

Going Green: The Process of Lifestyle Change¹

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This article draws on 40 in-depth semi-structured interviews of three groups of people who restrict their consumption in various ways: voluntary simplifiers, religious environmentalists, and green home owners. I identify common patterns in the emergence of green lifestyles across all groups. Green practices are not isolated decisions or actions, but components in an ongoing project. As a result, green lifestyles are often experienced as both a work in progress and a provisionally coherent life narrative. Furthermore, I explore bricolage, the cobbling together of resources at hand by nonexperts, as a mechanism for lifestyle change and expand the concept to include environmental practices and themes. I adopt a pragmatist perspective to understand lifestyle change as a deliberate process undertaken in response to a problem left underaddressed by current policies and practices. This article also weighs in on the debate in the sociology of culture over how culture influences action.

KEY WORDS: consumption; environment; green; lifestyle; policy; sustainable.

INTRODUCTION

But the real problem—the real energy consumption is in our lifestyle. You know, do we like to travel? How many times do we use airplanes to travel each year? What's our lifestyle in terms of the clothing we wear? Recognizing that we literally can't touch anything in this daily life without it having a relationship to consumption—consuming materials that require a lot of energy to produce, down to the acrylic fiber in our socks.

—Bruce, an Episcopal environmentalist

Green lifestyles include a collection of practices by which people today try to address an interrelated set of environmental problems: climate change and rising sea levels, air and water pollution, peak oil, and the increasing size of landfills, among others. The typical U.S. lifestyle is implicated in the worsening of these environmental problems.³ Bruce, quoted above, experiences

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³ The United Nations has called for a change in U.S. lifestyles.

environmental problems on multiple levels—there are problems in the world and at the level of personal lifestyles. Contrary to Beck’s (1992) notion of the individualization of responsibility, the people I spoke with support change on all levels—changes of lifestyle, changes in schools and institutions, changes in business behavior, and action at the local and national government levels. However, an awareness of the durability of institutions led the people I interviewed to change their lifestyles because they wanted to feel more involved in the environmental movement, they were not willing to wait for institutional change, or they were skeptical that institutional change would occur, even with their help.

The term lifestyle was taken for granted as the way to talk about how people live and organize their priorities, integrating both big ideas and small practices. My informants noted that they have unique worldviews, mindsets, “think differently” (#2), or “marched to a different drummer” (#15) than others, but the term used with the most frequency was lifestyle. Informants spontaneously discussed that their “lifestyle” was “conservation oriented” (#18), that they had struggles within their “lifestyle” over what was sustainable (#29), that they had adopted a “green lifestyle”⁴ before it was popular to do so (#26), or that their everyday actions involved “little things, you know, lifestyle things” like taking shorter showers to conserve water (#22).

To change a lifestyle, people not only have to change their practices, but also the story they tell about their practices, or their “narrative of self-identity” (Giddens, 1991:81). Thus, a *green lifestyle* is a pattern of living that involves deliberation over the uncertain environmental impacts of everyday practices and a guiding narrative that makes that process personally meaningful. The purpose of this article is to examine the process of green lifestyle adoption in more detail by focusing on the commonalities among groups: the resources used to build a green lifestyle, how that lifestyle is established, and how it is subjectively understood. This article draws on 40 in-depth interviews to examine three groups of people who restrict their consumption in various ways: (1) voluntary simplifiers, (2) religious environmentalists, and (3) green home owners. Although the groups differ in certain respects, there are similarities in how their green lifestyles emerge and progress.

Deliberation is one commonality among these groups. Deliberation happens in response to a problem that current habits fail to solve (Dewey, 1922), or when there are alternatives to consider and individuals make a slow and explicit choice with an intent that can be verbalized. This is particularly true when one makes the harder choice among alternatives (Danna-Lynch, 2010). My informants oscillate between deliberation and habit; they deliberate over how to make changes and then new practices, performed consistently,

⁴ I use the term green lifestyles, as opposed to sustainable lifestyles, because interviewees viewed the term sustainable as a dichotomy (lifestyles were sustainable or not), whereas green, also a problematic concept, was nevertheless interpreted as more of a continuum from light green to dark green or as different types: “hippy green” (voluntary simplifiers) or “commercial green” (green home owners) (#27). Several informants were skeptical that U.S. green lifestyles were sustainable.

recede into habitual action. Through this process, individuals can create new habits or “habit sets”—“repertoires for thinking and acting vis-à-vis a set of problems” (Gross, 2009:371). However, the overall process of lifestyle change remains far from simple.

In the case of environmental issues, individuals confront a problem, the solution to which is inherently complex and uncertain. Individuals respond, in part, by changing their lifestyles—drawing on old goods and practices, deliberating over new goods and practices, and bringing them together with overarching narratives based on environmental themes. This is not the same as replacing an old habit with a new habit; rather, resources are drawn from many different areas and cobbled together in a *bricolage* to serve a new purpose. Here the emphasis is not on consumer practices or environmental discourses *per se*, but how people draw on them pragmatically to construct and account for green lifestyles.

Ordinary material goods and everyday practices are not necessarily rich in meaning, nor are they clear and consistent in their significance, but within the paradox and ambivalence of the commonplace, individuals do their own phenomenological work to pull together disparate goods and practices into a consistent whole. It is this background of meaning, built in a *bricolage* style, which accounts for the difference between someone changing light bulbs or changing lifestyles. My informants view green practices not as isolated decisions or actions, but as components in an ongoing coherent project. But how is lifestyle coherence supported during a period of intentional change and does the notion of a lifestyle aid or hinder the process of changing practices? I propose the concept of *provisional coherence* to explain the simultaneous existence of an overarching lifestyle narrative that prevails in the face of deliberation, uncertainty, and anxiety over changing practices. Ultimately, green lifestyles are a “coordinating hypothesis” for action (Whitford, 2002), experienced as a path that supports future action as well as explaining past action.

