

Psychology

How people think about risks, politics, and sustainable development

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We are living in an unprecedentedly complex and uncertain world, facing difficult problems such as environmental disasters, economic turmoil, political turbulence, and pandemic crises. In spite of that, we cannot agree on how to achieve a more sustainable future. To resolve sustainability disputes, from sustainable mobility to development in general, we need to understand each other's worldviews and ideals.



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The world is contested: trade wars between giant economies, disagreements over climate change policies, diverse measures to control pandemics, or even just two men shouting at each other on the street. Apart from using scientific insights, which tools do we, as individuals and governments, rely on to take a position? Worldviews, our underlying mental models or behavioural principles, help us make judgements regarding everyday decisions and contentious social issues.

Scientists have long been interested in worldviews - the fundamental system of values that informs how we see the world. Worldviews are often used to

investigate social attitudes to complex, debated issues involving human and physical nature. Cultural Theory, proposed by Mary Douglas, Michael Thompson, and Aaron Wildavsky among others, proved useful in this aspect.

According to this theory, people's worldviews, ways of life, and risk perceptions are associated with their social and political life. Four worldviews or political cultures are defined: egalitarianism, hierarchy, individualism, and fatalism; each takes a different perspective on sustainability. To promote the egalitarian worldview, social equity should be emphasised. The desire to transform society in an

egalitarian direction is linked to the perception that nature is fragile and should be treated with great care. In the hierarchical worldview, social conformity, order, and government should be respected. According to this worldview, nature is seen as perverse but tolerant since government can regulate against unusual occurrences. According to the individualist worldview, individual autonomy, competition, entrepreneurship, and the free market should be endorsed. To fulfil the individualist vision of unlimited economic growth, nature has to be considered robust to man-made turmoil. Lastly, the fatalistic worldview is often shaped by an excessively constrained social context, for example the circumstances of prisoners or the very poor. Fatalists have little free choice in their life and tend to see nature as random.

Societal perceptions of various topics were studied using this theory, such as risk perception of climate change, support for nuclear power, and fear of HPV vaccination. Since transport is essential to people's lives and a major contributor to carbon emissions, in our research we asked: can worldviews have an impact on people's attitudes to sustainable mobility debates?

First, we measured the distribution of the first three worldviews in Great Britain. Fatalism was not included mainly because previous studies concluded that it was inconsequential in understanding environmental attitudes. The measurement of the three worldviews was carried out on a national survey that covers the economic, environmental, social, and political domains. Participants were asked to indicate their level of agreement with a list of statements, which are associated with the three worldviews. For example, egalitarianism was related to agreeing with the statement "the government should reduce income differences between the rich and the poor," hierarchy to "schools should teach children to obey authority," and individualism to

"the government should not spend more on unemployment benefits." Each individual was then assigned a worldview based on their level of agreement with those statements. We found that the British society was dominated by egalitarians, followed by individualists and hierarchists.

Next, we studied the link between worldviews and sustainable mobility arguments. We showed that egalitarians tend to support environmentally friendly transport solutions and policies, such as reducing car use, implementing higher car taxes, and switching to low-carbon cars. Hierarchists tend to care more about urban order. They are more inclined to follow other people's choice of transport, to obey the speed limit, and to worry about the danger of cycling. Individualists are more concerned about traffic congestion, which endangers their valuable time and opportunities, and about government intervention to regulate car use, which violates individual and market freedom.

While the three worldviews differ considerably, they also need to rely on each other to form viable solutions. If any of them is absent from urban policy, mobility will not be viable or truly sustainable. The worldviews are like three mirrors or rationalities that reflect each other's blind spots. We propose that this also applies to the context of climate change policy or sustainability governance in general. Egalitarianism helps promote environmental stewardship, hierarchy helps enforce regulations and agreements, and individualism helps advance economic and technological progress through its creative energy. If we want to achieve sustainable development, each of the worldviews should be taken into account.

Many disagreements are actually based on rival worldviews, especially when there is a lack of scientific agreement. Our study suggests that worldviews can help diagnose societal challenges

and conceive sustainable, inclusive solutions. Which worldview does your government follow? And what about you?