



# It's *not* (just) “the environment, stupid!” Values, motivations, and routes to engagement of people adopting lower-carbon lifestyles

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## ARTICLE INFO

### Article history:

Received 26 April 2012

Received in revised form 10 September 2012

Accepted 5 October 2012

Available online 1 November 2012

### Keywords:

Lower-carbon lifestyles

Values

Motivations

Environmentally responsible behaviour

Climate change mitigation

Pro-environmental behaviour

## ABSTRACT

This exploratory mixed-methods study uses in-depth interviews to investigate the values, motivations, and routes to engagement of UK citizens who have adopted lower-carbon lifestyles. Social justice, community, frugality, and personal integrity were common themes that emerged from the transcripts. Concern about ‘the environment’ per se is not the primary motivation for most interviewees’ action. Typically, they are more concerned about the plight of poorer people who will suffer from climate change. Although biospheric values are important to the participants, they tended to score altruistic values significantly higher on a survey instrument. Thus, it may not be necessary to promote biospheric values to encourage lower-carbon lifestyles. Participants’ narratives of how they became engaged with climate action reveal links to human rights issues and groups as much as environmental organisations and positive experiences in nature. Some interviewees offered very broad (positive) visions of what ‘a low-carbon lifestyle’ means to them. This, and the fact that ‘climate change’ is not necessarily seen as interesting even by these highly engaged people, reveals a need for climate change mitigation campaigns to promote a holistic view of a lower-carbon future, rather than simply offering a ‘to do’ list to ‘combat climate change’.

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## 1. Introduction

[I]t is important to understand not only attitudes toward the environment, but also the motives and values that form the basis for those attitudes. Examining both attitudes and associated motives can lead to a better understanding of environmentally related behaviors and new ideas about ways to encourage conservation. (Thompson and Barton, 1994, p.156)

Encouraging conservation in the huge range of individual and household-level behaviours that contribute to climate change has become an important policy goal: behavioural change with regard to home energy use, travel, and the consumption of goods and services is a significant part of the government’s climate change mitigation strategy (HM Government, 2006). This paper investigates the values and motivations, and the (generally related) routes to engagement, of people who have adopted lower-carbon lifestyles, in order to determine whether these offer new ideas about how to promote such change. It includes an examination of the images and discourses such people associate with ‘climate change’ and ‘a low-carbon lifestyle’, so as to understand what concepts associated with these terms are motivational (or not).

Adopting ‘a lower-carbon lifestyle’ is understood here to mean making changes to one’s lifestyle in order to reduce one’s carbon footprint (i.e. the amount of greenhouse gases emitted by the activities comprising that lifestyle). Thus it does not necessarily mean ‘having a below-average carbon footprint’ (although that would be true of many of those involved in this study); ‘lower-carbon’ refers to individuals having a lower carbon footprint now relative to some time previously, through intentionally adopting new technologies and/or changing their behaviour.

In this paper I refer to ‘environmentally responsible behaviour’ (ERB), rather than using the more common term ‘pro-environmental behaviour’, because I shall argue that behaviours undertaken to mitigate climate change are not necessarily motivated solely or primarily by concern for ‘the environment’ per se, and thus the term ‘pro-environmental’ could be misleading. Although the phrase ‘environmentally responsible behaviour’ may share some of the connotations of ‘behaviour undertaken for specifically ecocentric motives’ (i.e. because of a concern about the natural world for its own sake), it perhaps does so to a lesser extent. The term is used here to refer to behaviour that seeks to reduce the negative impact of one’s actions on the natural or built environment, whether or not this is done for ecocentric reasons.

After a review of relevant literature, Section 2 details the methods and participants involved in this study. Qualitative findings relating to participants’ values and motives (Section 3) and routes to engagement with climate change (Section 4) are

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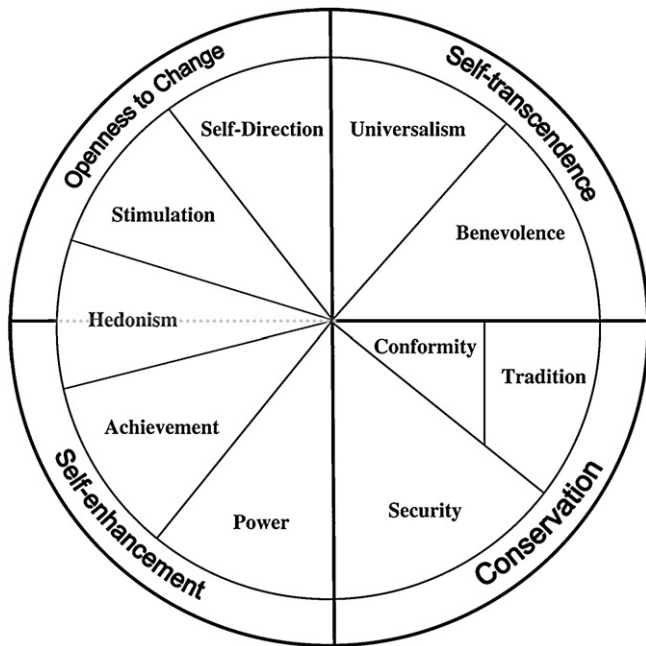


Fig. 1. Schwartz values circumplex.

