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# The Sum of its Parts: Exploring the Motivations, Actions, and Social Realities Amongst Individuals Living Green and Ethical Lifestyles in Lexington, Kentucky

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## **Introduction**

In recent years there has been growing public, political, and academic interest concerning environmentalism. (Woodruff, Hasbrouck, Augustin, 2008) Individuals are encouraged to recycle, to think about their 'carbon footprint', to shop local, and to adopt a more 'green lifestyle'. The green lifestyle is one that often centers on reducing one's consumption of goods and resources that may be harmful to the environment or others, while simultaneously encouraging the consumption and use of less harmful, greener options. The green lifestyle also encourages the adoption and development of non-consumption based behaviors, such as using alternative forms of transportation, growing one's own food, or even avoiding certain styles of consumption, in order to further lessen one's 'impact' on the planet. These "green materiality's" are performed in myriad ways, and are "central to the development of green visions within the environmentalist discourse." (Horton, 2006) In keeping with the materiality inherent in the green lifestyle, there has also been an increase in the consumption of 'ethical' goods (fair trade, for example) in much of the US.

Material goods allow individuals to share their identities, demonstrate to family and friends their beliefs, and to live their values through consumption. (Sustainable Consumption Roundtable, 2006) This same phenomenon can be seen amongst those who practice non-consumptive green practices, creating the rise of movements centered around cycling for transportation or growing one's own food. Now, unlike ever before, consumers are encouraged to examine their consumption practices, as well as their lifestyle choices in terms of a sustainable or fair context. Concepts of good citizenship are increasingly tied to thoughtful behaviors that encourage consumers to reflect on the impact their consumption has on the environment and other human beings. (Seyfang, 2006) This sort of ethical lifestyle can include many varied activities, not limited to cycling instead of driving, growing one's own food, purchasing locally raised food, recycling, etc. (Horton, 2006)

Ethical consumption practices stem from a variety of impulses, philosophies, values, and beliefs consumers hold about their impact on the globe and on other people. A major factor in the decision to buy Fair Trade or other ethical goods is the availability of information- consumers want to know their purchases are making a positive impact. (Basu and Hicks, 2008) Ethical and green consumption has its roots in activism and political beliefs concerning consumption paths, but is becoming increasingly more mainstream. (Low and Davenport, 2005) However, ethical purchasing practices, including consumption of local goods, continues to engender a sense of 'eco-citizenship' in the individuals who participate, and as such, remains a political and lifestyle choice. (Seyfang, 2006) Since beginning research in Lexington, it is noticeable that fair trade consumption is not often part of the equation for otherwise ethical or green consumers. It is clear in the literature that many different forces intersect to impact ethical and purchasing choices, including but

not limited to a personal commitment to leading a fair, sustainable, and ethical lifestyle. The importance of place in the making of the sustainable and ethical lifestyle cannot be understated. Individuals participating in these lifestyles tend to cluster in both social and physical spaces conducive to these beliefs, thus reinforcing their political consumption and lifestyle choices through interactions with an environment and a community who shares their belief system. (Kahn and Morris, 2009) The motivation for sustainable lifestyle choices, however, can stem from a varied array of personal value systems, including religious belief, environmentalism, and a desire to be fashionably 'green'. (Woodruff, Hasbrouck, Augustin, 2008)

As such, it can be seen that in studying ethical consumption and the green lifestyle, the ethics and politics of consumer participants cannot be ignored, and provide an important context for understanding how these actions form just one part of a political and value based lifestyle. These lifestyle choices are informed by access to information, provided by both social and consumption networks. The importance of information, particularly information retailers provide to consumers, is tantamount to the mainstreaming of ethical consumption practices. (Low and Davenport, 2005)

Lexington, Kentucky provides an interesting case for exploring green and ethical lifestyle choices amongst those who live in a small city situated in the social-geographical south. Lexington is home to multiple universities, a vibrant downtown, and is considered the 'horse capital of the world'. Lexington is also a city that has municipal recycling, citywide compost and mulching program, and has been ranked by Bicycling Magazine as the 41<sup>st</sup> most bicycle friendly city in the country. The discourse around green and sustainable urban lifestyle choices is many times centered around major metropol, which in some ways erases the experiences of individuals who choose to engage in these lifestyle choices in places not traditionally thought of as 'green'. Thus, it is important to explore the green/sustainable lifestyle choice in as many diverse contexts as possible, in order to develop a greater understanding of the types of individuals who engage in this lifestyle and the various problems or obstacles that are associated with place.

## **Methods**

For this research project, 6 individuals were interviewed in person for a period of 30-60 minutes, with the interviews being recorded on a digital device. Individuals were asked a variety of questions concerning their participation in green/ethical lifestyle choices in Lexington, their reasoning for doing so, what motivated them to begin such a lifestyle, how living in Lexington impacted their ability to carry out these lifestyle choices, etc. The individuals interviewed were contacted via facebook or email due to their membership in green or ethical facebook groups or community initiatives that had a facebook page. Individuals were also given the option of filling out a 12 question survey after their initial in person interview, which repeated the same questions as was asked in the interview. The data gathered in these interviews was transcribed, and then reviewed as to find common themes, ideas, concepts, and challenges related to the practice of green and sustainable lifestyle choices in Lexington, Kentucky.