People changing their lifestyles believe that they can make a difference “if everybody does a little bit” (#18). But what do they mean by this? As it turns out, it is not a simple expression of the aggregation hypothesis—that individual actions alone add up to significant change. Considering that interviewees advocate change on all levels, it would be more accurate to say “even individuals have a part to play.” Tess, a Catholic environmentalist, explains that changes in lifestyle, like composting food waste in your own backyard, can offer “a way into the whole picture” of global food shortages, the overindustrialization of the food system, and how corporate food producers contribute to global warming. Insisting that individual actions matter is part of the “mobilizing force of imagined futures” (Mische, 2009:695). When people believe that they can make a difference in addressing climate change, they are more likely to change their consumption patterns (Goldblatt, 2005). However, changing lifestyles and demanding that corporations take responsibility for environmental harms are not mutually exclusive; according to Tess, one encourages the other.

LIFESTYLES: IDENTITY, GROUP MEMBERSHIP, AND RISK AVERSION

Social theorists in multiple disciplines have responded to the scope and immediacy of environmental problems by focusing greater attention on resistance to consumption. A sociological approach frequently focuses on how individuals or groups construct their lives through restricted consumption practices (Kennedy, 2011; Shove and Warde, 2002; Spaargaren, 2003), sustainable and green lifestyles, ecological habitus, and resistant identities (Brown, 2009; Cherrier, 2009; Chitewere, 2008; Evans and Abrahamse, 2009; Haller and Hadler, 2008; Horton, 2006; Kasper, 2009; Spaargaren and Van Vliet, 2000).⁵

Lifestyles assist in organizing self-identity and self-expression.⁶ They are routines that include the presentation of self, consumption, interaction, and setting (Giddens, 1991). Consumer goods and practices are part of an imperfect system of shared meaning (Douglas and Isherwood, 1996; Sahlins, 1978) that has nonetheless become integrated into our identity projects (Callero, 2003; Holstein and Gubrium, 2000). We believe consumer goods, practices, and patterns signal to others who we are, intentionally or unintentionally, or who we would like to be (Bourdieu, 1984; Veblen, 1998; Zukin, 2004). Lifestyles do not arise in a vacuum but exist in concert, bringing together multiple and sometimes conflicting priorities like work and family.

Cross (2000) argues that reducing consumption will be difficult because our identities are formed around goods and products. At the same time, what we do *not* buy, or buy less of, can shape our identity as much as what we do buy, especially in the case of green lifestyles (Chitewere, 2008; Horton, 2006). A green lifestyle relies on meaningful practices that prioritize reducing the consumption of goods, energy, and water. This focus on practices is one way to rework lifestyles and distance them from the market. The theory that invisible goods like energy cannot serve identity projects (Shove and Warde, 2002) does not take into account that these invisible goods are coupled with visible practices and are part of an ongoing dialogue about how to live more sustainably.

Lifestyles also include our standpoint or social position in relation to other groups: our identity in context. This involves the social class we belong to and our socialization into groups and institutions, which affect our aspirations and the resources we may call on to fulfill those aspirations (Bourdieu, 1984). Lifestyles are relational by definition and can be meaningfully

⁵ For a multidisciplinary review of the sustainable consumption literature, see Jackson (2005).

⁶ This perspective was made popular during the postmodern turn, and characterized by hyper-agentic consumers who use brands creatively through bricolage (i.e., defined at the time as hyper-stylization, customizing, or appropriation of consumer goods) (Slater, 1997). For example, Hebdige (1988) studied young men who wore gray suits and skinny black ties; juxtaposed with their scooters this look went from corporate to mod. My use of bricolage returns to the more standard Levi-Straussian definition of piecing together available resources (beyond consumer brands and styles) to serve needs. For more on the structure/agency debate in the sociology of consumption, see Schor (2007).

understood only in context (Harvey and Lorenzen, 2006; Holt, 1997). Shove and Warde (2002) argue that in order to reduce consumption, lifestyles must be rationalized and goods must become less symbolic of social membership or status. However, I find that a utilitarian view of objects makes their quality and longevity even more important; they are defined as needs, not wants—fostering, if anything, stronger connections to fewer material goods. Thus, Schor's (2002) prescription makes more sense: that we need to invest more meaning into material objects to slow down the buy-use-discard cycle of U.S. consumer goods.

I use the term lifestyle instead of habitus (Bourdieu, 1984) because the explanatory strength of habitus lies in the social reproduction of everyday practices, as opposed to confronting problems and finding innovative strategies to address them. Also, individuals in the same social class, with similar levels of economic capital, may have different and competing lifestyles. Kasper brings together the concepts of lifestyle and ecological habitus, arguing that lifestyles are the products or, in Bourdieu's words, the "practical metaphor" of the habitus (2009:317). Evans and Abrahamse (2009) use both habitus and lifestyle in their analysis in order to include those who inadvertently, as well as intentionally, live green lifestyles. Habitus reminds us of the structural contingencies in which lifestyles exist; lifestyles are constrained by context—most often financial limitations, health, and family commitments (Veal, 1993)—but not determined by it. Aspiration (what we want) should not be entirely collapsed into expectation (what we are capable of doing).

Lifestyles also address practical and existential concerns over predictability and ontological security. Beck (1992) argues that in a risk society everyday life is increasingly reflexive. Lifestyles create habits and narrow choices (Schwartz, 2004), thereby offering a kind of practical utility and reducing the noise of the environment. Although these are habits, they remain open to periodic reflexive thought and thus change (Giddens, 1991). Here, Giddens echoes pragmatist theory, where action is thought to be primarily based on habit with moments of deliberation and revision. Giddens (1991) also offers a middle ground between a focus on agency in the case of self-identity and structure in the case of group membership or social class. While persuasive, Giddens overemphasizes the coherence of lifestyles (Chaney, 1996).

Evans and Abrahamse, using a perspective made popular by Giddens, argue that "lifestyles are made up of relatively consistent and coherent bundles of social practices" (2009:491). In confronting "tensions and inconsistencies" within lifestyle change they argue that individuals have multiple lifestyles and switch between different bundles of coherent practices (2009:500). I offer a simpler solution and question the coherence of lifestyles, making inconsistencies typical rather than problematic. The actual coherence of lifestyles—in terms of discourses, objects, and practices—is an ongoing, dynamic, and piecemeal process. Lifestyles change gradually and with some continuity by drawing on old goods and practices that are given new context and meaning

(Schor, 2010), with the ongoing goal of creating and maintaining coherence and spurring the adoption of further compatible practices.

