

Moving Toward Sustainable Values:

Adapting and Applying the Transtheoretical Model

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During this presentation, I will offer an example of how psychology can make a meaningful contribution to the sustainability movement by enhancing the effectiveness and efficiency of programs and initiatives. If you work in a psychological field, my goal is to show you one way that you might make a difference. If you work on sustainability or environmental issues, my goal is to give you a glimpse of how you might benefit from integrating Psychology.

For a long time now, I've had an interest in value systems, and by "value systems" I am really referring to our individual core values, which include our most basic attitudes, beliefs, assumptions, and biases about ourselves, other people, life, and the world around us. It is these core values that shape how we view the world, and it is our view of the world that shapes our choices and behaviors. I have long believed that values are the most critical element in the shift toward a more sustainable future. After all, values are like a golden thread that runs through all environmental and sustainability issues, and values change is the one goal that makes all other changes more feasible. As we look at this list, certainly all of these changes are important, but they will continue to be an up-hill battle unless the root cause is also addressed. By working toward a change in values, or at the very least by understanding the role values play as we work toward these changes, we may eventually crest that hill and get individual values to work in favor of sustainability rather than against it. This would be a major turning point, like the turning of a tide. The big question is how to promote such a shift.

In 1996, I proposed a dissertation that would attempt to lay a practical groundwork for understanding the value structures and change processes that are most essential to environmental reform. I approached this goal by exploring the living value systems of 21 dedicated environmentalists and conservationists, a couple of whom are at this conference, and several of whom you may recognize. I wanted to know what their value systems looked like and how they got that way. I traveled all over the country doing structured interviews to gather my data, and that's actually when I first met Dick Roy back in 1997.

Now, before I started doing interviews, I thought it would be a good idea to establish some hypotheses for value structure and value change, so I started looking around for existing theories or models. Unfortunately, I didn't find much that specifically addressed my questions. What I did come across were some interesting ideas about values change. The most significant to me was this: the only direct means of influencing a human value system is through experiences that are frequent and/or salient (Reason, 1990). Or, as one of my participants put it, "New values never arrive in the abstract. They come entangled in concrete situations, new realities, and new understandings of the world" (Alan Durning, 1995, p. 75).

This idea seems simple enough, but it also raises several challenges to promoting value change effectively and efficiently. First, the salience of an experience is subjective. So, it's hard to know what experiences will really stand out for an individual. For example, even if you present a very strong, rational argument, your message may not be salient simply because the other person's value system is also perfectly rational, and from their perspective, your reason sounds like nonsense. Thus, no saliency. Second, the interpretation of an experience is ALSO subjective. Sometimes, even the best of intentions go awry! A good example can be seen in cases involving logging and fishing communities. The need for immediate intervention often forces environmentalists to act quickly, usually with strong scientific support, but while they may win small battles, they do not win local support for their efforts. The loggers and fishermen see only an immediate threat to their way of life, which is very salient, but in the wrong direction. Nothing is accomplished in terms of value change. Third, salience is complicated by the volume of available info. Thanks to television and the internet, we are now flooded with more information than we can possibly process, and this makes saliency even harder to achieve.

Not finding any practical models of value change in the literature, I started looking at other types of change models. That's when I stumbled upon a model for smoking cessation known as the Transtheoretical (or Stages of Change) Model. I was drawn to this model for several reasons. First, it appeared to be well researched and meeting with quite a bit of success and approval. Second, it recognized value change as being intricately tied to behavior change, and even identified values clarification as part of its process. Third, it dealt with addictions. It is not a stretch to say that unsustainable lifestyles involve multiple addictive behaviors. We are addicted to consumption, automobiles, electricity, disposable products, fossil fuels, packaging materials, and on and on. So, it made intuitive sense to use this model to address these sorts of addictive and destructive values and behaviors. Finally, the icing on the cake was that this model offered a wealth of insights about change processes that seemed likely to generalize to values change, as you will see.

Adapting the Transtheoretical Model was quite easy, and very little of the model itself had to be altered. It simply required shifting the focus from specific behavior changes to the underlying value changes. Behavior changes would still be supported, of course, because they are directly related to values change, but they would now be considered secondary goals.

So, let's get into the model. I don't have time to present the original model from scratch, so I'm going to focus on the adaptation of each stage of the model to values change...

A precontemplative individual might say: "My lifestyle isn't perfect, but there really aren't any problems worth changing." The individuals in this stage are either unaware or under-aware that their values and lifestyles are a problem. They do not see the connection to environmental consequences, and so they do not experience significant levels of doubt. The existing value structure is rather stable and efficient, even if it is built on an illusion. Even with some level of awareness, precontemplative individuals may demonstrate resistance, feel coerced into changing, and revert back to old values and behaviors as soon as pressure subsides. Pushing solutions at this stage is futile, because the problem has not been accepted. Therefore, the goal is simply to expose without pushing, to plant the seeds that might produce some internal conflict or incongruity.

