presentation, Rainer Funk emphasized that, following Fromm, provision of information, knowledge transfer, fostering acceptance/adoption of technical innovations, and similar approaches would only be helpful when they would be in line with the inner driving forces of many members of a social group. Hence, interventions based on the work of Fromm would focus much less on the provision of (previously mentioned types of) knowledge or fostering conscious, intention-based individual decisions in a desired direction. Instead, they would focus on a fundamental transformation of the social character of most members of a society toward the productive character orientation (cf. Fromm 1976a, pp. 133 f.). The productive orientation is the only character orientation in which humans place high importance on social relations, fairness, and solidarity, but also on fully involving the requirements of their environment (including their ecological environment) in their life practices (cf. Funk 1996). Thus, to foster the social-ecological transformation, we would have to investigate how the productive character orientation can be fostered under the conditions of current non-productive character orientations in the dominant industrialized nations.

As mentioned in the last section, because of dominant non-productive character orientations, we would have to expect certain psychosocial skills to be underdeveloped for a majority of members of current societies. In his presenta-

tion, Rainer Funk explained that fostering the productive orientation on the individual level would mean practicing necessary skills (cf. Fromm 1976a, pp. 170–172), such as a tolerance for ambivalence, a sense of reality, emotional capacity, and trust in one's own thinking, feeling, and imagination. Rainer Funk compared this to humans' fitness workouts to increase physical activity: It would be necessary to train our psychosocial skills just as we would now train the often-underused muscles in our bodies. Rainer Funk and Burkhard Bierhoff advocated that only human creativity could find suitable solutions for the massive challenges at hand, regulating the sensible adoption of technological innovation instead of passively relying on technical innovations hoping that these would bring about salvation. A requirement related to dealing with the social-ecological reality would be the necessity to deal with (unpleasant) facts: Dealing with the reality of the situation would require confronting one's own resistances and defense mechanisms, as Rainer Funk, as well as psychoanalysts in the audience, pointed out. Related to this, Kai Mosebach suggested that change agents should pay specific attention to those who show forms of paranoid thinking, projective thinking, and fantasizing or extreme forms of denial: To foster dialogue and achieve compromises, it would be necessary to reason with these members of our societies as well instead of (further) marginalizing their views.

Whatever might be possible with training on the individual level and measures of communication, during the presentations it became clear that Fromm's theory clearly points to the life practices of the many, shaped by socio-economic framework conditions, as the most influential factor on the social character development. Fromm (1968a, pp. 93–140, 1955a, pp. 270–363, 1976a, pp. 168–202) developed a model of a sane society which can be viewed as synonymous with a society that fosters both the productive character orientation and social-ecological sustainability. He suggested concrete principles of economic, political, and societal organization of such a society while continuously highlighting the relevance of social-psychological relationships. The speakers mentioned some examples of principles of this model, such as abandonment of guiding economic principles of growth and efficiency, increased regulations of markets, decentralization of the economy, decentralization of democratic decision-making processes, abandonment of suggestive forms of product advertising, striving for peace and military (including nuclear) disarmament, and enabling and securing a life in humane conditions for every member of the society. Fromm (1955a) labeled this model to be one of «communitarian socialism» (p. 270).

Fromm suggested several measures that could pave the way toward such a new form of society. One concrete example that the speakers mentioned would

be the necessity to increase scientific research and council on human needs and social character (transformation) to help shape the exact laws, institutions, etc., of the new society and inform regulation processes and democratic decision-making processes. Burkhard Bierhoff illustrated another concrete example by describing social movements whose members choose lifestyles of drastic material possession and consumption reduction, thereby encouraging a humanistic spirit in society. However, overall, many of the suggested measures derived from the work of Fromm would still require large-scale insight and democratic majorities to change the course of current societies' lifestyles and the pillars of socio-economic systems. Fromm (1968a) himself questioned whether «radical changes of the system ... can be accomplished within the present power structure, with democratic methods, and given present-day public opinion and mode of thought» (p. 141). Over 50 years later, Rainer Funk, Burkhard Bierhoff, Ingolfur Blühdorn, and other speakers acknowledged the engagement of large-scale social movements (such as *Fridays for Future* or *Black Lives Matter*) and some promising niche activities (such as lifestyles of voluntary simplicity or the economic framework of the *Economy for the Common Good*). Nevertheless, they indicated that they could still not detect imminent major shifts in the societal framework conditions or lifestyle practices that would be needed to change the social character. Hence, who would be initiating the concrete measures for the transformation of the socio-economic system and which concrete steps should be taken remained questions that still need to be addressed.