The search for coherence has been viewed as a mechanism for change previously, in the form of the “Diderot Effect” (McCracken, 1988). McCracken (1988) uses the example of a fine gift that disturbs a consumption pattern, such that the recipient then begins to buy other fine things to match. According to the Diderot Effect, “Established consumption patterns, undisturbed, exert a kind of inertia that resists any major change. Once interrupted the unity of consumption patterns becomes a mechanism that seeks to rebalance itself” (Lorenzen, 2007). This attempt to regain coherence results in expansive consumer spending and continual trading up. Evans and Abrahamse imply a similar kind of coherence mechanism in their work on sustainable lifestyles and argue that “changes in one social practice lead to changes in other domains” (2009:491). This is not simply about coherence, it is about problem solving and addressing environmental harms, consistency is not an end in itself. Also, I argue this is a reasonable consistency that people are trying to achieve, a kind of “doing what you can” and not an unachievable ideal. To complicate the situation, there will always be new information and alternative practices coming to light through social networks, which means a continuation of the deliberation process.

Studies often focus on a single pro-environmental behavior instead of sets of practices and routines and how they are interrelated (Evans and Abrahamse, 2009; Spaargaren, 2003). In lifestyles, people attempt to connect an array of social practices into a reasonably coherent whole (Spaargaren and van Vliet, 2000). Change hinges on the extent to which practices coalesce into the “embodied logic” of everyday life (Kasper, 2009:319). This “holistic view of one’s personal life” contributes to sustained participation in green social movements (Passy and Giugni, 2000:117). But what accounts for this integration and holistic perspective?

Many scholars agree that sustainable or green lifestyle adoption is processual (Evans and Abrahamse, 2009; Nye and Hargreaves, 2009; Spaargaren and van Vliet, 2000). Deliberation over practices and discussion of local knowledge, or how to go green given the constraints in your area, are important parts of that process (Evans and Abrahamse, 2009; Kennedy, 2011; Nye and Hargreaves, 2009).⁷ I contextualize this work by explaining how practices unite, through bricolage, and become integrated into a holistic lifestyle narrative. I also expand on the role of deliberation. Uniting practices is not a simple process of deciding which practice is greener; frequently, the answer is unclear. Informants do thoughtful work to redefine old practices as related to the environment and recombine them with newly adopted materials, practices, and environmental discourses to form a new pattern.

⁷ Similarly, processing information about how individuals may address environmental harms (Hobson, 2002) and constructing a consumer-resistant identity (Cherrier, 2009) involve reflection and debate.

Current studies lean toward symbolic interaction as a theoretical frame and explain sustainable or green lifestyles or ethical identities as a performance constrained or enabled by particular systems of provision, green infrastructure, social context, or social boundaries (Brown, 2009; Evans and Abrahamse, 2009; Horton, 2006; Nye and Hargreaves, 2009). This is a productive area of inquiry and overlaps with pragmatist theory in the belief that knowledge and innovative solutions emerge from deliberation and discussion. For example, Horton defines green lifestyles as a performance of “embodying a culturally produced awareness of environmental risks, rights, and responsibilities” (2006:127). He stresses socialization into green cultural codes as a mechanism for change through shared practices, networks, spaces, and times. To expand on this theoretical foundation, I draw on pragmatist theory to stress the problem-solving orientation of informants and how they use their lifestyle to address environmental problems.

Next, I provide a brief description of the groups studied and of the methodology used in this project. Substantively, I explain how those whom I interviewed understood their lifestyles as holistic, involving high levels of deliberation while also in a process of guided gradual change. Furthermore, I explore bricolage as a mechanism for lifestyle change and expand the concept to include disparate resources like material goods, practices, family stories, and environmental themes such as antimaterialism, environmental protection, and interconnectedness. I also show how environmental themes are often integrated into preexisting storylines. The discussion includes an explanation of how these ideas fit into pragmatist action theory and presents implications for theorizing culture in action. I focus on how individuals explain their actions as environmental, and how those explanations over time transform into motivations and foster green practices.

DATA AND METHODS

In this article I draw selectively and illustratively on a set of 40 interviews, conducted between 2009 and 2010, with members of three groups: voluntary simplifiers (13 interviews), religious environmentalists (14 interviews), and green home owners (13 interviews). Many different groups could be considered, and would consider themselves, to be committed to a green lifestyle. Four main dimensions of difference guided my choice of groups: religious versus secular orientations, communal versus individual responses, high-tech versus low-tech strategies, and differences in commitment levels.⁸

⁸ Other groups considered for this study include: “locavores” or individuals in the local food or slow food movements, conservative and/or evangelical eco-Christians, kibbutz visitors, Pennsylvania Dutch Amish, downshifters, home power advocates, and individuals who have signed up to buy nothing new for a year (The Compact Yahoo! group). These topics were excluded because they were subsumed in other groups studied, would be difficult to reach, or have less explanatory value.

Although differences motivated my choice of groups, for this article I tease out the similarities between groups and establish how green lifestyles emerge and progress.

Voluntary simplifiers are a loosely affiliated movement determined to limit their consumption. In extreme cases, individuals attempt to buy nothing new with the exception of food, medicine, and some items of children's clothing or intimate apparel (Huneke, 2005; McDonald et al., 2006). By reducing the clutter in their lives, they believe they can return to a time with stronger family and communal bonds, a greater appreciation of nature, increased self-determination, more authentic experiences, and meaningful personal growth, all of which have been eroded by consumerism (Grigsby, 2004; Johnston and Burton, 2003; Zavestoski, 2002). This study focuses on simple lovers who reduce their consumption for environmental reasons, as opposed to others who are attempting to break the work-spend cycle and take back their time from paid labor (Schor, 1998).

Religious environmentalists believe that caring for the environment is part of their religious duty (Taylor, 2009). Green religion is diverse because environmental ideas have penetrated every world religion and many smaller religious movements in a kind of ecological zeitgeist (Gardner, 2006; Walsh, 2008). For example, Christians and progressive activists were the first groups connected to fair trade product purchases. Religious environmentalists have an approach that brings together progressive interpretations of religious texts, practices that reduce consumption, and technological solutions to environmental harms, including clean energy. Religious environmentalists interviewed for this study include people who identified as Episcopalian, Jewish, Muslim, Quaker, Roman Catholic, Unitarian Universalist, and United Church of Christ (UCC).

