



# Exploring inner and outer worlds: A quantitative study of worldviews, environmental attitudes, and sustainable lifestyles



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## ABSTRACT

This study generates insight into how environmental attitudes and sustainable lifestyles relate to worldviews. First, environmental attitudes are contextualized cultural-historically (using Charles Taylor's work) and psychologically (using self-determination theory, SDT). Then, a questionnaire exploring worldviews, environmental attitudes, and sustainable lifestyles was conducted ( $n = 1043$ ) in the Netherlands. Component analyses resulted in five worldview-factors (Inner growth, Contemporary spirituality, Traditional God, Focus on money, Secular materialism) and three environmental attitudes (Connectedness with nature, Willingness to change, Instrumentalism). The results show that Inner growth and Contemporary spirituality relate to Connectedness with nature and Willingness to change (and more sustainable lifestyles), while Focus on money and Secular materialism relate to Instrumentalism (and less sustainable lifestyles). In line with STD, the results suggest that intrinsically oriented worldviews correlate positively with pro-environmental attitudes and lifestyles, while extrinsically oriented worldviews correlate negatively. In line with Taylor, the results indicate a more traditional, modern, and postmodern worldview in the Netherlands.

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## 1. Introduction

A change of individual behaviors and lifestyles is generally considered to be of vital importance for making the transition to a sustainable society (Leiserowitz, Kates, & Parris, 2006; Steg & Vlek, 2009; World Watch Institute, 2010). However, as research and practice over several decades have shown, lifestyles are generally not becoming more sustainable, nor are changes in that direction easily made (Millennium Ecosystem Assessment, 2005; PBL, 2007). It has been frequently argued that *worldviews* play a fundamental role in shaping lifestyles and behaviors (De Vries & Petersen, 2009; Johnson, Hill, & Cohen, 2011; Koltko-Rivera, 2004; Tellegen & Wolsink, 1998). While values have been conceptualized as important life goals or standards (Rokeach, 1973), and environmental attitudes have been defined as “the collection of beliefs, affect, and behavioral intentions a person holds regarding environmentally related activities or issues” (Schultz, Shriver, Tabanico, & Khazian, 2004, p. 31), the 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, p. 5). 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, 2012), and contain, for example, values and environmental attitudes. Some authors have therefore argued that the concept of worldview can function as an integrative framework with which to investigate the interaction of beliefs, values, and traditions (Johnson et al., 2011; see also Koltko-Rivera, 2004). While worldviews have not been a central focus in the field of environmental psychology, precisely because of its wide-ranging nature, the concept may turn out to be particularly useful to come to a more inclusive understanding of individual differences in environmental attitudes and sustainable lifestyles (Hedlund-de Witt, 2012). In order to better understand environmental attitudes and sustainable lifestyles, insight into the larger worldview they may be related to—as well as the worldview(s) they can be contrasted with—is of substantial relevance. It allows us to place environmental attitudes and sustainable lifestyles in a larger, historical-cultural context and understand them more holistically, that is, as part of how individuals perceive and value reality at large.

In the philosophical literature, there is a recurring attention for certain *aspects* of worldviews, such as ontology, epistemology, and axiology (see e.g. Hedlund-de Witt, 2013b; Naugle, 2002). The *Integrative Worldview Framework* (IWF; Hedlund-de Witt, 2012) that we draw on here attempts to contribute to a systematic and

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**Table 1**

The five aspects of the Integrative Worldview Framework (IWF).

**The five aspects of worldviews, including exemplary questions and concerns for each of them**

1. **Ontology:** a perspective on the nature of reality, often enriched with a cosmogony.  
What is the nature of reality? What is nature? How did the universe come about? If there is such thing as the divine—what or who is it, and how is it related to the universe?
2. **Epistemology:** a perspective on how knowledge of reality can become about.  
How can we know what is real? How can we gain knowledge of ourselves and the world? What is valid knowledge, and what is not?
3. **Axiology:** a perspective on what a 'good life' is, in terms of morals and quality of life, ethical and aesthetic values.  
What is a good life? What kind of life has quality and gives fulfillment? What are our most cherished ethical and aesthetic values? What is life all about?
4. **Anthropology:** a perspective on who the human being is and what his role and position is in the universe.  
Who or what is the human being? What is the nature of the human being? What is his role and purpose in existence?
5. **Societal vision:** a perspective on how society should be organized and how societal problems and issues should be addressed.  
How should we organize our society? How should we address societal problems and issues?

comprehensive worldview-operationalization that supports accurate construct-measurement by distinguishing and articulating five different aspects of worldviews (see Table 1; this list is not exhaustive).<sup>1</sup> Other disciplinary approaches have suggested comparable aspects (e.g. Johnson et al., 2011; Koltko-Rivera, 2004), with the first three aspects of ontology, epistemology, and axiology being the most common ones, thus suggesting a fair degree of interdisciplinary agreement and overlap. The latter two aspects of anthropology and societal vision appear to be particularly useful in the context of investigating environmental and sustainability-issues.

