Leading a sustainable lifestyle in a 'non-sustainable world':

Reflections from Australian eco-village and suburban residents

Abstract

Despite increasing awareness and acceptance of sustainability, relatively little is known about the motivations, viewpoints and experiences of people who choose to lead extremely sustainable lives. Through in-depth interviews with seven sustainability leaders, residing in an ecovillage or traditional suburban community in South-East Queensland in Australia, this qualitative research explores their sustainability motivations, experiences and whether residing in a sustainable ecovillage makes leading a sustainable life easier. All shared a strong commitment to sustainability from early childhood and enjoyed being early adopters and leaders in sustainability, explaining that they felt this leadership role was "their calling". Ecovillage residents felt living there made it easier to stay motivated and maintain a sustainable lifestyle due to the support and shared knowledge from 'like-minded' neighbours, whilst participants residing in a traditional suburban community valued not being bound by a community code and the challenge of leading a sustainable lifestyle in a 'non-sustainable world'.

Keywords: ecovillages, sustainability leadership, sustainable lifestyles

The twenty-first century is frequently described as the 'era of sustainability', with increasing global awareness about the importance of addressing climate change and reducing greenhouse gas emissions (United Nations, 2007). Internationally, and within Australia, numerous initiatives and education programs have been designed to encourage people to change their behaviours, to make better environmental choices and ecologically sustainable lifestyle decisions in terms of housing, energy and water consumption and transportation (e.g., Miller, Buys, & Bell, 2009). Yet, to date, leading a sustainable life is not yet a mainstream concept. For example, although over three-quarters (82%) of Australian adults state they were concerned about environmental issues, only a third (34%) report some form of environmental involvement (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2010). Whilst a large body of literature has explored the wide array of internal (i.e., values, knowledge, experience, feelings, personality traits) and external (i.e., social norms, infrastructure, cost) factors that influence whether people behave sustainably or not (e.g., Kollmuss & Agyeman, 2002; McKenzie Mohr, 2001; Stern, 2000; Schultz & Zelezny, 1998; Whitmarsh & O'Neill, 2010), much less is known about the experiences of those who choose to lead extremely sustainable lives. Thus, this paper explores the motivations, viewpoints and experiences of a small sample of sustainability leaders from South-East Queensland, Australia.

Who are sustainability leaders?

Although leadership can take many forms, it has been proposed that anyone who takes responsibility for understanding and acting on sustainability challenges qualifies as a 'sustainability leader', whether or not they hold a formal leadership position (Ferdig, 2007). To date, whilst an emerging body of literature is exploring sustainability leadership in corporate organisations (e.g., Fenwick, 2007; Quinn & Norton, 2004), little is known about the motivations and actions of individual sustainability leaders in the wider community who consciously choose to live their lives in an eco-friendly manner by accounting for, and minimising, their impact on the planet. Research has typically focussed on the predictors of individual-level pro-environmental attitudes and behaviours among the general community, identifying feelings of environmental responsibility (Kaiser & Shimoda, 1999) and pro-environmental self-identity (Whitmarsh & O'Neill, 2010) as key predictors. In explaining non-activist environmentalism, researchers often utilise Stern's (2000) value-belief-norm model to explain how certain values (i.e. altruism), beliefs (i.e. environmental responsibility) and personal norms (i.e. sense of obligation) intertwine to influence whether people undertake environmentally sustainable actions. Whilst these actions have been variously operationalised – from recycling, water or energy conservation to sustainable housing and transport – they are commonly defined as 'intentionally reducing the negative impact that an action can have on the environment' (Kollmuss & Agyeman, 2002).