Green home owners build or remodel homes in such a way as to use resources more efficiently, and decrease unfavorable impacts to the environment and human health. Green homes, nearly 5% of the housing market (Schmidt, 2008), typically focus on the efficiency of energy, water, building materials, and indoor air quality (Lipke, 2001). Some green homes are LEED (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design) certified or are in the process of being certified.

Interviewees are from the northeastern United States and were recommended for inclusion in this study by the founder of a voluntary simple community group, the executive director of a nondenominational green religion nonprofit, and the senior technical consultant for residential building at a green building business. I also pursued recommendations for other possible interviewees directly from informants in a snowball sample.

Semi-structured interviews lasted approximately 60 minutes and focused on the lived experience of going green and changes made in day-to-day practices. Most interviews were conducted at homes, with a few exceptions. The interviews were transcribed and coded in Atlas.ti. I had a previous interest in lifestyles; however, I was not convinced that they existed beyond marketing

segmentations and was curious about the extent to which people felt they actually lived a lifestyle. In interviews, I let individuals tell their story about how they became involved in environmental issues. If the topic of lifestyles did not come up spontaneously, I brought it up toward the end of the interview. We discussed the supportiveness (or lack of support) of friends, family, and co-workers, and others known through relationships with community groups and religious organizations. Barriers to change came up, including the demands of work and the cost of green technology. Interviewees explored their acceptance of labels like environmentalist and any future plans to live more sustainably.

LIFESTYLE CHANGE: COHERENCE, DELIBERATION, AND GRADUAL TRANSFORMATION

Green lifestyle change is a gradual, deliberate process that is a response to environmental harms. Thinking of going green as adopting a lifestyle creates a relatively coherent story and collective vision of the future; it bridges discourses (e.g., Islam and ecological interconnectedness) and encourages changes in everyday practices so individuals may live out the environmental themes they use to make sense of their actions. People define lifestyles as both holistic and in never-ending change. Overarching ideas are holistic, but changing practices is a gradual, deliberate, and infinite process (one can always be “more green” or live a simpler life).

It is evident from my interviews that many practices are shared by those trying to live more sustainably. People buy less and try to extend the life of what they have. Individuals recycle (cans, plastic, glass, newspaper, junk mail), they use cloth bags, compact fluorescent (CFL) or light-emitting diode (LED) light bulbs, and they avoid kitchen paper products. They keep their programmable thermostats low (60–65 degrees in winter), they have weatherized their homes, they take short showers and run their hot water heaters on low or have tankless hot water heaters, they use baking soda instead of commercial green cleaning products, rarely if ever use air-conditioning, and they do only large loads in the dishwasher (if they have one) or washing machine and use clotheslines or drying racks. They grow their own food, cook from scratch, buy local, buy organic or raise organic fruits and vegetables to sell, avoid red meat, or are vegetarians/vegans, buy recycled toilet paper and tissues, use restrictors on water faucets, have rain barrels or rain gardens, reuse gray water, ride their bicycles to work, or carpool or avoid idling their cars, shop at and donate to thrift stores or consignment shops or pick things up off the curb. Several of those with whom I spoke pay a premium for renewable energy through their local energy provider, buy carbon offset credits, have solar panels on their roofs, use geothermal power to heat and cool their homes, or own a hybrid vehicle. What unites and supports these practices?

Coherence

Lifestyles incorporate materials, practices, and themes connected by a life narrative that pulls these together with a coherent result. Roni, a Muslim environmentalist, has made environmentally friendly changes in every area of her life and pushes her family and co-workers to do the same. She explains:

So, I believe that it's [religious environmentalism] a whole worldview. Everything you look at has to fit in. If it doesn't fit in, it doesn't make sense ... So when they talk about the environment, it is very Islamic. It's with that understanding that it's part of our world, and it's just the one lifestyle.

The coherence between environmentalism, Islam, and her practices at home, work, and in worship are imposed by her understanding of a single lifestyle. Other Muslims, like her husband, do not necessarily agree. She is currently attempting to eat organic and Halal, although there is only one butcher in town that satisfies both requirements. This is a good example of lifestyle as bricolage: the green lifestyle does not arise in a vacuum but is integrated with preexisting priorities. Roni goes on to explain that there are many “different paths” or “roads” that lead to living a more sustainable life, you just have to decide on the path to take—she indicates that the decision lies more in the means one uses than the goal itself.

Green practices are more likely to multiply if the individual defines those practices as meaningfully part of a larger project or lifestyle. Natalie, a UCC environmentalist, describes how lifestyles crystallize out of smaller choices.

I think you start out by making choices, one—individual choices. But then I think it becomes, has to become, a lifestyle, that it's kind of—that it's there. It's there in your mind all the time. “Am I making a good choice doing this?” or “How could I do this better?”

She describes a process that in the initial stages is highly deliberative but actions develop into automatic responses. During interviews, practices subject to deliberation at the time came readily to mind, whereas more routine practices that had been in place longer were more difficult for people to remember, which sometimes prompted a follow-up e-mail.

Deliberation

My data show that much of the process of greening a lifestyle is deliberative in nature because it is a difficult path with a high level of uncertainty. Deliberative actions are slower, controlled, serial, effortful, rule governed, consciously motivated, flexible, and tend to disrupt each other (Kahneman, 2003). Many interviewees explained that being green is hard work, from growing your own food to changing township ordinances to include green technology. Ava, a voluntary simplifier, explains that deliberation and uncertainty “slow me down in making decisions, but in a good way.” She defines an

environmentalist as “anyone who makes *conscious* decisions” about their impact on the environment, although she notes no one is perfect. This struggle, which some might consider draining or time consuming, makes her feel “intensely alive.”