The aspect of *ontology* refers to fundamental assumptions concerning the nature, constitution, and structure of reality—including the cosmos, nature, and the divine. An ontology is often related to a *cosmogony*, that is, an origin story or study of how the universe came to be what it is (Brague, 2003). Different worldviews conceptualize the nature and origins of the world differently—for example, as the creation of a transcendent God; as a material, mechanistically steered cosmos; or as a living, divine being or “Gaia” (e.g. Sire, 2004). *Epistemology* is a perspective on what knowledge is and how knowledge can come about—for example through empirical science, intuition and nature experience, and/or divine revelation and faith. Epistemology is thus concerned with the nature, scope, and limitations of knowledge. *Axiology* concerns ideas about what a good life looks like, what is valued in life—both in moral terms (ethics) as well as in terms of quality of life (aesthetics). *Anthropology* refers to assumptions about what kind of creature the human being is and what his or her role and purpose is in existence. *Societal vision* refers to fundamental assumptions on how society should be organized and how societal problems and issues should be addressed.<sup>2</sup> In the context of research concerned with environmental issues, the operationalization of this aspect may focus on views about how to, on a societal level, respond to environmental problems specifically.

In his acclaimed *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity*, Charles Taylor traces the roots of our contemporary cultural worldview(s), resulting in kind of a ‘genesis of the modern identity.’ In this context, Taylor argues that notably two historical-cultural

currents—of the Enlightenment and Romanticism—powerfully inform our contemporary worldview. These currents are in conflict to this very day, coming to expression in the battle over environmental issues and how to respond to them:

... although the Romantic religions of nature have died away, the idea of our being open to nature within us and without us is still a very powerful [aspiration]. The battle between instrumental reason and this [Romantic] understanding of nature still rages today in the controversies over ecological politics. [...] One sees the dignity of man in him assuming control of an objectified universe through instrumental reason. If there are problems with pollution or ecological limits, they will themselves be solved by technical means, by better and more far-reaching uses of instrumental reason. The other sees in this very stance to nature a purblind denial of our place in things. We ought to recognize that we are part of a larger order of living beings, in the sense that our life springs from there and is sustained from there. [...] The notion is that sharing a mutually sustaining life system with other creatures creates bonds: a kind of solidarity which is there in the process of life. To be in tune with life is to acknowledge this solidarity (1989, p. 384).

In this quotation, Taylor suggestively outlines several aspects of these different worldviews, briefly sketching their ontologies (an objectified universe versus a larger order of living beings), epistemologies (instrumental reason versus being open to nature within and without), axiologies (an emphasis on instrumental versus intrinsic values), anthropologies (humanity assuming control versus humanity as part of the larger order), and societal visions (solving ecological issues through technical means versus through a different way of relating to nature, and life). According to Taylor, one of the most esteemed philosophers alive today, environmental attitudes and sustainable lifestyles can thus not be adequately understood without considering their historical-cultural roots and the larger worldviews they are related to.

This study, therefore, aims to generate insight into how environmental attitudes and sustainable lifestyles are related to worldviews in individuals and (Western) society at large. We do this by developing a questionnaire that explores different aspects of individuals’ worldviews—that is, their ontology, epistemology, anthropology, axiology, and societal vision—next to their environmental attitudes and sustainable lifestyles (i.e. intentionally benefitting the environment).<sup>3</sup> In this way, we place environmental

<sup>1</sup> The IWF is ‘integrative’ in the sense that it is directed toward the inclusion and coordination of a pluralism of worldview structures and their constitutive aspects into a more unified framework. It thereby highlights 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 & Welzel, 2005; Johnson et al., 2011), as well as that worldviews exist in the context of other, competing and/or complementary worldviews.

<sup>2</sup> Although one could also consider anthropology as a subset of ontology (the ontology of the human being), for purposes of measurement-development this more refined differentiation may be helpful, as it explicitly stimulates researchers to investigate conceptions of the human being and human nature. The same counts for societal vision, which one could potentially consider as a combination of axiology and anthropology. However, in the context of empirical research this differentiation supports researchers to investigate the societal dimensions of worldviews, and perspectives on the appropriate relationship between individual and society.

<sup>3</sup> Sustainable behaviors include pro-ecological, frugal, altruistic, and equitable behaviors, and there is empirical evidence showing significant interrelationships among those different types of sustainable actions (Corral Verdugo, 2012; De Young, 1993; Schultz, 2001), thus supporting the concept of sustainable lifestyles. However, other voices have argued that factor-analyses reveal that individuals are fairly inconsistent in their environmental behaviors (Steg & Vlek, 2009).

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