Several studies have explored the actions and experiences of sustainability leaders and activists, those who prioritise sustainability in their daily life choices and may hold formal leadership roles in environmental movements, demonstrations or initiatives (Seguin, Pelletier & Hunsley, 1998; Stern, Dietz, Abel & Kalof, 1999). In 1980, Tanner investigated the formative or 'significant life experiences' of over 50 American individuals who demonstrated environmental concern – sustainability leaders. Tanner (1980) identified a distinct set of sources: lengthy periods of time (usually during childhood) spent outdoors in natural surrounds, parents and family members, involvement in environmental organisations, education and the loss/degradation of a personally valued natural place. More recently, in a sample of 30 sustainability leaders, Chawla (1999) found they reported similar motivations for action (i.e., childhood experiences, family, organisation involvement, negative experiences of habitat destruction) as well as new sources, specifically vocation, sense of social justice, religion and concern for children/grandchildren. Two recent studies have highlighted the challenges associated with leading a sustainable life, even for environmentally-minded citizens. Isenhour's (2010) in-depth ethnographic research revealed that citizens who were extremely committed to leading 'green' lifestyles still reported frequently encountering significant barriers, specifically social (e.g., inter-household negotiations, peer pressure), lifestyle (e.g., habit, time), economic (e.g., price, trust), informational (e.g., lack of or overwhelming information) and political (e.g., government inaction). Surveying 84 Americans associated with the environmental movement, Quimby and Angelique (2011) also found a high degree of frustration, hopelessness and disappointment about the uptake of pro-environmental sustainability initiatives amongst the wider community. A major challenge for these sustainability leaders, who typically endeavour to lead 'with' rather than 'of' or 'over' other individuals, is how best to engage others in the processes for creating a vision and making it a reality through their actions (Ferdig, 2007). Indeed, in evaluating a pilot Australian sustainability education program, Miller and colleagues (2009) found that many early participants already lead very sustainable lives and had participated in the program not to learn but to publicly demonstrate their commitment to sustainability, to be a 'role model to others' and to help make sustainability 'mainstream'.

The role of residential locality and ecovillages

Research to date has not fully explored how residential locality might impact on how easy it is to lead a sustainable life and make sustainable choices in terms of transport, water and energy usage, despite a small body of literature demonstrating that residing in a purpose-built sustainable house makes performing sustainable actions easier (e.g., Buys, Barnett, Miller & Bailey, 2005). This knowledge gap is surprising, particularly given the increasing popularity of sustainable ecovillages. Commonly defined as intentional communities where like-minded residents share a commitment to leading sustainable lives, ecovillages typically offer a combination of sustainable

house building methods, advanced technology to assist with sustainable resource management, and social support to make and maintain lifestyle choices that are based on what is best for the environment (Conrad, 1995). For example, in a case study of an ecovillage in the American Pacific Northwest, Ergas (2010) documented – via participant observation and interviews with 24 residents - how the collective community goal was sustainability, which they were achieving "by *being* the change they seek" (p40). Residents, who were consciously rejecting dominant consumer culture by their residential choice and desire for self-sufficiency, shared their knowledge, values and ideas through regular visitor tours. Similarly, Kirby (2003) found that residents of the Ithaca ecovillage in upstate New York, who identified personal experiences as underpinning their commitment to lead a sustainable life, described social and environmental activism as the main reasons for their decision to reside in an ecovillage. Globally, there is increasing awareness and interest in sustainable living and the ecovillage choice; in Australia, for example, 15 ecovillages are currently listed at an online sustainability directory (EcoDirectory, 2011). The most prominent of these is *Ecovillage at Currumbin,* frequently described as a *n*ational and international exemplar of sustainable community living: a 110 hectare site (80% open-space) on Queensland's Gold Coast with a community hub, sustainable building design and numerous green initiatives, it was the winner of the Urban Development Institute of Australia's award of excellence in 2007 for Australia's best environment development and the International Real Estate Federation's Prix d'Excellence Award for the World's Best Environmental Development in 2008 (Sustainable Green, 2011).

However, despite increasing interest, relatively little is known about what it is like to live in an ecovillage or whether it might be easier to maintain a sustainable lifestyle in this type of community compared to a traditional suburban community. Thus, this exploratory qualitative research investigates the experiences of seven Australian sustainability leaders residing in South-East Queensland, who lived either in an ecovillage (the Ecovillage at Currumbin) or a more traditional urban suburb. As well as exploring the extent to which it is easier to maintain a sustainable lifestyle in an ecovillage, a second aim of this research is to the document the experiences, values and motivations of sustainability leaders.