Given the status quo bias (the tendency to go along with the status quo) and loss aversion (a loss has a greater impact than an equivalent gain) (Thaler and Sunstein, 2008), it may be difficult to reduce consumption without some deliberation. To clarify, a dual-cognition approach (automatic and deliberate) does not mean that automatic and deliberative actions are mutually exclusive. Overlap and interaction is possible between the two systems. For example, the automatic system can be retrained with planned repetition (Thaler and Sunstein, 2008), like bringing cloth bags to the grocery store. Done once a week, it can recede into the automatic system. Pragmatist theory agrees that individuals alternate between habit and creativity when problem solving, and that innovations can regress into stock habits (Gross, 2009). This involves different degrees of deliberation; consumer deliberation should not be considered simply present or absent (Johnston and Szabo, 2011).

Carol, a voluntary simplifier, hangs a cloth bag on her front doorknob so she’ll remember it on her way out. Carol referred to this as one of her “little tricks” to adopt a new routine. Natalie, a UCC environmentalist, also uses this convenience strategy. Her washing machine and dryer sit just inside the kitchen door. Natalie explains, “I have them [cloth bags] on the washer, where I—And so they’re accessible when I’m going to the store.” Seeing the cloth bags as she leaves her house reminds her to take them along allowing her to change her routine with minimal effort and make self-monitoring less demanding. She only needs to remember to put them back in place when she gets home from the store.

The main barrier to going green is uncertainty (Connolly and Prothero, 2008). Thus, an attempt to match practices with a green lifestyle results in deliberative action and interaction. Several interviewees recounted times when they had asked themselves, “Am I making a good choice doing this?” or “How could I do this better?” Lindsey, a voluntary simplifier, describes her day-to-day thinking when she goes to buy something.

And sometimes, I go and I look, and I’m ready to pick it off the shelf and I say: Wait a minute. Where am I going to put this in my house? Do I really need this? Is it going to serve a purpose? Or am I just going to give it away to somebody in a few months when I realize it was nice when it was new, but I don’t care for it anymore? So I try to prevent myself from just blindly buying things just because I was raised in a feel-good culture where buying things makes you feel good. ... And so when I feel a need to buy, I try to assess: Why do I need to buy this thing? Why do I need [x]? Maybe I need to go for a walk instead. Maybe I need to do something for myself, but not in a way that furthers that consumerism drive within me. ... So I think: Is it something that I need? Let’s say food. And if it’s food, am I going to buy the box of highly-processed food, or am I going to buy the fresh food, even if it’s not, say, organic? ... Or if I need to buy something, can I buy something that is organic and/or fair trade? Like if I want to buy coffee, is it fair trade? Is it shade grown?

She uses a kind of decision-making tree when considering her purchases (A or B? If A, then C or D?). She acts as her own intervention, saying “wait a

minute”—this is micro-level, incremental change. Through reflection about how to be green, Lindsey is really asking herself what practices or purchases fit her future lifestyle? She explains why she has to ask herself so many questions.

Well, unfortunately, it always seems like a struggle. It's that, if you want to make choices, you've got to think about it. You can't just automatically go and buy the nearest thing on the shelf, or even the cheapest thing, or even the most expensive thing.

Her reflection during shopping is an attempt to distance herself from an old imagined lifestyle (consumer oriented) and move toward a new lifestyle (simplicity). She uses the critique of consumerism as a disease to support this change.

Similarly, Beth, a green home owner and residential green building business owner (with her husband), explains, “we [my husband and I] think about this stuff a lot, and we try to do whatever we can reasonably do.” When I asked her when she started to consider environmentally friendly options for her home and business, she identified the dinner table as the place the process started. Beth explains that knowledge production around green building and LEED certification is accelerating and it's hard to keep up with.

Since January 20th of this year [2009], [laughter] things have moved very much faster, I think. ... [For example] Oh, I think it's LEED, ... if they follow them [the LEED guidelines], they're [the buildings are] turning out not to operate efficiently. So, I think there's a lot going on. ... Because people ask us all the time in our business about what a lot of this means. ... There aren't clear definitions of a lot of things. So what I say is that—We've made a decision for it at this point in time. But I'm not sure whether it's better for me to buy a stick of wood from a sustainable forest in Oregon and have it brought here, or cut down the tree in my backyard and not replant it. Do you know what I'm saying? And I'm not—I'm neither knowledgeable enough nor have the ability—for every stick of anything—[to] figure out which is better. So we've made our own decisions for now, and it's possible that next year, I'll find out that was wrong, and we'll change it.

She uses her own home as a testing ground for many innovations, like geothermal heating and cooling, and then introduces them to her clients. This trial-and-error process at home reduces some of the uncertainty in her business and although she anticipates course corrections in the future she still approaches these decisions as a kind of moral dilemma.

My interviewees foresee refinements in their green practices as they learn more, but it does not paralyze their action in the present. Ava, a voluntary simplifier, explains that “in ten years knowledge will change” so we have to continue to be “open to changing practices, when we learn practices are wrong.” Informants do the best they can with what they know now. In this case, knowledge does not necessarily precede action, especially as knowledge is expected to evolve and expand. Darren, an architect and green home owner, explains that trying to be environmentally friendly is a “moving target,”⁹

⁹ Greenwashing was not explicitly mentioned in the interviews but was alluded to, and involves exaggerations in corporate public relations campaigns and/or deceptive product claims (Muldoon, 2006).

which leads to a few mistakes and many conversations with his wife and two kids at the dinner table.

In sum, my informants oscillate between deliberate and automatic cognition when building a green lifestyle. There is a great deal of deliberation over what is more sustainable. When new practices are adopted they are incorporated into routines (automatic cognition) until or unless called into question by new knowledge, leading to further deliberation and revision. This means that the resources used to assemble a lifestyle are constantly changing.

Gradual Transformation

Green lifestyles are also characterized as a process of gradual change over time to the extent that a tipping point is difficult to identify. Carol, a voluntary simplifier, explains, “I’ve taken a little path,” which sounds like a typical conversion experience (DeGloma, 2010), but her description has a much longer time horizon. She states:

I think that voluntary simplicity is, you know, broader, and it involves more of a total lifestyle change ... Uh, it’s been a progression ... I came back from [a retreat], I decided that was what I was going to pursue. But you know—but it’s certainly—You know, I certainly wasn’t one way one day and another way another day ... You know, even decluttering—you could do that all the time. You know, you keep going. There are still things here [at home] that I, you know, know that I don’t need and could get rid of, and so, it’s a process. And so, I haven’t—You know, I was convinced after the [retreat] that, that was simple.