The many questions that the participants of the conference had in this regard came to my attention not only in the discussions after the presentations but also in the working group, moderated by Burkhard Bierhoff, that I visited. In this working group, the discussion revolved around questions such as: *Who is responsible for what (in our society, but also in the comparison of different nation states)? What do we/others already do, and what do we/others don't do? How can we overcome our personal struggles with behavior and lifestyle changes? How can we support or persuade others to overcome their struggles? How can we communicate more effectively with each other in our society? How do we implement change while ensuring that our economy would still be competitive?* The discussion seldom linked back explicitly to the psychological insights previously gained and specific implications of the theory of Fromm. I had the impression that, at this point, there was a high level of alertness and readiness to act amongst the members of the working group, but no shared sense of direction in terms of what exactly could be done because of what exact (psychological) reasons and how.

Presumably, to help answer these exact questions, the conference's final

presentation was held by Kora Kristof, who presented principles and strategies from the applied discipline of transformation research (see, e.g., Kristof 2022). She argued to build on the discipline's systematic professional approaches and insights to foster social-ecological transformation. For example, she repeatedly argued that change agents would have to learn to «love forms of resistance», i.e., to expect resistance to any kind of change, to think of how oneself would feel and act when resisting, and, importantly, to systematically include people who show resistance in change processes. For an external change agent, this would often require the ability to take a step back from the self-image as a case expert: Inviting the most resisting individuals could introduce very new perspectives, ideas, or grounds for compromise. Although Kora Kristof did not address this aspect explicitly, the idea of *loving resistance* drew back pleasantly to the psychoanalytic concept of resistance mentioned by previous speakers, i.e., challenges that come with acknowledging and dealing with resistance stemming from unconscious defense mechanisms. Furthermore, Kora Kristof reemphasized the need for establishing communication, as Kai Mosebach had previously suggested based on the work of Fromm. In this respect, she mentioned practical examples in which she could suddenly find common ground that she would never have expected with (previous) adversaries of the change process. Another suggestion of Kora Kristof linking to arguments that previous speakers had made was to approach change processes as holistically as possible, addressing social and ecological matters in parallel. Finally, to help transform promising niche activities into the mainstream, Kora Kristof suggested developing and experimenting with solutions on a small scale and with heterogeneous actors (e.g., in experimental spaces, pilot projects, and living laboratories). This would make it easier to upscale promising innovative solutions to a larger societal context.

Reflecting upon the contents of this step, again, there are obvious differences between behavior-change strategies from the traditions of environmental psychology and Erich Fromm. Importantly, environmental psychologists usually focus only on ecology-related behavior change. They often aim to foster informed conscious decision-making and tend to remain on a rather small societal scale (e.g., municipal level and below). In contrast, Erich Fromm started by developing a new model of society based on his humanist concept of the productive character orientation. In his view, this model would allow humans to develop their full potential in terms of, for example, relatedness, love, self-identity, or reason and objectivity. Following Fromm, for sustainable pro-environmental behavior change to occur, it would be necessary to foster human growth potential as a whole (e.g., by training productive human skills, but also by changing the reality of human living conditions). Again, applying

a more holistic and comprehensive approach should be an important impulse for environmental psychologists who have often struggled to find support for the long-term effectiveness of their interventions. As step 1 showed, the most meaningful goal of interventions at present would be to aim for large-scale socio-economic and lifestyle changes. Contrary to that goal, Fromm's theory implies that dominant social character orientations would develop enormous powers in the majority of society to uphold and defend the status quo. Hence, from the view of Fromm, communication-based interventions typical for environmental psychology would fail to unfold their full potential if they were opposed to unconscious fundamental motivations driven by social character orientations.

The transformation theory of Erich Fromm has another important component that behavior change strategies from environmental psychology are usually lacking — in fact, this component might currently be missing in many academic, political, or public discussions about the social-ecological transformation. In his descriptions of the productive character and his model of a sane society, Fromm created an *Utopian moment*: a clear, consistent, and conceivable image of how good the future which to strive for *would feel like*. In interdisciplinary models of socio-economic transformation towards sustainable future societies, depictions of the future are often quite technical, describe legal or economic framework conditions and procedures, name general aspects of how the social life would look like (e.g., terms such as *equality*), or that the *well-being* of individuals would be fostered. Fromm, on the other hand, described the positive impacts of socio-economic transformation for every human in much detail, relating, for example, to the level of feelings, self-identity, relations to others, and relations to the world and environment. His outline of a productive character orientation would be in line with pathways towards social-ecological transformation in interdisciplinary discourses. For example, a loving and reality-based relation towards other humans and nature, as well as usage of human creativity, would certainly help to develop suitable solutions to the current challenges; a strong sense of self-identity, interest, and productive activity would not depend on material needs and (resource) consumption. Thus, we would assume that developing the human growth potential and principles of sufficiency would reinforce one another. Although guided by humanist principles in his approach, Fromm derived his Utopian model of society from a well-developed psychological theory. This might offer psychologists a suitable reference framework to raise their voices in the context of social-ecological transformation processes. For example, they could now demand that exploring and fostering human psychological needs should be an important facet of social-ecological transformation — and they

