



Exploring worldviews and their relationships to sustainable lifestyles: Towards a new conceptual and methodological approach

Annick Hedlund-de Witt*

Institute for Environmental Studies, Environmental Policy Analysis, Free University Amsterdam, De Boelelaan 1087, 1081 HV Amsterdam, The Netherlands

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 4 May 2012

Received in revised form 5 September 2012

Accepted 10 September 2012

Available online 24 October 2012

Keywords:

Worldviews

Sustainable behaviors/lifestyles

Values

Environmental attitudes

Survey-research

Literature review

Integrative Worldview Framework

New Environmental Paradigm

ABSTRACT

In the global debate on sustainable development, there appears to be a growing recognition of the crucial importance of *worldviews* vis-à-vis the urgently needed transition to an ecological economy and society. This study therefore aims to support (survey) research exploring worldviews and their complex relationships to sustainable lifestyles. I do this by analyzing and critically challenging existing measures such as the *New Environmental Paradigm*, and by 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 comprehensive and systematic, measure structural worldview-beliefs, and be able to account for human and cultural development. Then, the *Integrative Worldview Framework* (IWF) is proposed in order 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.

© 2012 Elsevier B.V. All rights reserved.

1. Introduction

A change of behaviors in a more sustainable direction is generally considered to be of vital importance for realizing the urgently needed transition to an ecological economy and society (Buenstorf and Cordes, 2008; World Watch Institute, 2008). Such sustainable behaviors include pro-ecological, frugal, altruistic, and equitable behaviors, and there is empirical evidence showing significant interrelationships among those different types of actions (Corral Verdugo, 2012; De Young, 1993; Schultz, 2001). Such behaviors thus involve aspects of individual *lifestyles*—such as consumer and dietary choices, use of energy and transportation, political priorities, support for policy measures, and contributions to societal change. However, such everyday choices, which can be seen as important drivers of spending patterns and economic trends, are generally understood to be difficult to alter. Not only are there many structural (e.g. economical, infrastructural, institutional, social-practical) barriers for changing behaviors and lifestyles, they also tend to be deeply embedded in worldviews, values, and cultural associations and habits (Gifford, 2011; Schösler and Hedlund-de Witt, 2012; Shove et al., 2012; Sorin, 2010). This has also been called ‘the double embedding of attitudes’ (Hernes, 2012).

Worldviews, the inescapable frameworks of meaning and meaning-making that profoundly inform our very understanding and enactment of reality, appear to be particularly relevant in this context. Not only do

they tend to shape how individuals perceive particular (ecological) issues and their potential solutions, they also tend to influence their willingness to partake in such solutions themselves, as well as their (political) support for addressing the issue societally (Gifford, 2011; Kempton et al., 1995). According to Taylor (1989), our contemporary cultural landscape is characterized by a tension between the opposing currents or worldviews of a post-Romantic expressivism on the one hand, and an Enlightenment-inspired instrumental reason on the other. While the former worldview tends to see the solution to ecological issues in humanity recognizing its place in the larger natural order, the latter worldview generally understands the solution to be through the means of technical fixes—that is, better and more far-reaching uses of instrumental reason. Worldviews thus profoundly influence perceptions of human–environment relationships, thereby informing environmental attitudes and sustainable lifestyles. Take for example the consumption of organic food. The origination of organic agriculture in the beginning of the 20th century has frequently been associated with shifting views on and feelings towards nature (Schösler et al., 2012; Verdonk, 2009; Vogt, 2007). Such changing perspectives on the human–nature relationship—e.g. from domination over nature towards participation with nature—may point at larger processes of changing worldviews in society (Campbell, 2007; Hedlund-de Witt, 2011; Van den Born, 2008), thereby supporting economic and political trends, such as the global growth in organic food industry (LEI, 2009) and the emergence of political support for organic and ecological agriculture. Therefore, in order to better understand the nature and structure of (more) sustainable behaviors and lifestyles, insight into *worldviews*

* Tel./fax: +31 20 59 83062.

E-mail address: Annick.de.witt@vu.nl.

and how they function and change in society appears to be of substantial relevance (De Vries and Petersen, 2009; Hulme, 2009; O'Brien, 2009).

As a field of study, the concept or construct of worldview is still young, and to date, there is no formal (scientific) general theory of worldview available (Koltko-Rivera, 2004).¹ At the same time, and paradoxically so, as Kearney (1975) noted more than three decades ago, literature about worldview-related subjects permeates the social sciences, including sociology, psychology, and anthropology. In fact, the intangibles—that is, the worldviews, values, and attitudes—that seem to underlie and interact with (more) sustainable behaviors and lifestyles have been explored for decades. As a result, a large body of research has built up on the issue of what explains individual differences in such behaviors (see e.g. Kaiser et al., 1999; Milfont and Duckitt, 2004; Schultz and Zelezny, 1999). While *values* have been conceptualized as important life goals or standards (Rokeach, 1973), *environmental attitudes* have been defined as “the collection of beliefs, affect, and behavioral intentions a person holds regarding environmentally related activities or issues” (Schultz et al., 2004). The more encompassing concept of *worldview* is generally understood to consist of foundational assumptions and perceptions “regarding the underlying nature of reality, ‘proper’ social relations or guidelines for living, or the existence or non-existence of important entities” (Koltko-Rivera, 2004). Worldviews are then understood as the inescapable, overarching systems of meaning and meaning-making that substantially inform how humans interpret, enact, and co-create reality (Hedlund-de Witt, 2013), and thus contain, for example, values and environmental attitudes. Although the concept of worldview has not been a central focus in existing approaches in the field of environmental behavior and psychology, precisely because of its overarching nature it may be particularly suitable to come to a more comprehensive understanding of the explanatory mechanisms underlying individual differences in (more) sustainable behaviors, as well as generate insight into how existing approaches are related to each other. Also others have argued that the concept of worldview may have the potential to function as an integrative framework with which to investigate the interaction of beliefs, values, and attitudes (Johnson et al., 2011; Koltko-Rivera, 2004).