The decision to make a change may happen at a specific time, like during a retreat (although this was rarely identified in the interviews), but the change in practices and shedding material goods is a long, slow process.

Tess, a progressive Catholic environmentalist, describes a project of understanding and synthesizing knowledge. This is not simply the accumulation of facts but, rather, coordinating how those facts fit together and their political implications.

So, how do people start? They start someplace. And wherever they start, they can move onto something else. And as you learn more and more and more, you have more hooks inside you to absorb. ... [W]hen somebody tells you something, like the IAASTD report [2008 International Agricultural Assessment of Knowledge, Science and Technology Development] ... you could hook it someplace. You have someplace to put it. Now, if you’ve never heard of genetic engineering, if you’ve never heard of, thought much about, monocultures, then you might not appreciate what diversified farming [is]—and [the importance of] having all the stakeholders instead of just the leaders of countries and well-to-do corporations made decisions—to have that unusual grouping of people that made that report. You have the hooks now. You can absorb what you’re learning from people.

Tess also envisions learning that connects macro food politics to everyday life. Lindsey, a voluntary simplifier, focuses more on the dynamic process of changing practices.

And sometimes, I do make progress [buying healthy food, fair trade, and avoiding sweatshop products], and then sometimes, I feel like I slip back. So for me, it's not a constant forward movement. It's kind of a moving ahead and a slipping back, and a moving ahead, kind of an ebb and flow.

Lindsey used to rent a house and then moved back to an apartment for financial reasons. She mentioned several practices that she felt she had to give up due to apartment living, like composting.

Part of what accounts for this slow process of change, aside from deliberation over what is green or sustainable, is the reality of multiple and possibly divided priorities—for example, family commitments, health concerns, and/or a lack of financial resources. Lifestyles emerge out of preexisting conditions and may conflict as, for example, when “caring consumption” gets in the way of simplifying or reducing consumption because cultural ideas about being a good mother are closely related to provisioning (Thompson, 1996). Bricolage assists in the adoption of a greener lifestyle, drawing innovatively on bits and pieces of practice and value orientations at different times as constraints change.

BRICOLAGE: A LIFESTYLE MECHANISM

Bricolage is a makeshift, do-it-yourself mechanism used to build, change, or repair something—in the present case, a lifestyle. It involves the cobbling together of resources at hand by nonexperts who figure things out as they go. *Bricoleur* was originally used by Levi-Strauss (1966) to describe someone who recycles old materials to make do with whatever is at hand. I return to this definition to explain how green lifestyles are adopted.

Bricolage includes materials and practices from old lifestyles viewed in a new light and recombines them with newly adopted materials, practices, and environmental discourses to form a new pattern. Part of bricolage is what you have already built in your life. For example, commonsense practices surrounding the careful use of well water becomes water conservation, not eating meat for health reasons shifts in focus to avoiding resource-intensive factory farming, and a collection of Depression-era glass gravitates toward emphasizing “The Depression” and de-emphasizing “collection.” As Angela, a voluntary simplifier, explains:

But I really believe in using something until it's unusable. And one of my fetishes is buying Depression glass because it's collectible. But it's old. It was made in the 30's. It's lasted this long, and I just feel that that's a badge of honor. It's also sort of pretty.

She is a little embarrassed that a simplifier would have a collection of anything, but integrates it into her lifestyle by pointing out its longevity and symbolism.

Bricolage is continually pulled together in a patchwork composition that imposes provisional coherence on this dynamic process. Cynthia, a voluntary

simplifier, mentioned that simple living is a matter of perspective and simple living practices are associated with multiple and even contradictory lifestyles. The practices themselves have no objective or inevitable coherence; instead, coherence is crafted by imposing the idea of a lifestyle onto disparate materials, practices, and discourses. When the term lifestyle is invoked in interviews, it is in itself a discourse for asserting cultural coherence.

Interviewees who grew up with frugal practices often returned to them when faced with the problem of environmental harms. For example, Cynthia explained to me that she has similar practices as her politically conservative parents but justifies her behavior from a progressive perspective. Cynthia's old family practices included do-it-yourself home renovation and car repair, going to garage sales and the dump to find goods to reuse, composting, and picking up litter. Cynthia continues those practices minus the trips to the dump; instead, she uses Freecycle and Craigslist and drives around nearby neighborhoods on garbage day to pick up small pieces of furniture or building materials. In college, she adopted a new environmental perspective that revived old practices concentrated around self-reliance and reducing waste, and motivated new practices.

Thus far I have given examples focused primarily on practices and material goods; however, bricolage also incorporates environmental stock themes, which are key components of provisional coherence.

Environmental Themes

Environmental themes are “available culture” (Swidler, 2001) and when integrated into a lifestyle act as guiding principles that lend it coherence. The three main environmental themes¹⁰ that I found integrated with life narratives include: (1) antimaterialism, (2) environmental protection, and (3) interconnectedness. These three primary environmental themes, along with secondary themes, are combined in diverse ways to support lifestyle change.

Antimaterialism was used most distinctively by voluntary simplifiers to critique consumer culture. Green home owners primarily relied on a critique of the overuse of finite resources and called for their protection (a theme present in other groups, but used differently—in combination with other themes). Religious environmentalists supported the idea of interconnection through their view of creation as sacred, making stewardship of the earth a religious calling (this was also used by other groups but in terms of secular ecology). So while I single out these three primary themes for analytic purposes, they were used in combination with other supporting themes like health concerns.

¹⁰ For example, Brulle identifies nine discursive frames adopted by the U.S. environmental movement: manifest destiny, wildlife management, preservation, reform environmentalism, deep ecology, environmental justice, ecofeminism, and ecotheology (2000:273).