could now evaluate models of change by policymakers or researchers from other disciplines based on a clear set of indicators. Furthermore, embedding the Utopian moment in communication measures could raise the attraction of models of a sustainable future and support acceptance of policy measures. The importance of appealing but reality-grounded communication of ideas and ideals was not only emphasized by Birgit Mahnkopf during the conference but also by Fromm (1962a, pp. 71–88) himself.

However, being used to very detailed and thorough intervention design from environmental psychology, my impression of the solutions suggested based on Fromm's work was that they needed further substantiation in terms of concrete change agents, concrete target groups, concrete methods, concrete timetables, measures of evaluation, etc. Fromm developed several ideas for transformation strategies toward his ideal model of the sane society. Nevertheless, as Burkhard Bierhoff mentioned, Fromm also called for more support from the scientific community and experts from practice to better understand possibilities for concrete steps towards large-scale character transformation. Especially, who would initiate the required fundamental changes in the socio-economic system remained rather unclear and implicit, which might have contributed to a certain degree of perplexity among the participants of the conference. In this respect, the concrete principles and methods from transformation research, as suggested by Kora Kristof, but also disciplines such as environmental psychology or action research, might help to develop ideas for hands-on practical research and experimenting with interventions in the field. An important aspect here would be to keep the time horizon in mind. In environmental psychology, measures to initiate fundamental value shifts, such as broad environmental education measures, are considered to take years and decades to make a meaningful impact. The social character concept of Erich Fromm is also a concept that we can expect to be relatively stable in a society, given that it is supposed to develop under stable social conditions. Thus, large-scale changes would probably also require much time — time that is running out in light of, for example, imminent tipping points of global warming. From a practical perspective, this might suggest the requirement to focus on building fast-growing social movements for change to happen in time (for an illustration of how such a movement could look like, see Fromm 1968, pp. 141–162). How exactly change agents could start and upscale a comprehensive humanist social movement could be a meaningful goal that could steer the direction of psychology-informed interventions in the near future.

Discussion and conclusion

In his presentation, Ingolfur Blühdorn described how, for a long time, he perceived conferences on the social-ecological transformation to follow similar patterns. The speakers and participants would tend to look ahead into the future, there would be manifold pleas to act, and most of the speakers and participants would attempt to create a dynamic feel-good atmosphere, which would be pleasant in times of fundamental uncertainties. I experienced the Annual Conference 2022 of the International Erich Fromm Society to be different from that. Except for the last presentation of Kora Kristof, who strongly advocated keeping a spirit of optimism, the speakers spared the audience no detail of the severity of our current situation in their different types of problem analyses. In the interdisciplinary analyses of the problem context, it became very clear once more that we humans are currently facing dramatic social and ecological crises that will likely have disastrous consequences for current and future human generations as well as for ecosystems and many other species on the planet. The speakers emphasized the enormous complexity and interrelatedness of current crises and the enormous time pressure to implement effective mitigation measures. Furthermore, they demonstrated that we humans are able to understand the causes of our current large-scale crises very well — in fact, to an enormous level of degree. We humans have also been able to develop a large variety of effective options for action. However, despite having gathered the necessary knowledge and suitable mitigation tools, we humans have not been able to take appropriate action. My conclusion here was that we clearly do not have a lack of knowledge about the challenges or possible solutions but about the reasons for the lack of appropriate response. Thus, psychological research should indeed play a central role in analyzing *how it is possible* that we are in the situation we are in.