This should be accomplished through exposure to real examples and experiences, not theories and philosophies that can be argued, rebuked, or rationalized away.

Individuals in contemplation are starting to see the consequences of their values and lifestyles, but they have not committed to taking action. Initially, as they attempt to patch and defend old values, they may continue to react with disbelief, detachment, or rationalizations. Doubts, dilemmas, and complexities may arise, leading to an intense struggle over the pros and cons of change. All of this can lead to an overwhelming reduction in the effectiveness and efficiency of decision-making. As a result, individuals may remain stuck at this stage indefinitely. The goal at this stage is consciousness-raising. This requires two primary forms of intervention, education and support. Education efforts should be direct, relevant, and in-depth. They should reveal the consequences of current values, shake existing assumptions, and offer alternative perspectives. Real examples and experiences are still essential, but some theory and philosophy can also be offered, especially once questioning begins at a deeper level. Meanwhile, support efforts are critical to prevent individuals from stalling or regressing. After all, this is a stressful and unstable stage, and some people will need guidance and emotional support to help them navigate it successfully.

An individual in the preparation stage might say “I really need to change the way I do things” and start to take some small steps toward that change. These small steps may include practice runs or preparatory changes that will make the transition easier. The individual is still trying to clarify new values and how they will be applied, while old values are still vying for attention. This leads to continued stress. Nevertheless, small changes are being made, such as increased recycling, better buying, driving less, or voicing a few new ideas. The success of these small changes builds confidence, and when confidence reaches a high enough level, the transition to action will take place. The goals for this stage are to set the new perspective in place, test the waters, and build commitment. Continued education and support efforts are essential, because this is the stage where peers will begin noticing and reacting to small changes. Support efforts must help individuals identify new peers and new communities that will validate the changes being made.

At the level of values, very little change takes place during the action stage. The big shift in values is complete, and all that remains is to fully apply those values. The creators of the Transtheoretical Model acknowledge that action is only made possible through all the work that goes into the change process, much of which occurs at the level of values. They also acknowledge that it is the changes that must be maintained, not the specific actions. In other words, as long as the new values are maintained, decisions and behaviors will naturally fall in line. During the action stage, individuals are finally “living as if nature matters,” and their actions are starting to be viewed as a natural extension of a new perspective. Environmental problems continue to exist, but individuals in this stage can feel some consolation that they are no longer blind or willing contributors. Unfortunately, this stage can still involve a high level of stress, because the new perspective is likely to be in the minority, especially within old social circles. The goals for the action stage are to maintain the big shift toward applying the value changes, to deal with old values that arise, and to foster recognition of what has been accomplished. Interventions should include a push to act, to voice ideas, to establish new support networks, to teach, and to explore. Old peers will continue to pose a serious challenge to new behaviors, and individuals will probably be forced to explain or defend their actions. Thus,

support remains critical in this stage.

Individuals in this stage have demonstrated successful, consistent action for at least six months. They are now working to maintain their new values and prevent relapse. Maintaining new values involves making small adjustments in the specific values that are applied in daily life. Preventing relapse means avoiding old habits and behaviors, especially when tempted by familiar surroundings and situations. This is the stage where new values are reinforced, leading to new habits. It is also the stage where stress finally begins to subside, as the new values become stable, efficient, and effective. The goals for this stage are to reinforce new decisions and behaviors, and to deepen and clarify the new values. All previous interventions should remain available as tools, but the primary intervention should be continued support. This is a good time to encourage individuals to teach others. Openly engaging in discussion will force these individuals to present their new perspective in a way that others will understand, which keeps the ideas salient and fosters a deeper level of understanding, acceptance, and confidence.

Using the Transtheoretical Model has some big implications for the sustainability movement. For example, if a large proportion of individuals in the Western World live as if environmental problems do not exist, that means that there is a large pool of individuals at the precontemplative end of the spectrum. Meanwhile, many if not most environmental and conservation groups are primarily offering action-oriented interventions. The creators of the Transtheoretical Model put great emphasis on the importance of a good fit between stage and treatment intervention. Programs that are highly effective with individuals at the preparation and action stages may actually prove detrimental to individuals at earlier stages. Based on this understanding, there appears to be an immediate need to fill the gap between the precontemplative majority and available interventions. In other words, accessible starting points for change are required. The Northwest Earth Institute offers one possible example through its discussion courses, but others are needed, too.