Method

Participants

Seven South-East Queensland residents participated: three (1 man, 2 women) currently residing in traditional suburban communities (TS) in Brisbane (the capital city of Queensland in Australia), and four (2 men, 2 women) residing in the *Ecovillage at Currumbin* (EV) community, a forty minute drive from Brisbane. All participants lived in privately owned detached housing and ranged in age from 56 to 70 years old, with the majority professionals currently running their own home-based business in the sustainability industry. The EV residents had lived there

for approximately two years (ranging from 18 months to 2 years); of the three TS households two had significant time living in an EV. One had withdrawn from an EV land purchase because of the strict and lengthy EV covenants and one had rented in a EV, leaving because of a *"personality mis-match with the community regulations"*.

Procedure

The study followed standard ethical protocols, with written informed consent obtained from each participant. A purposive sampling technique was utilised to recruit sustainable leaders, with advertisements placed on the website of an organisation that coordinates 'open home' visits to sustainable houses in Brisbane and on a notice board at the Currumbin Ecovillage Hub. Interested participants replied, with semi-structured interviews (lasting approximately 90 minutes) conducted in participant's homes. The following key areas were discussed: early exposure and 'conversion' to sustainability, barriers and motivators to living a sustainable life, their specific behavioural choices, and the influence of family, friends and their local residential community on leading a sustainable life. Interviews were audio-recorded and later transcribed. A thematic data analysis approach was utilised to identify key themes, with interview notes and transcripts coded manually after a process of date immersion (Liamputtong & Ezzy, 2005).

Results

Participants were extremely passionate about sustainability, which they defined as changing their daily behaviours to proactively minimise the impact their actions have on the environment. This meant consciously making sustainable choices in all aspects of their lives, from designing their homes for energy and water sustainability, selecting more sustainable transport options and daily choices in terms of products and packaging. Participants explained that sustainability was their 'calling' and they felt a moral responsibility to act, with all enacting this belief by running a small business that focussed on particular elements of sustainability. Two main themes are discussed in turn: motivations for, and experiences of, sustainability leadership and the role of neighbourhood social-dynamics.

Theme 1: Motivations for, and experiences of, sustainability leadership

Participants described two key motivations for leading a sustainable lifestyle: personal experiences and a strong sense of moral responsibility towards the environment. Their childhood experiences appear to be the foundation of their sustainable habits and sense of responsibility for the environment; in retracing their path to choosing a sustainable lifestyle, participants explained how their family (specifically their parents) taught them respect for the land and the environment, with most describing how as a child they valued family time spent interacting with nature (i.e., fishing, hunting and growing food). All described how an initial motivator for their current sustainable

lifestyle was personal experiences – these 'trigger' experiences varied, from growing up in developing countries to travelling and becoming aware of the damaging impacts that their own behaviours and choices could have on the environment. Once aware, participants felt that they had a moral responsibility to act. Interestingly, whilst they had endeavoured to pass their sustainability values and lifestyle onto their children, several participants described how their children did not currently prioritise sustainability – as one explained, "*money and time prevents, but that is their choice*" (EV).

Participants highlighted two specific dimensions of moral responsibility: personal leadership and the wider community. All described how they had made a conscious decision to 'do their part' in reducing the impact their daily activities had on the environment, and to lead and inspire by example: "*we are merely stewards of the environment, we take from the environment but we must return more to keep the balance for the future. We must manage our resources better and be accountable for what we use*" *(EV).* They felt a strong moral responsibility to act, explaining that they had brought children into this world and believed that they had to contribute, in some way, to ensuring that there is a sustainable future for the next generation: "*we see the environmental issues as a whole issue and we need to do something to guarantee a future for the grandchildren*" *(EV).* Many viewed and treated sustainability as 'their religion' and reported a strong desire to share their experiences and knowledge with the wider community; they described how they would trial new technologies and initiatives so that they could then demonstrate (via the open home and ecovillage tour days) their learnings to other interested people. Interestingly, one TC participant described how they treated leading a sustainable lifestyle as a game and viewed it as an enjoyable challenge for them: "*the eco-lifestyle, it's a game and a challenge... being a rebel*". All were early adopters of the sustainability lifestyle, leading the way in adopting new sustainable technologies, designs, initiatives and build environment practices. However, they acknowledged that there was often a financial penalty associated with being an early 'sustainability leader', with some expressing a degree of annoyance that they were now 'missing out' on multiple state and federal government grants to support sustainability actions as they had already adopted these initiatives (e.g., rainwater tanks, solar panels).