The psychological analyses offered at the conference in this respect were very interesting from the perspective of a researcher with roots in environmental psychology. For example, environmental psychologists tend to focus on explaining behavior by focusing on conscious predictor variables. However, they tend to circumvent directly addressing systemic factors and neglect unconscious factors. Erich Fromm, on the other hand, built his theory to explain human behavior on these very pillars. With his theory of social character, he delivered reasonable explanations of how these two factors heavily influence and distort conscious processes and human behavior. Furthermore, Erich Fromm approaches analyzing human behavior comprehensively on a large societal scale, while environmental psychologists tend to focus on specific types and classes of environment-related behaviors and specific target groups/roles of the

member of a society (i.e., private-sphere behavior of individuals in their role as household members). Finally, Erich Fromm has been challenging positivistic tendencies in psychology, whereas environmental psychologists are currently quite positivistic in many of their activities. Hence, in sum, Fromm's theory can offer many impulses for environmental psychologists. In turn, for example, the theory of Fromm could be more articulate regarding the relationship of humans to nature in contemporary societies. My conclusion here would be that more dialogue between researchers of the two research traditions could be fruitful: Re-introducing the work of Erich Fromm to a diverse, application-oriented community currently open to new directions while further investigating and linking rational and non-rational factors could certainly lead to helpful new insights on the link between human behavior and large-scale social-ecological crises.

This brings me back to the beginning of this article and the audience member's question: «What shall we do now?» While interventions based on insights from environmental psychology tend to be quite specific and often aim at individual behavior changes on a smaller scale, Erich Fromm laid out a comprehensive model of a sane (and social-ecologically sustainable) society. However, he formulated rather general suggestions of how to get there. Environmental psychologists are currently aiming to gain more influence on the course of large-scale societal transformation processes, while researchers from the tradition of Fromm expressed to welcome more empirical research and theory-building regarding the question of how to transform social character. This situation might be another opportunity to foster dialogue between the research traditions, which could lead to new impulses for the development of comprehensive and effective psychology-informed interventions. In this respect, both disciplines would and should continue to engage in inter- and transdisciplinary dialogue to foster the productive orientation and the social-ecological transformation.

This article represents an effort to introduce two research traditions to each other that left a mark on my personal academic path. In sketching out major trends and tendencies for that purpose, it was often necessary to generalize. I am aware that I probably failed to address several lines of research aside from the mainstream, theoretical details, or contributions at the annual conference that might also have been important to my investigation. Already, I can think of many more ideas and concepts that would be worth mentioning, comparing, and investigating from the perspective of both traditions, and I can certainly think of other important insights and moments from the conference. I take this as further confirmation that environmental psychologists and researchers from the Frommian tradition should enter dialogue to strengthen psychology's theories, conduct meaningful research, and make a stronger impact regarding

the large-scale social-ecological challenges of our time — and I hope the reader takes this as an invitation to get involved in this process.

Erich Fromm (1976a) titled the final chapter of his famous book *To Have or To Be?* «The New Society: Is There a Reasonable Chance?» (p. 173). Throughout the book, he repeatedly emphasized the enormous challenges at hand and the slim chances for achieving change. So, is there a reasonable chance — and, possibly, even for psychologists? Although social and ecological crises have certainly not decreased in quantity and quality since the 1970s, underlying motivations to resist change towards more sustainability might have changed in our societies, as pointed out by, for example, Rainer Funk. Nevertheless, in light of the complexity, severity, and enormous time pressure of many large-scale social-ecological challenges such as climate change, combined with minimal large-scale mitigation efforts and current rollbacks of some of these efforts, it is hard to be optimistic that two rather small psychological traditions can really make a difference. What might be encouraging in this respect is Fromm's principle of hope, as presented by Kai Mosebach and Burkhard Bierhoff at the annual conference (see Fromm 1968a, pp. 6–24). For Fromm, the ability to hope was a component of the productive character orientation, a sign of being active and related to reality. Fromm encouraged us to have a reasonable form of hope that is grounded in reality. Kai Mosebach described how Fromm himself appeared to be following these principles of hope. When engaging in dialogue with scientists, politicians, or the public in his engagement for large-scale radical humanist change, he would appear as active, realistic, optimistic, and emotionally stable and secure. Hence, today, Fromm would probably hope. And, in any case, we can try to follow his example. I would like to conclude this article in the same way that Burkhard Bierhoff concluded his statement at the annual conference's final panel — by quoting these famous words of Fromm:

«Considering the power of the corporations, the apathy and powerlessness of the large mass of the population, the inadequacy of political leaders in almost all countries, the threat of nuclear war, the ecological dangers, not to speak of such phenomena as weather changes that alone could produce famines in large parts of the world, is there a reasonable chance for salvation? From the standpoint of a business deal, there is no such chance; no reasonable human beings would bet their fortunes when the odds represent only a 2 percent chance of winning, or make a large investment of capital in a business venture with the same poor chance of gain. But when it is a matter of life and death, «reasonable chance» must be translated into «real possibility,» however small it may be.» (Fromm 1976a, p. 197.)

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