

What are worldviews and why do they matter?

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Introductory Context

Increasingly, research is revealing that a person's set of beliefs—one's worldview—will strongly influence how one perceives and responds to information, including decisions about actions to take (or not). For example, whether or not a person believes in climate change—and the need to do something about it—is determined more by their political beliefs than scientific evidence (Joyce 2010, Kahan et al. 2011). In this way, exploring worldviews and the factors that shape them is necessary to fully understand how people interpret and act on environmental and sustainability data and messages. The more that we understand our own and others' worldviews, the more likely we might be to recognize their limitations and engage with each other in productive, respectful dialogue. **The goal of the learning activity** described below is to help students understand worldviews and their relevance to examining environmental and sustainability issues.

Learning Outcomes

After completing this activity, students should be able to:

- Describe what a worldview is and its many dimensions
- Ask questions that help reveal dimensions of a person's worldview
- Reflect on their own worldviews and the factors that have shaped them
- Discuss how worldviews influence people's environmental and sustainability perspectives
- Explain why examining worldviews is a valuable part of environmental and sustainability studies

Original Course Context

15-20 minutes with 20-30 students, 4 volunteers

Instructor Preparation & Materials

To complete this activity with students, the instructor should be prepared to A) provide a definition of worldview, B) list major thematic components of one, and C) discuss factors that influence a person's worldview. The online Free Dictionary provides the following basic definitions of a worldview: "1. The overall perspective from which one sees and interprets the world. 2. A collection of beliefs about life and the universe held by an individual or a group." (<http://www.thefreedictionary.com/worldview>). The psychologist Koltko-Rivera (2004; p. 3) offers this description: "A worldview (or "world view") is a set of assumptions about physical and social reality that may have powerful effects on cognition and behavior."

As a group of ideas, a worldview has multiple dimensions that may not be easy to list; multiple approaches to disentangling them may be possible and asking students to brainstorm several could be integrated into the learning activity described below. However, to start, the instructor might introduce such themes as: the nature of good and evil; the existence of God; interpersonal relationships and human rights; human-environment relationships; sources of knowledge; the purpose of life and the existence of fate. More broadly, worldviews may be conceived of as having thematic gradients pertaining to religious beliefs, legal and ethical stances, valuation of science, and, the many aspects of "human nature." (For extended discussion of the components of a worldview, see Koltko-Rivera (2004).)

Factors that influence a person's worldview are also numerous and diverse. Among the most obvious, each of which affect a person throughout their lives and interact in many ways, are: family upbringing, interpersonal relationships, phenomenological experiences, education, geographical context, career, and, perhaps to some degree, genetics. Because each person has a unique context and set of experiences for his or her life, it can be argued that everyone develops and possesses a unique worldview. To this end, instructors should be open to integrating many different student responses into the discussion about the nature and dynamics of worldviews.

The materials needed to complete the activity described below are **four or five “funny eyeglasses”** for students to wear; these represent a worldview’s “lens” that a person looks through. These can often be found in stores that contain party goods including dollar and other discount stores. Possible types of glasses to look for include: giant “clown” sunglasses; those with eyes that droop down on springs; any that have funny or scary eyes in place of lenses; or “nerd” glasses with thick lenses. Although such funny glasses are unexpected and engender laughter, inexpensive standard reading glasses could be used to make the same points. In addition to these props, **a chalk or white board** (or other writing surface) is needed to list out the components of the worldviews.

Activities

The instructor can introduce the topic of worldviews as needed depending on the placement of this activity within the larger lesson, the nature of the course, and students’ educational level. (The author has introduced the concept of worldview with a brief statement and then used the activity as the jumping off point for examining its details and catalyzing student discussion.) The instructor then asks for four or five volunteers from the class to come to the front of the room. (It is up to the instructor whether or not to say why the volunteers are needed; the author chooses not to so it is a surprise.) These students will be given theoretical “identities” that help delineate their worldviews using the following steps.

Once the volunteers are lined up in front of the writing surface, the instructor asks the rest of the class to generate possible categories (or themes) of worldview components and/or factors that will influence a worldview. (In the author’s experience, listing either components, influences, or both will yield the same discussion and learning outcomes.) Common student responses may be religion, race/ethnicity, hometown, family size, education level, and career. The instructor, choosing among the student-generated ideas and/or prompting and contributing others, writes a list of the four or five worldviews components/influences on the board. Then the identity of each student is generated by asking the class to provide specific characteristics of each volunteer for each of the worldview categories. (See Table 1 for examples.)

Table 1. Example of list of worldview components/influences and generated identities for two student volunteers.

| Worldview component/influence | Volunteer 1 "identity" | Volunteer 2 "identity" |
|-------------------------------|-------------------------|------------------------|
| Age | 26 | 55 |
| Religion | Christian | Bhuddist |
| Hometown | New York City | Small Nepalese Village |
| Environmental ethic | Strong environmentalist | Anti-environmentalist |

Once the “identity” of each volunteer is established, the instructor hands each volunteer one of the funny eyeglasses to put on. Class discussion can then ensue about the nature of each volunteer’s worldview and how the components/influences affect the lens (glasses) that the person is looking through. For example, a person growing up in New York City is likely to have a very different worldview than a person growing up in a small Nepalese village. The questions “Why and in what ways?” can be posed to the class to bring forth discussion and analysis that deepen the students’ understanding of worldviews.

In this activity, the glasses provide a concrete visualization of the abstract worldview concept. To utilize them further, the instructor can ask the volunteers to take off their glasses, switch them with someone else, and comment on how the “world” looks different without them and through the lenses of someone else’s worldview (utilizing the “identities” on the board that accompany each set of glasses). This can help make the point about the value of, first, recognizing that we have a worldview that colors our outlook, and second, trying to step outside our own worldview to see and think as others do (i.e., developing empathy, putting ourselves in the shoes of others). To round out the activity, instructors should help students connect these issues to specific environmental and sustainability issues that fit within the context of a particular course.

Follow-up Engagement

- Ask students to consider what the dominant beliefs within and influences on a worldview are
- Is it possible for two people to share nearly the same worldview or worldview characteristics?
- Can a person’s worldview change over time? Why might it?
- How does the issue of stereotypes relate to this discussion? Is it risky to assume that any one of a person’s many characteristics will dictate that they have a certain worldview or parts of one?
- Assign students a short writing assignment in which they explain major components of and influences on their own worldviews. (For one model, see the “This I Believe” website: <http://thisibelieve.org/>.)
- How might some people’s worldviews cause them to not accept environmental problems as serious?

- Why might it be helpful to identify components of a person's worldview when discussing environmental and sustainability issues with them?

Making Connections

- Throughout a course, ask students to analyze a topic from diverse worldviews.
- When introducing scientific thinking and/or principles, compare and contrast scientifically-informed worldviews with those based on religious or other beliefs/values.
- Ask students to read diverse texts about a controversial environmental topic and speculate on the components of the authors' worldviews that influence their assumptions and views about the issues.

Online Supplemental Materials

- Photos of the funny eyeglasses and students wearing them with lists of worldviews components
- PowerPoint slides to accompany the activity with a simple "worldview framework" and follow-up discussion points and examples

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