Source: Davidov et al., 2008. Values and Support for Immigration: A Cross-Country Comparison, *European Sociological Review* 5, 583–599. By permission of Oxford University Press.

followed by results of a quantitative values survey (Section 5). Section 6 examines interviewees' discourses and images relating to climate change and low-carbon lifestyles, and Section 7 offers an overall discussion and conclusions.

### 1.1. Values and environmentally responsible behaviour

The term 'value' is defined here following Schwartz (1992, p.21) as "a desirable transsituational goal varying in importance, which serves as a guiding principle in the life of a person or other social entity." Values make a significant and strong contribution to the explanation of different environmental beliefs and behavioural intentions (de Groot and Steg, 2008). Value-belief-norm theory (Stern, 2000; Stern et al., 1999) posits that values are the first link in a causal chain influencing worldviews, awareness of negative consequences of behaviour, and ascription of personal responsibility for those consequences, thus activating personal norms that lead to ERB.

Schwartz's (1992, 1994) influential Value Theory posits that there are ten motivational value types, organised in two bipolar dimensions: Openness to Change vs Conservation (in the sense of valuing tradition and conformity), and Self-Enhancement vs Self-Transcendence (see Fig. 1). The poles of each dimension are opposed to each other; for example, self-enhancement values (achievement, power) are opposed to self-transcendent values (universalism, benevolence). Studies suggest that environmentally responsible attitudes and behaviour are predicted by self-transcendent values (Karp, 1996; Nordlund and Garvill, 2002; Stern and Dietz, 1994), especially those in the 'universalism' category (Schultz and Zelezny, 1999; Thøgersen and Ölander, 2002).

Schwartz's 'universalism' value type includes both 'altruistic' (e.g. social justice, equality) and 'biospheric' (protecting the environment, unity with nature) items. In the 1970s, debate began over whether ERB is motivated more by a 'land ethic' (associated with biospheric values), or 'the golden rule' (altruistic values) (Dunlap and Van Liere, 1977a,b; Heberlein, 1972, 1977).

Since the early 1990s, research has sought to identify whether these values can be empirically distinguished (Schultz, 2000; Stern, 2000). Karp (1996) found a biospheric value factor, which correlated with ERB, but Stern et al. (1995) and Stern et al. (1998) found no evidence for distinct altruistic and biospheric value orientations. More recently, de Groot and Steg (2007, 2008) have developed a survey instrument that distinguishes egoistic, altruistic, and biospheric values. They found that both altruistic and especially biospheric values positively correlate with preference for a car that scores high on environmental aspects, while people with a biospheric value orientation express a preference for donating to environmental over humanitarian organisations and those with an altruistic value orientation express the opposite preference (de Groot and Steg, 2010).

Holding certain values does not necessarily lead to ERB; there is frequently a mismatch between the attitudes and values that people affirm, and their actual behaviour (Anable et al., 2006; Blake, 1999). This 'value-action gap' arises because many factors other than values influence behaviour, and these may constitute psychological or situational constraints on action (Gifford, 2011; Lorenzoni et al., 2007; Tanner, 1999). Everyday behaviours are often routine and habitual, making them difficult to change (Bamberg and Schmidt, 2003; Hobson, 2003; Ouellette and Wood, 1998). But although it cannot be assumed that promoting particular values will lead to lower-carbon lifestyles, it is worth understanding the values of those who have adopted such lifestyles, as they might suggest necessary, though not sufficient, prerequisites for (voluntary) action, and conversely, could reveal that certain values are not essential antecedents of ERB.

### 1.2. Motives for environmentally responsible behaviour

When people consider particular choices, the various values that they hold can conflict, and certain values may lack salience. Therefore it is also important to consider individuals' motives for adopting ERBs. These may be multiple and complex (Moisander, 2007). There has been less research in this area than on values relating to ERB.

A motive is similar to a value in that it is a reason for action, or the goal of action, and motives and values can certainly overlap. 'Protecting the environment', for example, can be both a motive for action and the value that inspires action. The distinction between motives and values being made here is that, although at least something about a person's values may be inferred from the reasons (motives) they give for their behaviour, particularly if these are consistent across behavioural domains, the values that (they state) are most important to them are not necessarily the motives for a particular course of action. Thus we cannot assume that we understand a person's motives for specific behaviours or even general categories of behaviour (such as 'reducing consumption') by asking only about their values.

Adopting a lower-carbon lifestyle may be an example of ecological citizenship, which emphasises global, non-reciprocal responsibilities towards others as the main reason to minimise one's ecological impact (Jagers, 2009). Participants in a study of perceptions of and responses to climate change by Wolf and colleagues (Wolf, 2011; Wolf et al., 2009) shared a belief that acting to mitigate climate change is part of being a 'responsible citizen', and expressed compassion for those affected by climate change impacts. Interviewees thought they were using more than their fair share of global resources, and felt guilty about contributing to the problem. They believed that people in developing countries suffer disproportionately due to climate change; "[t]his perceived inequity in part induced the feeling of individuals' civic responsibility in the absence of political leadership on the issue" (Wolf, 2011, p. 126).

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