

VU Research Portal

Worldviews and the Transformation to Sustainable Societies

Hedlund-de Witt, A.

2013

document version

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

[Link to publication in VU Research Portal](#)

citation for published version (APA)

Hedlund-de Witt, A. (2013). *Worldviews and the Transformation to Sustainable Societies: An exploration of the cultural and psychological dimensions of our global environmental challenges*.

General rights

Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in the public portal are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

- Users may download and print one copy of any publication from the public portal for the purpose of private study or research.
- You may not further distribute the material or use it for any profit-making activity or commercial gain
- You may freely distribute the URL identifying the publication in the public portal ?

Take down policy

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

E-mail address:

vuresearchportal.ub@vu.nl

Summary

Worldviews and the transformation to sustainable societies: An exploration of the cultural and psychological dimensions of our global environmental challenges

In the global debate on sustainable development there appears to be a growing recognition of the importance of worldviews vis-à-vis the urgently needed transformation to more sustainable societies. As Mike Hulme (2009) argues in his widely lauded book *'Why we disagree about climate change,'* debates about global environmental challenges such as climate change are disputes about ourselves—about our dreams, our fears, our assumptions, our identity—that is, about our worldviews. Some authors contend that the multiple crises we currently face are not only environmental, technological, economic, and political-institutional in nature, but also philosophical-existential, psychological, cultural, and even spiritual. Thus, worldviews are increasingly—and from a variety of perspectives and disciplinary angles—considered to be of vital importance in our timely quest for sustainable societies. A central argument and premise of this dissertation is therefore that an understanding of worldviews plays a major role in addressing our highly complex, multifaceted, and interwoven global sustainability issues.

The purpose of this dissertation, then, is to contribute to social-cultural transformation in the direction of more sustainable societies, by generating insight into the nature and structure of worldviews in the contemporary West and their interface with goals and issues of sustainable development. This aim is divided into five sub-aims, which can be summarized as follows:

- 1) Understanding the nature of worldviews;
- 2) Empirically investigating the structure of worldviews;
- 3) Exploring various worldviews and their relevance for sustainable development;
- 4) Deepening insight into worldviews with particular potentials for sustainable development; and
- 5) Applying insights into worldviews to sustainability policy and practice.

In the first chapter, I carefully argue why worldviews are understood to play a major role in addressing our complex sustainability issues from four different disciplinary perspectives: philosophy, psychology, sociology, and political science. Despite diverging positions on the subject, environmental philosophers generally tend to see worldviews (and frequently the Western worldview) as 'root-cause' of our sustainability issues, and a profound change in them (or it) therefore as crucial to the

process of forging solutions. Environmental psychologists argue that a change of individual lifestyles is essential in the transition towards more sustainable societies, and an understanding of worldviews therefore significant. Consider for example the complex task of changing culturally embedded behavior patterns such as meat consumption, car- and energy use, voting, consumption of 'green' products, and support for environmental organizations and -policy. Moreover, as sociological research indicates, profound shifts in (the Western) worldview are already taking place, informing social and grassroots movements, environmental initiatives, democratic functioning, and societal change. There are also arguments from the perspective of environmental policy-making, as a critical reflection on the—often implicit—worldviews that policies are based on potentially helps to intercept less sustainable policy strategies and may form the starting point for more reflexive forms of policy-making. Finally, I elaborate in this chapter on my 'research worldview,' and contextualize the chosen *mixed methods* research design therein. This design consists of quantitative (a large-scale representative survey in the Netherlands) and qualitative (in-depth interviews in Canada, the United States, and the Netherlands) studies, in combination with extensive literature reviews.

The nature of worldviews remains controversial, and it is still unclear how the concept can best be operationalized in the context of research and practice. In chapter two I therefore explore the nature of worldviews (*aim 1*). I do this through investigating various conceptualizations of the term in the history of philosophy, focusing on the ideas of Plato, Kant, Goethe, Hegel, Nietzsche, Heidegger, and several contemporary currents (e.g., social constructivism) and their potential successors (critical theory, integral theory, critical realism). This review shows that worldviews can be understood as inescapable, overarching systems of meaning and meaning-making that to a substantial extent inform how humans interpret, enact, and co-create reality. I then propose the *Integrative Worldview Framework (IWF)*. This framework operationalizes worldviews by differentiating them into five constitutive, interrelated aspects—ontology, epistemology, axiology, anthropology, and societal vision (or social imaginary). An *ontology* is a perspective on the nature of reality, a vision of 'what is' (including the nature of nature, the origin of the universe, the presence or absence of a God or the divine). An *epistemology* is a perspective on how knowledge of reality can be attained (what is valid knowledge, and why?). An *axiology* is a perspective on what a 'good life' is, both in a moral sense (ethical values) and in terms of the quality of life (aesthetic values). An *anthropology* is a perspective on who or what a human being is and what his/her role and position in the world, or even the universe, is. A *societal vision* is a perspective on how society should be organized and societal problems (including environmental ones) addressed. A worldview provides—even though frequently implicitly—answer to all these questions and concerns. Thus, by distinguishing these different aspects, the