Now, based on just my initial explorations of values change, I was able to identify some basic principles for promoting values change efficiently and effectively. [1] Establish common ground. Don't argue. Battles between incompatible value systems are rarely won. [2] Be patient and respectful. Avoid being accusatory, inflammatory, or intrusive. Avoid cynicism in the presence of genuine naiveté. [3] Think Deeper. Focus on changing relevant values, not behaviors. [4] Allow maximum diversity. Don't alienate people with different motivations. [5] Personalize the message. Match interventions to a person's current value system and stage of change. [6] Keep it real. Use living examples and experience whenever possible. [7] Educate and support. Use these interventions at all times.

Okay, so all of that is what I discovered before conducting my research. Let's move on to the research outcomes. After 21 structured interviews and many months of qualitative and quantitative analysis, I came away with what I call "emergent models" for both value structure and value change. The emergent model for value change looks something like this...

It offers a more detailed conceptualization of values change using two parallel paths leading from "passive ignorance" to "active awareness" – an internal path based on growing self-awareness and

an external path based on growing environmental awareness. Notice that, in both paths, there is an awareness threshold, around the point of the emotional reaction, that must be reached before understanding can be transformed into involvement. This was a consistent theme in the stories told by my participants, and it may be true that a strong emotional reaction is needed to overcome personal inertia. Also notice that the paths are not mutually exclusive. In fact, it is expected that progress on one would naturally stimulate some progress on the other. After all, external awareness makes the problems real, while internal awareness makes them personally relevant.

It may not be obvious in looking at this diagram, but this model is fully compatible with the Transtheoretical Model. The precontemplation stage applies to individuals who have not yet begun the journey to active awareness. The contemplation stage applies to those who have begun the journey but have not yet reached the awareness threshold. The preparation stage applies to those who have reached the awareness threshold but are still building commitment. Finally, the action and maintenance stages apply to those individuals who have reached active awareness.

Like I said before, the advantage of incorporating the Transtheoretical Model is that it offers insights for developing change strategies. For example, it suggests that people down in precontemplation may actually resist starting out on either path, so we must choose interventions that offer exposure through real-life examples and experiences. Arguments, theories, and data probably won't work very well on these folks.

Okay, so in a nutshell, this image captures what I learned from my dissertation research. It summarizes the various ways that people might find their way to active awareness. Now let's move on to how these insights can be applied.

After grad school but before my post-doc, I spent almost 4 years working in environmental activism, environmental advocacy, and environmental education. I spent 2 of those years working as the Education Director for Caritas Creek, a 5-day residential outdoor education program in Sonoma County, CA. Part of my job was to update and refine their curriculum using psychological and deep ecology perspectives, with the goal of raising the program's level of quality and consistency in helping urban kids connect with nature. What I developed was a practical curriculum model that intersected everything I have shown you so far with David Sobel's theory of environmental awareness development in children. You will notice that there are only three stages in this model, but they are applied to four different value areas. In some ways, this experiential model is just a simple variation on the Transtheoretical Model and my Emergent Path Model, but in other ways, it also treats each cell as its own unique change process. The important thing is that it is built on the same basic principles of values change, which were then adapted to the unique challenges and goals of the Caritas Creek program. Once the experiential model was created, we were able to use it as a guide for designing an entirely new curriculum for the program, a curriculum that has been used very successfully ever since.

My next opportunity to apply these models came last summer, when Tim LaSalle, the executive director of the Northwest Earth Institute, approached me about helping with the development of a new discussion course on Global Warming. This course was to be a departure from previous

courses in that they wanted to reach more precontemplative people using a course that was only four sessions long, so they needed it to be as efficient as possible. From the very first meeting, I was able to introduce a perspective, a framework, and a language for understanding personal value change, and we used this knowledge to shape the flow and content of the course. I can't say whether or not it really made a difference, but I hear the course is doing quite well, so I guess it didn't hurt!

After all of my experiences working with value systems and working with non-profits, I now have a clear vision of what I consider to be a critical problem. The field of Psychology possesses a wealth of knowledge that is directly relevant to many social and environmental issues, both in terms of understanding the problems and their potential solutions. Unfortunately, much of this knowledge never reaches the people who are working on these issues. Large industries spend a fortune on think tanks, lobbyists, advertising agencies, and public relations specialists. Meanwhile, most non-profits have to survive on far fewer professional resources, which is bound to lead to mistakes and inefficiencies. I have just shown you a few small examples of how the field of Psychology can help level the playing field by providing psychological perspectives, grounded in research and professional experience. My goal is to establish a group of consultants who are willing to provide such perspectives and help non-profits increase their effectiveness. Now, I'm not talking about a huge commitment. Even if each consultant only took on one consultation project per year, perhaps no more than sitting in on a meeting or two, imagine the difference it could make!