



Green lifestyles and subjective well-being: More about self-image than actual behavior?[☆]



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ABSTRACT

Does environmentally-friendly behavior necessarily imply sacrifice? In the metric of subjective well-being, research has shown that green behavior and sustainable consumption are positively related to life satisfaction. We extend this research analyzing UKHLS household panel data for Great Britain, showing that this boost in life satisfaction is mostly due to self-image (i.e. one's own assessment of how environmentally-friendly one's behavior is) but not due to concrete pro-environmental behaviors such as conserving water, recycling and so on. We further show that green self-image increases the extent and intensity of green behavior yet even the greenest (self-identified) individuals do not consistently exhibit all pro-environmental behaviors. By this, our data can be used to assess the varying extent of a value-action gap for different pro-environmental behaviors for our sample.

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1. Introduction

Climate change, over-exploitation of natural resources and environmental pollution have prompted researchers and policy-makers to rethink the idea of how societies should live in order to avoid damaging nature (United-Nations, 1992; World Commission, 1987). Consumers can play a role here by adopting “green lifestyles”, aiming for sufficiency, voluntary simplicity, sustainable consumption or other ways of being part of a “green economy”. However, to the extent that “green lifestyles” (or ecologically-sustainable behavior) are costly or lead to reduced consumption they seem to imply the sacrifice of some of the well-being that one imagines will result from consuming the goods the modern consumer is so used to.

But is a “green lifestyle” really associated with sacrifice and ordeal? Within a narrow standard economic framework, lower incomes (and consumption of goods) translate into lower welfare (Mas-Colell et al., 1995, chs. 1–3). When adopting

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a broader view of societal progress (“Beyond GDP”, Stiglitz et al., 2010; Binder, 2013, 2016b), however, it is no longer *prima facie* clear whether adopting a green lifestyle will prove detrimental under these alternative currencies of welfare.

In the present paper, we adopt a subjective well-being view, arguing that what ultimately should matter in the assessment of welfare is not one’s income (an instrument; a means) but rather the subjective well-being individuals derive from all that is to their lives (not solely from consumption). In this framework, our research question then becomes whether cutting down on consumption spending, living sustainably and green, will impact negatively in terms of subjective well-being on those who adopt such a lifestyle. We want to explore the hypothesis that leading a green lifestyle might be actually beneficial for individuals’ well-being (Kasser, 2017) because it allows them to achieve meaning in their lives and behave in altruistic ways. Both non-materialistic lifestyles (Pandelaere, 2016) and altruistic behavior (Dunn et al., 2011; Binder and Freytag, 2013) have been shown to improve individuals’ subjective well-being and they could thus counterbalance the negative well-being effect from decreasing one’s consumption of material goods. In short: adopting a green lifestyle assessed in the currency of subjective well-being might not be such a sacrifice at all.

Our work builds on related literature, where a small number of cross-sectional studies have found positive relationships between subjective well-being and specific types of environmentally-friendly behavior (Brown and Kasser, 2005; Jacob et al., 2009; Welsch and Kühling, 2010, 2011; Xiao and Li, 2011). We contribute to this literature by focussing on “green lifestyles”, distinguishing here between green self-image (perceived lifestyle) and actual green behavior (actual lifestyle), the latter of which also allows us to quantify the extent of divergence between self-image and behavior (thus providing a measure of the “value-action gap” in green behavior in our sample). Considering the importance of self-image or identity (Akerlof and Kranton, 2010) for well-being and pro-environmental behavior (Sexton and Sexton, 2014; Owen et al., 2010), we explore to which extent it is one’s self-identification with a green lifestyle or the actual green behavior that drives the expected positive relationship between an environmentally responsible way of life and subjective well-being.

The British UKHLS panel data set allows us to apply panel data methods to a data set better representative of a larger population and offers a rich variety of information, ranging from self-assessments of whether one considers one’s lifestyle to be environmentally friendly to the (objective) assessment to what extent one follows environmentally friendly behaviors (such as bringing one’s own bag to do the groceries, turning off the tap water while brushing teeth, car pooling, and so on). We find that while self-assessments of leading a green lifestyle are associated with higher subjective well-being, the same does not hold for the actual green behaviors. We explore further the extent to which self-image will impact on green behaviors and can show that green self-image predicts green behaviors, whereas the (stated) preference to do more environmentally-friendly things does not. We also find that even those who self-identify as doing everything environmentally-friendly in our sample do not consistently exhibit the concrete green behaviors elicited in the questionnaire. Using this as a measure of a “value-action gap” we can see that such a gap depends strongly on the different types of green behaviors (ranging from 2% in the case of running tap water while brushing teeth to 65% in the case of taking fewer flights).

The paper is structured as follows. We first present the pertinent literature and state of research in Section 2. Section 3 contains a description of our data set. We then present the results and discussion of their relevance in Sections 4 and 5. The penultimate section deals with how green lifestyles translate into pro-environmental action and the value-action gap (Section 6). We conclude in Section 7.

2. Literature background: pro-environmental behaviors, green lifestyles and subjective well-being

Sustainable development requires systematic individual participation (United-Nations, 1992), e.g. in the form of pro-environmental behavior and sustainable lifestyles (or “green lifestyles”¹), including not only (green) consumption, but also energy saving, waste management and water conservation, and so on (Barr and Gilg, 2006, 2006; Christensen, 1997; Lorenzen, 2012; Seegebarth et al., 2016).

Within a narrow standard economic framework, where higher income and higher consumption spending are equated with higher welfare (Mas-Colell et al., 1995, chs. 1–3), reducing one’s consumption expenditures to live more sustainably translates into welfare losses so that following a green lifestyle would be viewed as involving sacrifice (e.g. Brown and Kasser, 2005).² We adopt a broader subjective well-being view of societal progress (Binder, 2016b; Mont and Plepys, 2008; Veenhoven, 2008; Engelbrecht, 2009) to assess the effects of pro-environmental behavior and green lifestyles.³ While there are some few studies that directly analyze the impact of specific green behaviors on subjective well-being (see Kasser, 2017,

¹ Different concepts exist under this wide label amongst them “sufficiency” (e.g. Enquete-Commission, 2013), “frugality” (e.g. Lastovicka et al., 1999) or “voluntary simplicity” (with “downshifting” as its moderate version, e.g. Etzioni, 1998).

² A broader utility maximization framework could incorporate psychic payoffs from sustainable lifestyles into the utility function in addition to consumption goods. The optimal consumption level of both is reached under usual assumptions when marginal utilities of consumption and conservation are equal. Finding positive coefficients for pro-environmental behavior on subjective well-being would then be interpreted as consumers falling short of maximizing utility or be attributed to divergences between decision utility and experienced utility (i.e. ex post subjective well-being). Such a view would cast the results of subjective well-being research as extension of the standard microeconomic utility maximization model and is discussed in Welsch and Kühling (2010, 2011).

³ A broad literature has investigated the determinants of subjective well-being (Frey and Stutzer, 2002, 2005; Dolan et al., 2008; Graham, 2009; Layard et al., 2012). These measures’ validity and reliability have been sufficiently established so that we refrain from further discussing it here (see, e.g., Krueger and Schkade, 2008). The usage of subjective well-being data in environmental economics strongly increased in recent years (Welsch and Ferreira, 2013; Welsch and Kühling, 2009).

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