somewhat abstract and ambiguous concept of 'worldview' becomes readily researchable (*aim 2*; see also table 2, p. 80). Lastly, I conclude that worldviews are profoundly historically and developmentally situated, arguing that the evolution of the worldview-concept is suggestive of an increasing reflexivity, creativity, responsibility, and inclusiveness—each of which are qualities that appear to be crucial for the global sustainable development debate.

In light of the need for more robust, empirical research into the relationship between worldviews and sustainable development, I aim to advance such (survey) research (*aim 2*) in chapter three. I do this by analyzing and critiquing existing measures such as the *New Environmental Paradigm*, on the way to developing a new conceptual and methodological approach. First, a review of multiple survey-approaches, stemming from different disciplinary and theoretical traditions, is conducted. This results in a meta-analysis of their strengths and weaknesses. On this basis it is concluded that a more optimal approach should be more comprehensive, systematic, and measure structural worldview-beliefs. Moreover, I argue that a more optimal approach should be able to account for human and cultural development, instead of being limited to the frequently used binary frameworks (e.g. New Environmental Paradigm versus Dominant Social Paradigm, intrinsic versus instrumental values of nature, preservation versus utilization), which are unable to account for the cognitive possibility of integration. I then argue that the IWF is able to support such a systematic, comprehensive, structural, and dynamic operationalization of the worldview-construct. In this way, a conceptually and methodologically innovative approach to exploring worldviews and their relationship to sustainable behaviors is developed and argued for.

In chapter four I use the IWF to empirically and quantitatively explore how environmental attitudes and sustainable lifestyles are related to worldviews in both individuals and (Western) society at large—thus testing the utility of the IWF for investigating worldviews (*aim 2*) as well as exploring different worldviews and their relevance for sustainable development (*aim 3*). First, environmental attitudes are placed in a larger historical-cultural context (on the basis of Charles Taylor's work) and psychological context (using Self-Determination Theory, or SDT). Then, a questionnaire exploring worldviews, environmental attitudes, and sustainable lifestyles was developed and conducted with 1043 individuals in the Netherlands. Principal component-analyses resulted in five worldview-factors, labeled *Inner growth*, *Contemporary spirituality*, *Traditional God*, *Focus on money*, and *Secular materialism*, and three environmental attitudes, *Connectedness with nature*, *Willingness to change*, and *Technological optimism*. The results show that notably Inner growth and Contemporary spirituality are related to Connectedness with nature and Willingness to change, which are related to more sustainable lifestyles. In contrast, Focus on money and Secular materialism are related to Technological

optimism, which tends to be related to less sustainable lifestyles. This study thus shows that there is indeed an empirically demonstrable relationship between how people understand and interpret the world (worldviews) and a variety of environmentally relevant behaviors, such as meat consumption, car use, voting behavior, and support for environmental organizations. In line with SDT, these results suggest that more intrinsically oriented (or 'eudaimonic') worldviews correlate positively with pro-environmental attitudes and lifestyles, while more extrinsically oriented (or 'hedonic') worldviews correlate negatively. In line with Taylor, these results can also be interpreted to indicate the existence of (at least) a more traditional, modern, and postmodern worldview in the Netherlands.

As the results of the survey demonstrate, several phenomena, such as contemporary spirituality, the cultural emphasis on inner growth and self-exploration, and the popularity of nature experience and connectedness with nature appear to be of particular relevance for sustainable development. Chapters five, six, and seven therefore report the further investigation of these phenomena, such as spiritual nature experiences (chapter five), the culture of contemporary spirituality (chapter six), the integrative worldview (chapter seven), and their interface with sustainable development (*aim 4*).

In chapter five, I offer an *insiders perspective* into contemporary nature spirituality, thereby making the inner experience of this phenomenon more comprehensible and palpable for the reader. This is done through a qualitative exploration of the spiritual dimension of nature experience and its relationship to environmental responsibility, as reported in 25 semi-structured, in-depth interviews with nature-lovers/environmentalists and spiritual practitioners in Victoria, Canada. Although these individuals were not explicitly asked about their worldviews, their understanding and experience of both nature and spirituality were extensively explored, thereby providing insight into central aspects of their worldviews, including their ontologies, epistemologies, and axiologies. As the interviews demonstrate, seeing nature as imbued with meaning, intrinsic value, and/or the sacred seems to engender an increased sense of environmental responsibility. Simultaneously, a natural, evolutionary, this-worldly understanding of spirituality tends to lead to a 'kinship with all life'-ethics. The participant's spiritual nature experience was characterized by three key-themes—labeled *Presence*, *Interconnectedness*, and *Self-expansion*. Many participants explained that these spiritual nature experiences profoundly informed their worldviews, sense of environmental responsibility, and sometimes their career choices. The research thereby illuminates three pathways to a sense of environmental responsibility: profound encounters with nature, contemporary spirituality, and their convergence in spiritual nature experiences.

