Ecological Worldviews: A Missing Perspective to Advance Sustainability Leadership

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A significant body of research has emerged in recent years focused on best green business practices and corporate sustainability at the organizational level. However the literature has not paid enough attention to sustainability leadership at the individual level.
As a result, little is known about the deeper psychological motivations of sustainability leaders and how this may relate to their capacity to lead transformational change.

(Boiral et al., 2009; Brown, 2012; Hedlund de-Witt, 2013; Rogers, 2012; Visser & Crane, 2010)
THE THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Ecological Worldview Literatures

Developmental Theory

Interior Leadership

Sustainability Leadership
Ecological Worldview Literatures

Deep Ecology

Ecopsychology

Ecological Economics

Environmental Sociology

Indigenous Studies
- Four Arrows. (2013). Teaching truly; A curriculum to indigenize mainstream education. New York, NY

Integral Ecology

Systems Thinking
Developmental Theory

Interior Theories on Leadership


- Scharmer, Otto, Kaufer, K. Leading from the Emerging Future, 2013
Sustainability Leadership Literature


THE THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

- Ecological Worldview Literatures
- Developmental Theory

- Interior Leadership
- Sustainability Leadership

Ecological Worldviews & Action Logics
Ecological Worldviews

Can be thought of as the deep mental patterns for how we see the natural world

They are the cognitive, perceptual, and affective maps that we continuously use to make sense of our natural environment

They are usually unconscious and taken for granted as the way things are

They can limit or enhance our perception of the natural world

**Anthropocentric**

**Ecocentric**

How adults construct knowledge through specific hierarchical stages of increasing complexity

The frame through which people translate their thoughts, feelings, and perceptions into actions

Stage of development effects what we can be aware of, reflect on, and act on

Conventional and Post-conventional refer to two broad stages of development

Conventional action logic is characterized by conformance with social conventions and achieving expertise and efficiency

Post-conventional is characterized by an attempt to reframe problems with a broader understanding of complexity and interdependency of systems

Research has shown that leaders with post-conventional action logic have greater capacity to lead transformational change

(Brown, 2012; Cook-Greuter, 2004; Kegan & Lahey, 2008; Rooke & Torbert, 2005; Torbert, 2004)
**Pre-Conventional (13%)**
- **Opportunist**
  - Short time horizon, fleets power and sexuality, rejects feedback, hostile humor, deceptive, manipulative, externalizes blame, punishes, views rules as loss of freedom, "eye for an eye" ethic.

- **Diplomat**
  - Observes rules, avoids inner and outer conflict, conforms, suppresses own desires, loyalty to group, seeks membership, right versus wrong attitude, appearance/status conscious, tends towards clichés, works to group standard.

**Conventional (80%)**
- **Expert**
  - Interested in problem solving via data, critical of others and self, chooses efficiency over effectiveness, perfectionist, values decisions based on merit, wants own performance to stand out, aware of alternative constructions in problem resolution but can be dogmatic, accepts feedback only from "objective" crest masters.

- **Achiever**
  - Results and effectiveness oriented, long term goals, concerned with issues of ethics and justice, deliberately prioritizes work tasks, future oriented, drawn to learning, seeks mutuality in relations, aware of personal patterns of behavior, feels guilt if does not meet own standards, blind to own shadow, chases time.

- **Redefining**
  - Collaborative, tolerant of individual difference, aware of context and contingency, may challenge group norms, aware of owning a perspective, inquiring and open to feedback, seeks independent, creative work, attracted by difference and change, may become something of a maverick, focuses on present and historical context.

**Post-Conventional (7%)**
- **Transforming**
  - Process and goal oriented, strategic time horizon, systems conscious, enjoys a variety of roles, recognizes importance of principle and judgment, engaged in complex interweave of relationships, aware of own personal traits and shadow, high value on individuality, growth, self fulfillment, unique market niches, particular historical moments.

- **Alchemical**
  - Alert to the theatre of action, embraces common humanity, disturbs paradigms of thought and action, dispels notions of heroic action, deeply internalized sense of self knowledge held with empty mind, sees light and dark, order and mess, treats time and events as symbolic, analogical, metaphorical (not merely linear, digital, literal).
There have been only a few *theoretical* studies that have attempted to integrate ecological worldviews and action logics in the context of sustainability leadership.

(Esbjorn Hargen & Zimmerman, 2009, Boiral et. al 2009)

In terms of *empirical* research, there have been even fewer studies. Those that have been conducted have been based on small sample sizes.

(Brown, 2012; Hedlund de-Witt, 2012; Rogers, 2011)
Q1: How do sustainability leaders describe their worldviews and motivation for their work?