This study, then, aims to support research into worldviews and their relationships to (more) sustainable lifestyles, by analyzing and critically challenging existing measures as well as by developing a new conceptual and methodological approach that attempts to build forth on their strengths and surpass their identified limitations. First, a literature review is provided in which multiple survey-approaches, stemming from different disciplinary and theoretical traditions, are summarized and explored. Subsequently, a meta-analysis is presented that identifies several limitations to these measures, as well as potentially opportune directions for a new survey approach. On the basis of this analysis it is concluded that, optimally, an approach to exploring worldviews in relationship to sustainable behavior should be comprehensive and systematic, measure structural worldview beliefs and assumptions, and be able to account for human and cultural development. Then, the Integrative Worldview Framework (IWF) is proposed, aiming to support such a systematic, comprehensive, structural, and dynamic conceptualization of the worldview construct. This framework enables one to operationalize the somewhat abstract and complex concept of worldview in the context of empirical research (such as survey studies), highlighting that a worldview is not a patchwork of loosely related phenomena but a coherent pattern or *system* that integrates seemingly isolated ideas into a common whole (Campbell, 2007; Inglehart and

Welzel, 2005; Johnson et al., 2011). Moreover, in contrast with existing measures that are frequently based on one or two central binaries (e.g. new environmental paradigm versus dominant social paradigm, intrinsic versus instrumental values of nature), this framework is based on a more dynamic, dialectical–developmental perspective (see e.g. Habermas, 1976; Kahn, 1999; Kegan, 1982; Wilber, 2000). The article concludes that this framework may have substantial potential to support studies investigating the relationships between worldviews, environmental attitudes, and sustainable lifestyles. Finally, directions for potential future research are outlined.

2. Literature Review: Research into Worldviews and Values

In this section, I discuss a sample of five, generally widely used and frequently cited approaches (e.g. Dunlap et al., 2000; Mayer and McPherson Frantz, 2004; Milfont and Duckitt, 2004; Schultz and Zelezny, 1999; Thompson and Barton, 1994) that stem from distinct disciplinary and theoretical traditions, such as social and environmental psychology, political science, environmental philosophy, and value theory. In this way, I aim to cover the most exemplary approaches to researching worldviews and values vis-à-vis sustainable behaviors and lifestyles, as well as insure some degree of diversity among them. Most of these approaches tend to be conceptually and methodologically formulated around one or two central binaries.² This section is therefore structured according to this observation.

2.1. The New Environmental Paradigm: Ecological Interconnectedness versus Human Exemption

The most widely used scale for exploring environmental worldviews in the past few decades is the New Environmental Paradigm (NEP; see e.g. Dunlap, 1980, 2008; Dunlap et al., 2000). The NEP aims to measure the adherence of individuals to an “ecological worldview,” which, in contrast with the Dominant Social Paradigm (DSP), acknowledges “the fact that human societies depend on their biophysical environment for survival” (Dunlap, 1980). According to the authors, the DSP starts from the assumption that, unlike other species, *Homo sapiens* is exempt from ecological constraints. In contrast, the environmental paradigm calls attention to the fact that human beings are governed by the same physical laws that regulate the growth and development of all other species. This new paradigm thus rejects the “exemptionalist” perspective on human societies (Dunlap, 1980). The conceptualization of the NEP focuses on beliefs about humanity’s ability to upset the balance of nature, the existence of limits to growth for human societies, and humanity’s right to rule over the rest of nature, plus (in the updated version) the estimated likelihood of an ecological catastrophe, and a stance of anti-anthropocentrism. Although the NEP has proven to be, especially at the time of its conception, a highly innovative approach with fairly strong psychometric properties (e.g. strong internal reliability), the scale has been criticized for its lack of unidimensionality and its lack of predictive power concerning environmental behavior (see e.g. Dunlap, 2008; Scott and Willits, 1994). Moreover, other authors have argued that while the NEP emphasizes the instrumental and ecological interconnectedness between human beings and nature, the intrinsic and spiritual connection seems not-well captured (Lockwood, 1999;

¹ Although one can find aspects of the worldview-construct under other names (e.g. schema’s, values) in the literature of a number of psychological subdisciplines, there appears to be a neglect of the concept in the mainstream psychological literature. As Koltko-Rivera describes this situation: “One comes away with the impression that worldview is the most important construct that the typical psychologist has never heard of” see: Koltko-Rivera (2004). The psychology of worldviews. Review of General Psychology 8, 3–58.

² However, this binary structure does not characterize all existing approaches. An example is the Human-and-Nature scale (HaN-Scale), which differentiates several images of relationship between humans and nature, ranging from ‘master,’ ‘steward,’ ‘partner,’ to ‘participant.’ (De Groot et al., 2011 Public visions of the human/nature relationship and their implications for environmental ethics. Environmental Ethics 33, 25–44, Van den Born, 2008 Rethinking nature: Visions of nature of a Dutch public. Environmental Values 17, 83–109). However, as has been noted by the authors themselves, these different images of relationship may be interpreted as a (binary) scale of degree of anthropocentricity. Moreover, the HaN-scale is primarily focused on the relationship between humans and nature, and is thus of limited use for investigating worldviews more comprehensively.

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/5050052>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/5050052>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)