Chapter six reports an investigation of the sociological literature on the culture of contemporary spirituality, resulting in a delineation and overview of its potentials and pitfalls for sustainable development. This chapter demonstrates that this culture can both be a potentially promising force, as well as a phenomenon posing specific risks, for sustainable development. Table thirteen (p. 196) gives a concise overview of the primary potentials and pitfalls as identified in this study. Moreover, a developmental-structuralist understanding is introduced in order to be able to distinguish between more monistic and more integrative tendencies in this culture.

In chapter seven, I focus on the integrative worldview, which, according to several authors, attempts to reconcile rational thought and science with a spiritual sense of awe for the cosmos. This study generates insight into this worldview by qualitatively exploring it in 20 semi-structured, in-depth interviews with integrative environmental leaders and innovators (*aim 4 and 2*). The results demonstrate that these individuals tend to: share an evolutionary/developmental, spiritual-unitive perspective on the nature of reality (ontology); hold a positive view on human nature as characterized by a vast, though generally unrealized, potential (anthropology); emphasize an internalization of authority, as well as an integration of multiple modes of knowing (epistemology); and engage in their sustainability-work from a spiritual foundation (axiology). The results also show how these premises logically flow forth in a social imaginary of a sustainable society, or 'sustainable social imaginary,' which is: 1) positive; 2) emancipatory; 3) inclusive of post-rational ways of working/knowing; and 4) integrative/synthetic. The chapter concludes that this imaginary or societal vision—particularly because of its compatibility with, and its attempt to integrate and synthesize (instead of polarize with), other perspectives and worldviews—may serve the important task of public communication and large-scale mobilization for sustainable solutions.

In chapter eight, I explore how the assembled insights into the predominant worldviews in the West can be applied to policy and practice for sustainable solutions (*aim 5*). To do so, I introduce an expanded understanding and articulation of the IWF (*aim 2*), offering a synoptic overview of the major worldviews in the West, based on the empirical results of chapters four, five, six, and seven, in the light of the findings of, among others, sociologists. See table 13 for this expanded overview of the IWF, which ideal-typically delineates *traditional*, *modern*, *postmodern*, and *integrative* worldviews in the contemporary West, using the five worldview-aspects as an organizing scheme. In this chapter, I also offer the perspective that the culture of contemporary spirituality (as explored predominantly in chapter six) can potentially be understood as transition and bridge between more postmodern and more integrative worldviews, displaying a process of dialectical development.

Chapter eight then moves on to demonstrate that the IWF has the potential to serve as: 1) a heuristic for psychological, cultural, and policy reflexivity; 2) an

analytical tool for understanding worldview-dynamics in society; and 3) a scaffolding for effective sustainability communications and solutions. It is argued that reflecting on and clarifying the worldview that undergirds one's aims may have a powerful and transformative effect on the policy-making process. Moreover, a basic understanding of the structure and dynamics of worldviews in our contemporary context is likely to contribute to more attuned and thus more effective communications and cooperation for sustainable solutions. I suggest that the IWF can thereby function as a concrete tool for facilitating the emergence of more *reflexive* forms of governance, as well as increasing their democratic and deliberative quality. As PBL Netherlands Environmental Assessment Agency (2004, 2008) has argued, thinking from the perspective of diverging worldviews may help to intercept less sustainable policy strategies and detect transverse connections. The practice of explication and confrontation of worldviews may form the starting point of a creative process for the seeking of syntheses and new pathways for policymaking.

I conclude in chapter 9 with a discussion of the major theoretical and methodological concerns with respect to the dissertation as whole, including: 1) the use of different theoretical and paradigmatic perspectives; 2) the use of a developmental perspective; 3) the relationship between individual and collective worldviews; 4) the worldview-bias of the researcher; 5) the use of a heuristic approach; 6) the choice to focus on certain worldviews at the expense of others; 7) and the worldview-structures emerging from the survey. In this context, I also offer recommendations for further research. I end by summarizing my findings with respect to the five sub-aims and sketching future perspectives through concisely discussing the larger societal and policy-implications of this study.