Q2: Do the descriptions by sustainability leaders of their worldviews and their motivation for sustainability reflect specific action logics?
THE STUDY
Qualitative Methodology

Multi-phase Qualitative Design

- Semi-structured interviews allowed for a wider range of data collection
- Provided for a deeper picture than the variable based correlations of quantitative studies
- Qualitative studies are increasingly used to study interior dimensions of leadership
- Tested quantitative instruments as part of my pilot study
- Based on my constructivist and transformative stance, a qualitative study best captured the spirit of my research

(Creswell 2009; Marshall & Rossman, 2011; Silverman, 2006)
Data Collection

- Purposive and snowball sampling strategy to recruit leaders from multinational corporations, environmental NGOs, private corporations, and consultants

- Semi-structured phone and face-to-face interviews were conducted with sample of sustainability leaders

- Interviews typically lasted from thirty to forty-five minutes and were transcribed during or after the interview

- Two phases of data collection using different sets of questions as interview guides

(Babbie, 2002; Creswell, 2009; Lincoln & Guba, 1985)
## Description of Participants

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<th>SECTOR / TITLE</th>
<th># OF PARTICIPANTS (N=65)</th>
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<td>Chairman and CEO</td>
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<td>Chief Sustainability Officer</td>
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<td>Vice-President</td>
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<td>Manager</td>
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<tr>
<td>Environmental NGO CEO's</td>
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<td>Total Participants</td>
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<td>Director of Corporate Consciousness</td>
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<td>Director of Coffee Community Outreach</td>
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<td>Manager of Product Integrity</td>
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<tr>
<td>Director of Sustainability and Stewardship</td>
<td>Director of Sustainability Initiatives</td>
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Semi-structured Interview Questions

- How or why did you become involved with sustainability within your organization?
- Where do you think your deeper motivation comes from in regards to sustainability?
- How has sustainability influenced your approach to leadership?
- How do you think your work in sustainability has impacted your worldview?
- How would you describe your ecological worldview?
- What comes up for you when you think about your relationship with nature?
- Looking back, can you point to any transitions or events that caused you to look differently at the world, yourself, and nature, or is this a worldview that you have held for a long time?
Multi-step thematic analysis and hermeneutic methodology was utilized to analyze approximately 40,000 words of text

- Color-coded key words, phrases, and expressions
- Margin notes led to identification of initial sub-themes
- Hermeneutic methodology catalyzed a greater awareness of multiple contexts during the thematic analysis
- Additional rounds of analysis evolved into descriptive findings and themes
- Findings were organized under three major themes that were supported by more than 100 interview quotations as evidence
- Themes and findings were connected into a narrative storyline

(Bentz & Shapiro, 1998; Braun & Clarke 2006; Creswell 2009; Rogers, 2013; Strauss & Corbin, 1990)
THE FINDINGS
EXPERIENCES THAT SHAPE ECOLOGICAL WORLDVIEWS ACROSS THE LIFESPAN

THEME ONE

- Family of Origin and Childhoods in Nature
- Environmental Education, Teachers & Mentors
- Seeing Poverty and Environmental Degradation in Developing Countries
- Perceiving Capitalism as a Vehicle for Environmental Activism
- Through a Sense of Spirituality and Service
**THEME TWO**

**Expressions of Ecocentric Worldviews**

- Awareness of Ecological Embeddedness
- Awareness of the Fragility of Planetary Ecosystems
- A Belief in the Intrinsic Value of Nature
THEME THREE

EXPRESSIONS OF POST-CONVENTIONAL ACTION LOGICS

- Awareness of Diverse Worldviews and Contexts
- Thinking in Longer Time Horizons
- Enhanced Systems Consciousness
- Planet-centric Circles of Identity and Care
- Inquiring Stance and Increased Vulnerability
- Highly Collaborative Approaches to Leadership
  - Leading from the Middle
  - Influencing without Control
  - Collective Wisdom
Implications for Sustainability Leadership Practice

Based on a worldwide sample of 1847 corporate leaders, they found that although nearly two thirds rate social and environmental issues as significant, less than ten percent report that their corporations are addressing them thoroughly.

The researchers attribute this gap to a “disconnect between thought and action.”

(Kiron et al., 2013, p. 3).

BY SHOWING EVIDENCE FOR HOW A GROUP OF SENIOR EXECUTIVES:
- EXPRESS HIGHLY DEVELOPED ECOLOGICAL WORLDVIEWS
- CONNECT THEIR ECOLOGICAL WORLDVIEWS WITH THEIR MOTIVATION
- EXPRESS POST-CONVENTIONAL ACTION LOGICS
- PRACTICE HIGHLY COLLABORATIVE FORMS OF LEADERSHIP

THE FINDINGS OFFER NEW WAYS TO CLOSE THE GAP BETWEEN THOUGHT AND ACTION
## Future Research Questions

- Is the practice of sustainability driving human development?

- Do individuals with post-conventional action logics self-select for sustainability leadership?

- How can an understanding of ecological worldviews and post-conventional action logics be integrated into sustainability leadership development programs?

- How can ecological worldviews and post-conventional action logics be leveraged by sustainability leaders to enhance their effectiveness in their organizations?

- How can existing assessment instruments be modified to enhance our understanding of the ecological worldviews of sustainability leaders?

- How do the ecological worldviews and action logics of sustainability leaders vary across age group and gender?

- How do ecological worldviews and action logics of sustainability leaders vary across nationality and culture?