Many interviewees, especially voluntary simplifiers, reduced their consumption for both personal and environmental reasons. They argued that reducing consumption can be spiritually fulfilling and personally satisfying, as well as reducing reliance on nonrenewable resources. Voluntary simplifiers used the theme of antimaterialism to help them reach this goal. The voluntary simplifier I spoke with argued that we should separate needs from wants to reduce consumption but not deprive ourselves. Needs are contextual, thus we are allowed to define a cell phone (to keep in touch with our family or for emergencies) or laptop (for work) as a need. Angela, a voluntary simplifier, explains “love, food, education, medical care, decent housing, clothing, you know, is essential. So I would say, try to think about what you really need in your life, and see what consumer items really are necessary and what are not.” Voluntary simplifiers argue that quality of life increases with restricted consumption, and claim that material objects literally get in the way of personal fulfillment and social relationships that can be restored when material barriers are cleared away.

Angela describes her approach to antimaterialism:

simple living means just being more what people are meant to be. And as I said, stuff is—it should not be ruling us; consumerism shouldn't be ruling us. You know, *people-ism* should rule us, and so, a sort of side effect would be, you know, to help the environment as well. But it's also—it's really bad for us to be so thing oriented, and to be so wasteful.

Angela also incorporates a kind of nondeist spirituality and views the world as an interconnected ecosystem. She explains, “I think of the whole world as one organism, sort of Gaia-ish, you might say, and then, I think humans are a part of it; they're not apart from it.”

She also brings together secondary themes in her justification for lifestyle change—the economic downturn, environmental justice, and economic inequality. In addition to drawing on these themes to explain her actions, she also lives below her means and considers food quality and the distance it has traveled, does not eat red meat, has recently had a home energy audit and is planning small renovations (attic insulation and replacing windows), and owns a Prius hybrid, to name a few. This “toolkit” (Swidler, 2001) of practices and discourses does not simply follow action as an explanation, but is inextricably connected with action as it unfolds over time and motivates future action.

Environmental protection includes the conservation of natural resources and landscapes. All three groups used the theme of environmental protection predicated on the critique of finite resources. However, it was the primary theme used by green home owners, whereas other groups used it as more of a supporting theme and in combination with other themes. Groups acknowledged the environmental damage that had already occurred and their desire to take responsibility for it. This was often assisted by both a sense of urgency (time is running out) and an open view of the future (beyond a single lifetime). Interviewees asked: “What are we leaving behind for our children and grandchildren?” A kind of ecological balance or sustainability was sought by green home owners. There was also awareness that intensive use of resources in the United

States means a lack of necessary resources in other regions, truly a zero-sum game. Anthony, a green home owner and builder, in the process of LEED certification and EPA (Environmental Protection Agency) certification for air quality, explains what he means by green building being the right thing to do.

Is it right to recycle? Of course it is, because if you don't, you're utilizing resources that you could basically regenerate through the recycling process. So why tax future generations and burden future generations by having less available resources than we're capable of leaving them.... It's the right thing to do because our generation doesn't have the right to utilize any more resources than it absolutely needs ... resources need to be shepherded, hoarded, you know, carefully dealt with.

Anthony focuses on the finite supply of resources, the fairness of their distribution (present use vs. future use), and considers the connection between future generations and remaining resources. Notice this is a kind of interconnection, but not the secular ecology (“Gaia-ish”) understanding that many voluntary simplifiers share, nor the sacred understanding the religious environmentalists share.

Religious environmentalists explained that everything is connected because it was part of a single process of creation. People rely on this “web of life” for their survival. Secondary themes called on to support this idea included social and environmental justice, workers’ rights and economic inequality, super storms and rising seawater killing and displacing people, and people hurt in the name of progress and industrialization.

Bruce, an Episcopal environmentalist, argues that “we are required by God to be good stewards of creation.” He believes that faith can make people more motivated to change their lifestyles.

Well, we're really trying to look at ecology from a faith perspective ... look. It's—In the past, we [Church Ecology Committee] looked at it as the right thing to do, and taking a biblical perspective puts a totally different spin on things. And I think we have not been as—What it does is that it gets you to—I mean, if people were to recognize it from a biblical perspective, that we are to be stewards of all of creation, we would take this idea of saving energy and saving—you know, recycling bottles and paper, and take it to a whole new perspective [level]. We would begin to ask ourselves. We would get into the question, you know: What is our carbon footprint? ... But trying to be mindful of our lifestyle and how we influence our—the production of CO₂ is something that we—it takes this to a far more significant depth.

Using a religious lens for his critique results in a deeper understanding of the problem, possible solutions, and makes the process more meaningful to him. Bruce is a retired chemical engineer and does not require a religious perspective to be an environmentalist. As an engineer, he was concerned about air and water pollution and disposal of hazardous waste, but now he has expanded that to include America’s carbon footprint and the fairness of resource distribution. He has alternative narratives available to him, but he chooses a biblical perspective as more personally meaningful and flexible enough to bring together many concerns.

Bruce organizes interconnectedness around global inequality. He understands that resources used in the developed world come at the expense of the

developing world. Bruce points out that the church has moved from a focus on personal piety to saving all of creation—both people and the environment. He also mentions secondary themes of environmental protection and resource efficiency (saving money heating church buildings), resource distribution (concern for developing countries and the poor), and energy independence (for national security reasons, in the news at the time of interview). These themes are not in themselves cohesive, yet the narrative of a green lifestyle and interconnectedness brings them together under a single umbrella of provisional coherence, even though they are formed over time in a piecemeal fashion.

Environmentalism was often incorporated through progressive politics, akin to what Snow et al. (1986) describe when they use the term frame bridge. A frame bridge is a link between ideologically compatible frames used to address a particular problem. For example, Natalie, a UCC environmentalist, has been involved with gun control and supporting women in politics, which are brought together with environmentalism through a Catholic human rights background and a focus on social justice.

Interviewees defined environmental harms as problems to be addressed at all levels, including individual lifestyles. Informants brought together different resources for this cause, redefining old goods and practices, recombining them with new consumer goods and practices, and supporting these with environmental themes, often in dialogue with other progressive political issues.