This process was largely successful, as all individuals whom participated in the research process were easily contacted, felt comfortable with the interview process, and were very giving of their time and their opinions. The primary difficulty in this process

resulted from some problems concerning the digital device, which manifested in some loss of data. However, participants were informed of this, and were more than willing to re-interview or fill out a questionnaire consisting of questions gathered during the interview. The number of participants in this research project was quite small, which is due in part to the small number of respondents to the initial queries for volunteers, and also due to the limited amount of time available to perform the research. Should this project have continued beyond the summer months, more individuals could have been interviewed.

## **Results**

The individuals who participated in this research study were all over the age of 25, were all college educated, and all but one owned their own home. These individuals were employed across a variety of fields. Two individuals interviewed were employed in a job related to their green/ethical beliefs, and one was a stay at home parent. Most of the respondents had children and all were partnered. Every individual interviewed lived within the New Circle Road loop, meaning they were either centered within downtown Lexington, or within 3 miles of the area. Throughout the research interviews, several larger themes were repeated by the participants in regards to their green, ethical, or sustainable lifestyle choices and beliefs. These themes were self-sufficiency, awareness and responsibility, community and improvement.

### **Self-Sufficiency**

Self-sufficiency was a theme that was commonly reproduced by the individuals who were interviewed in this study. These individuals grew their own food, including several whom raised small livestock (chickens and bees) for honey, meat or eggs. Some of these respondents reported having food/animal goods to excess, and sold or gave away this excess to friends or restaurants. One participant reported on having eaten food they'd preserved themselves well into the winter, long after the growing season. This idea of self-sufficiency was an attractive one to some of the individuals interviewed, who viewed their ability to feed their families as an asset in the face of an uncertain economy and a food market that they saw as having products that had "sprays" on them- sprays referring to chemical pesticides that they view as harmful to humans and the environment.

Agricultural knowledge is a knowledge that is coming back into vogue (again), with mass-market books concerning urban farming and other related fields becoming very popular within the green/ethical lifestyle marketplace. One individual interviewed referenced these types of books that they had utilized in order to garner knowledge about new types of agricultural practices (in this case, bee-keeping). Another participant noted that, "This isn't something new, if you go back to before World War II, this is American culture." This type of knowledge is not a 'new knowledge', but it is one that is casting off negative cultural assumptions about who farms. Metrocentric ideas about rural lifestyles has led to farming being considered a 'stupid knowledge', (Heldke, 2006) yet the recent interest in producing food for one's family and being a more sufficient individual is reversing this trend. The Back to the Earth movement of the 1970's was referenced by one individual as a vantage point from which they learned many of the things they did about farming, and many of the participants interviewed referenced learning from their parents

or grandparents as a child. Gardening is not longer something for the suburbanite, it can even be seen as a form of protest against community ills (poverty, food deserts). (Reynolds, 2008)

Self-sufficiency was not limited solely to producing food. Two of the individuals interviewed reported on utilizing a bicycle as either a primary mode of transportation, or a secondary one. Cycling as self-sufficient transportation is one that requires much less investment than owning a car, and is one that works regardless of whether or not the local public transportation system services one's area or not. One of the individuals interviewed described their ability to cycle as a young child and the feeling of independence as a formative experience that led to choosing cycling as a primary mode of transportation. Self-sufficiency was even included by two participants as a response to growing up in a poor family. "My family didn't have much so we reused things and repaired things. I was taught that you shouldn't throw something away because it does work, you should fix it. My parents weren't environmentalists though, they lived that way out of necessity."

### **Awareness and Responsibility**

Awareness was another recurring theme amongst the individuals interviewed. Awareness could refer to many things, including awareness of the environment, of one's impact, of the things one could do to improve (or be more green), or of problems within their community. Many of the individuals spoke about their learning process, about certain touchstones that encouraged them to begin their own green/ethical journeys. Sometimes these events occurred in childhood, or later in life as adults, or both. Feelings of responsibility typically followed these initial bouts of awareness. Responsibility for one's actions in regards to their impact on the earth, responsibility to one's children in terms of a more intangible 'leaving a better world' sense, or even a more tangible one concerning the quality of food they fed their children. For one participant, this responsibility stemmed from their religious beliefs about being a 'steward of the earth', and being responsible not only to their own family in terms of feeding them healthy food, but to their community at large.

One major area of 'awareness' was in food production and transportation methods. Chemicals (in the form of pesticides, herbicides, and fertilizers) were of a particular concern to many of the respondents, as was the treatment of the humans and animals involved in the 'food chain' that led to their plate. In terms of their realizations of awareness and responsibility, the responses of the participants reflect a growing realization about the importance of food systems in the quality of urban life. (Pothukuchi and Kaufman, 1999) "I have become aware of pesticide abuse, mis-labeling, GMO's, and the effects of processed food, and want to change that aspect of my life and society in general," replied one individual when asked as to how they became aware of these green/ethical problems in the world. Another responded, "I became a vegan once I really began to think about the impact that large-scale animal farming has on our planet (and in the animals and ourselves). I ride my bike much more than I ever used to so that I'm not using so much gas, I recycle, compost and greywater. We don't leave appliance plugged in at our house. I buy my clothes and a lot of my belongings second hand. I try to shop local as often as possible. All of this has happened because I believe it has to. Maybe for me it's based on some kind of morality but I honestly think it's the right thing to do."