In terms of the challenges associated with engaging the wider community with sustainability, , participants identified three inter-related barriers they felt impeded uptake: complicated technologies, high investment (time and cost), and societal values. First, in terms of technologies, there was a feeling that there were major issues in terms of both sourcing accurate information and product overload – as one TC participant explained "*the information on the technologies is hard to resource to begin with… and it is very difficult to filter through all the garbage that is out there as well. For example, at home shows, everyone promotes that their product is the best, yet the facts are opposite*". Second, the significant investment of both time and money required to make the 'right'

decision about what technology to install meant many people unfortunately put the exercise into the "too hard basket" – the reality is that "*the solar systems aren't cheap. The water tanks aren't cheap and and then, of course, you have to get the filters and pumps to get your water*" (TC) and "*it can be a little financial to establish a sustainable lifestyle, especially for young ones*" (EV). Participants were frustrated that cost stopped the public from converting to a sustainable lifestyles and retrofitting residences with new sustainable technologies, explaining how it was hard to advise others to act when there was often a significant initial cost barrier – from a few hundred dollars for the simplest vegetable garden to thousands for solar panels. Third, societal values and 'narrow' thinking were perceived as the biggest barriers: there was a strong sense that to achieve sustainability, the general public needed to be more open to changing how they viewed the environment and the impact of their built environment and lifestyle choices. Critically, these leaders shared a idealistic vision for a time when a non-sustainable lifestyle "*will become un-cool, like smoking one day… in the future, it will be trendy to be living an ecological lifestyle*" (TC).

Theme 2: Role of neighbourhood social-dynamics

Although most explained that they were committed to sustainability and where they lived did not influence their sustainable actions or behaviours, it was evident that the two groups valued different aspects about their choice of residential locality. Ecovillage residents valued the existing sustainability infrastructure and the social support network, whilst sustainability leaders residing in more traditional suburbia valued searching for the 'right' sustainability solution for their individual needs and the 'challenges' associated with leading a sustainable lifestyle in isolation in a non-sustainable world.

The Ecovillage experience: existing sustainability infrastructure and social support

Whilst explaining that they would be sustainable wherever they lived, EV residents (who had lived there for approximately two years) said that it was much 'easier' to be sustainable in the EV because the services and infrastructure to support sustainability was already in place – they did not have to "*research and do everything themselves*". This meant residents did not 'have to think' about how to implement sustainable initiatives, as they were already in place. For example, one resident described how the strict code in their ecovillage (which mandated building type, the materials used, the installation of goods and some lifestyle choices) made sustainable living easier and allowed them to focus on other issues. Most described the code as positive, with technology for things such as water management, energy use and planting taken care by the community; one resident explained how "*it is easier as the thinking is taken out for us. For example, the water management system, we only need to know what we can put down the sink and what not to use for cleaning*". However, another resident expressed frustration at the level of rules under this strict code, describing situations where building has been delayed, or made near impossible, due to rules, or misinformation about these rules. All residents praised the community

environment, which they felt maintained their motivation to lead a sustainable lifestyle through support, knowledge sharing and sharing a *"bond of sustainability with like-minded neighbours"*. One resident commented that residing in this committed sustainable community type provided a valuable consistent reminder of their decision and commitment to making more sustainable lifestyle choices.

The traditional suburbia experience: enjoying the challenge and leading by example

Conversely, those living in a traditional suburban community relished the challenge of leading a sustainable lifestyle in a 'non-sustainable world' and demonstrating - through their actions - that it was doable for everybody. They explained that an EV did not appeal to them as how they did not want to be bound by a community code or seek permission for implementing sustainable initiatives and technologies, whether it was the installation of solar panels, rainwater tanks or the process of approval for garden designs. For example, someone who had preciously resided in an EV, described how the restrictions and long approval process for her building and garden design was frustrating and eventually motivated her to leave: *"The sustainable community would not work with our personality type. The pressure to conform with their requirements is not for us...we enjoy being different [from] our neighbours, plus we enjoy the challenge of living sustainable"*. Traditional suburbia residents explained how most of their neighbours were unsustainable in their lifestyles, but they tried to motivate and inspire change by leading by example: *"it's their choice, but if they think about it they will do it. It is not my role to push, only lead by example"*.