A PRAGMATIST PERSPECTIVE ON LIFESTYLE CHANGE

According to pragmatist theory, beliefs, values, and desires do not preexist and motivate action; instead, pragmatists argue that routines and conventions are followed until a problem situation is encountered. Dewey (1922) gives the example of a traveler confidently following a path, until she meets an obstacle. The traveler stops, studies the situation, considers past experiences, including the experiences of others, and imagines future alternatives for action to plan her “anticipatory project” (Dewey, 1922:182). Pragmatist theory rejects the idea of final ends and the dualism between ends and means. In its place, the traveler poses an “end-in-view” or a subjective and flexible goal that can be amended with deliberation (Whitford, 2002). Here action is continuous and not segmented into means/ends. Actors do not choose ends but, rather, choose a means of dealing with a problem.

Hobson finds little evidence for a preexisting “environmental preference or the awakening of a latent sense of environmental concern” as expected by prevailing studies of changing behavior (2002:110).¹¹ Instead, people were “made to think” when confronted with literature about the environment—made to

¹¹ Other work assumes a return on moral utility from going green. For example, Mazar and Zhong (2010) have stirred up a debate over moral licensing rebound effects, arguing that increased morality in one area (green consumption) reduces morality in other areas. For those with a more holistic perspective on sustainability, this does not seem to be the case.

think about trust, authority, interests, responsibility, access, right and wrong, distribution, and fairness (Hobson, 2002). As Nye and Hargreaves (2009) note, many studies tend to define context as preexisting and neglect the emergent factors in deliberation and interaction. Moreover, Cherrier argues that for some consumer-resistant identities, “resistance does not emerge from promoting an objective truth on environmental degradation or social inequalities but from promoting discursive fields in everyday life as a source for self-reflection” (2009:189).

Drawing on pragmatist action theory, Herrigel argues that goals “emerge out of action as a socially interactive, reflective, creative, and experimental process that both discovers and generates possibilities for further action” (2010:20). This in-between state of deliberation is where ideas break through at the edges of thinking. Actors choose processes that bring certain goals into sight. The process of going green addresses a problem situation and during that process values and desires are co-constituted with that project. A change in behavior can precede a change in values (Goldblatt, 2005), and knowledge is built up over time after practices have started to change and is used as a rationale for past and future changes.

A green lifestyle emerges out of this process. This is an agentic project because the “processes of reconstruction and creative reflection make it possible for actors to move beyond existing constraints” (Herrigel, 2010:20). Individuals use bricolage to build a critique of the problem and pull together old and new sustainable practices. Green lifestyles create provisional coherence, which organizes and synchronizes action. Green lifestyles are typically experienced as a path, not a tipping point. A very small minority of informants can identify when they entered the path *post hoc*. A much more common perspective was the realization of being on a new path but unable to identify a tipping point or starting point. A period of deliberation or information gathering did not precede action, but was closely linked with action unfolding over time. People wrestle with problems; recombine routines with practices they grew up with and incorporate environmental themes that critique the problem of climate change. These environmental themes support cohesive action even as they are themselves evolving and provisional, subject to new knowledge.

Changes in life also afford opportunities to rethink problems, choose between the means to address them, and set new paths. The interviewees in my sample linked changes to having children, having children leave home and go to college, having grandchildren, surviving breast cancer, retirement, divorce, moving to a new place, or building a new home. When something intrudes on our routines like an “interruption of the guaranteed supply of water or energy ... or [a] home-improvement project,” individuals become “(temporarily) alert” and consider alternatives in “periods of de- and re-routinisation” (Spaargaren and Van Vliet, 2000:64–65). Swidler has noted that “culture thus has greater, or at least more obvious, influence over action” when people have unsettled lives, when they are “reorganizing their strategies

of action or developing new ones” (2001:93, 99–100). These transitions, and problems related to them, require more than habitual action in response.

The dichotomy between motivations (values, cognition, heuristics) and rationales (justifications, cultural repertoires, toolkit)¹² rests on the view of periodic action and linear time. Yet if we consider “culture in action” to be continuous, then process is prioritized rather than causality. Using a process perspective opens up a different relationship between motivation and rationale. Nothing stops a motivation from becoming a rationale or vice versa. Dewey (1922) argues that the difference between means and ends is the time at which they are considered. Similarly, Whitford argues that “an end, or effect, soon becomes a means, or cause, for what follows” (2002:337). Looking at interconnected actions over time turns motivation/rationale into a reciprocal phenomenon. The people I spoke with about environmental concerns, and the decisions they made to work on developing environmentally sensitive lifestyles, provide ample evidence of this pragmatic approach.

CONCLUSION

The people I interviewed brought together old and new consumer goods, old and new practices, and environmental themes to form a more sustainable lifestyle. Despite this creative use of resources—subject to uncertainty, deliberation, and incremental change—an experience of provisional coherence was cultivated. The gelling together of these resources to confront environmental harms is what accounts for a green lifestyle, which functions as a compass to guide everyday deliberations.

A green lifestyle reaches into everyday lives, including transportation, grocery shopping, or using cloth diapers. Lifestyles emerge from deliberation over environmental harms and choosing between the means of living more sustainably. My informants go green gradually because they believe their actions matter. Green practices snowball to build a more coherent lifestyle or ebb and flow according to life circumstances. Environmental themes are used as a justification for action that becomes, in turn, a motivation for future action and new practices resolve into habits.

Coherence is cultivated over time through life narratives. Lifestyles remain fraught with contradictions, tentative solutions, and dinner table discussions. My findings suggest that “doing the right thing” is a process of awareness, critique of the problem, and deliberation over the right course of action. This is a gradual change over time that allows us to witness the process of going green. It also tells us something about how people relate to their culture in a meaningful, reflexive, and self-disciplining way. Policymakers and advocates

¹² Discussed by Vaisey, whose project is to “coherently combine the appealing possibility that culture matters both as a social and psychological justification *and* as a motivation for action” (2009:1676).

should consider fostering reflection and dialogue, instead of organizing environmental information in to-do lists.

The treatment of environmentalists as exceptional (holding higher values, greater levels of knowledge, or inspiration) lifts individuals out of their social processes, fostering a one-dimensional understanding of action and a narrow avenue for the transmission of sustainable practices. Lifestyle change is not a recipe or blueprint, but an ongoing process that co-constitutes values, knowledge, and hope for the future. A pragmatist perspective offers fresh insight into explaining how green lifestyles emerge and how the understanding of a problem can be invested with prescriptive, and not just descriptive, powers.

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