Discussion

As the first study to explore what motivates Australian sustainability leaders residing in a traditional community or an ecovillage to adopt and maintain a sustainable lifestyle, as well as the impact of residential locality, this research extends our knowledge of sustainability leadership in several important ways. First, all felt this sustainability leadership role was "their calling" and described feeling a strong "moral responsibility" to act. Consistent with a small body of research (e.g., Chawla, 1998, 1999; Furihata et al., 2007; Kirby, 2003), these sustainability leaders described significant life experiences (SLE) – specifically exposure to nature or extreme environment degradation in their childhood or early adulthood - as a major reason for why they now lead extremely sustainable lives. The value of SLE in facilitating commitment to sustainability is widely debated. Many researchers argue that retrospective autobiographical memory is reconstructive and SLE are not predictive (see Gough, 1999), suggesting that siblings of sustainability leaders likely had similar SLE with their parents yet were not similarly affected. Indeed, consistent with this argument, many of our sample described how their children – whom they explicitly raised to value sustainability - did not currently lead sustainable lives. Yet, qualitative research repeatedly shows that sustainability activists perceive SLE as driving their commitment (Chawla, 1998, 1999), with a recent quantitative cross-sectional survey of 2000 Americans linking self-reported participation with

"wild nature" (e.g., camping) in childhood with later life environmentalism (Wells & Lekies, 2006). Creating and assessing the impact of such SLE is challenging, with Haluza-DeLay (2001) reporting that participating in a 12-day wilderness program – although enjoyable – did not translate into a greater appreciation of nature in teenagers day-to-day urban lives. Clearly, prospective longitudinal studies are required to identify and better understand the formative influences that trigger and shape sustainability leaders value systems, whilst future cross-sectional research would benefit from data triangulation and collecting data from multiple data sources (i.e., sustainability leaders and other family members, such as parents, siblings and children).

Second, by identifying what residents believe are the two key defining benefits of residing in an ecovillage - supportive technological infrastructure and social networks – this research has highlighted what policy-makers, educators and researchers need to address to help make contemporary suburbia more sustainable. Creating 'mini' ecovillages in suburbia is a challenging undertaking, but transferring some of the principles (e.g., community hubs and gardens, streamlining access to clear and accurate information and approvals for sustainability technologies) may help make the transition to a more sustainable lifestyle easier. Fortunately, an array of new initiatives, such as Sustainability Streets and Transition Towns in the United Kingdom (designed to inspire and support neighbours in process of discussing , trialing and adopting sustainability initiatives; Transition Newcastle, 2011) and Solar Cities in Australia (communities trial new sustainable energy options; Australian Government, 2011) provide practical innovative examples of how government, industry and communities are working collaboratively in local suburban neighbourhoods to help create social norms that support more sustainable lifestyles.

Third, the finding that ecovillage residents appreciated the supportive environment whilst traditional suburban residents found it restrictive and enjoyed the challenge of leading a sustainable lifestyle in a 'non-sustainable world' suggests that certain personality types may be attracted to different community types. One obvious question for future research is how residing in an EV might impact the behaviours, beliefs and actions of 'a non-sustainable individual' – would, as a small body of literature suggests (Miller & Buys, 2008; Pretty, 2003), they alter their behaviours to conform to the norms of the community? Might 'sustainability visits or vacations', enabling people to trial the lifestyle without commitment, help challenge and overcome key social, lifestyle, economic and informational barriers? Future research must investigate such possibilities and address the limitations of this research, specifically the small sample size, the self-nomination and differing recruitment methods, and the fact that all ran their own small business associated with sustainability, which may have affected views and responses. Larger and more diverse samples across Australia and internationally, exploring differing levels and types of sustainable leadership, are required, as well as longitudinal prospective research investigating these issues and

the experience and impact of SLE and ecovillage living. Our challenge now is to understand how best to enable all citizens to commit to sustainability and adopt more sustainable lifestyles.

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