A sense of awareness and responsibility inevitably became one of morality for many of the respondents. One individual mentioned their son as their motivation for developing their garden, as their “being a father” necessitated taking care of “at least one part of the earth”. Another participant noted that they were “making up for lost time”, and that they felt they needed to constantly work harder at developing their green lifestyle and reducing their contribution to landfills as a response to their ignorance of the problem earlier in life. “There have been days many years ago where I may have not been as quick to sort all of this, let’s throw it in a landfill. Have you ever seen a landfill?! It’s pretty grotesque. And you know, there’s crap in there that could have been reused, recycled, or reconformed (sic) to some other use. So anyway, I think I’m making up more for lost time than anything.” Responsibility to those who produced their food, especially

## **Community and Improvement**

Community, both in the sense of the larger Lexington community, as well as the local green/ethical community, was a theme that was discussed throughout the interviews, in conjunction with a sense of improvement. Improvement at a personal level was often seen in the lens of contributing to the improvement of the community, the planet, or the world at large. Many of the individuals interviewed participated in community organizations that sought to improve certain problems related to transportation, food access, and social justice. Many of these organizations, as well as many of the individuals interviewed, lived near or within the North Lexington area, which is one that experiences disproportionate poverty, transportation issues, and has a low number of stores that sell fresh produce. The research participants who participated in green or ethical organizations in this area see the green/sustainable/ethical movement as an opportunity for improvement for disenfranchised people within this community.

For many of the individuals interviewed, they saw the green organizations in the north of Lexington as a positive, powerful thing, “These people are, not a handful, but a growing number of individuals down there who are really making it happen, and its exciting to see that.” Another participant saw their living in the north end of town as a way to carry out their religious beliefs about caring for their community, to provide fresh food to their neighbors who may not otherwise have access to it. Green and ethical lifestyle choices, both on the individual and the organization level were seen as opportunities for development and improvement amongst a portion of the Lexington community that suffers from disproportionately high rates of poverty.

One part of what made the north end so appealing to these green and ethical organizations was the low property values, according to one participant. Sustainability practices and progressive development have often been seen as socially exclusive, accessible to those who belong to a higher socioeconomic class. (Bunce, 2009) The fact that these sustainable organizations are being made available to a non-traditional audience for green or sustainable lifestyle choices is an exciting and positive one for Lexington. However, development and progress can often be related to gentrification (Bunce, 2009), and there is the potential for this development within the north end to create a “patchwork quilt urbanism”, with an increasing number of ‘revitalized’ streets and locales replacing one population for another. (MacLeod and Ward, 2002) The North-end of Lexington can be viewed in some aspects as a “city of physical proximity and institutional estrangement” as

new 'green' businesses move into a part of town made popular amongst green and ethical consumers, and thus change the landscape for those who already live there. This potentially problematic aspect of the green and ethical lifestyle movement is one that is appearing throughout the discourse on the urban farming movement.

Community amongst the participants in this study also referred to the green and ethical community many where a part of. During the interviews the participants would recommend certain individuals to be interviewed as well, noting that these individuals participated in certain aspects of the green and ethical lifestyle movement that the participant might not, and that they'd be a good resource for this project. Community groups that focused on one aspect of green or sustainable living were also brought up by many individuals, and often times a group cited by one participant was one another participant had either founded or devoted volunteer time to. Community events were seen as opportunities for others to learn, and thus perhaps engage in the same 'awareness' that the research participants felt they'd become a part of. One participant spoke of an event that they were planning, "So we're going to really encourage people to one: eat everything, don't put it on your plate if you can eat it and two: throw aways (sic), you're still going to have some wrapping, its still going to be over the food, but everything that is thrown away we want it to be no bigger than a softball. So I'm hoping to have an event where we can wad it all up and that'd be our goal, to see if it's the size of a baseball. And it'll make everyone really think really minimally what they'll need to bring. If they bring something for the food, they won't bring it in some little bag that's going to be thrown away. I think if you start to see the volume of what you throw away, what you do, then you realize, wow. Then multiply that times all the people on this earth, or in this country in particular, and you're like 'We've got a problem here'."

## **Conclusion**

Lexington is a city that has created a warm welcome to individuals who are interested in participating in green, sustainable, and ethical lifestyle choices. From municipal recycling to an ever-increasing focus on preserving the local environment and lowering the barriers to alternative forms of transportation, Lexington has shown that green and sustainable city services are considered a worthwhile investment. This does not occur in a vacuum- there has to be an interest. The individuals who participated in this interview have made Lexington their home, and have set out on improving it at an individual, and many times community level. Lexington is a city that has made certain practices, such as keeping bees or chickens, legal within city limits, which one participant mentioned was important to their ability to act on their green and sustainable beliefs. Other individuals cited the continued improvements to the city's green and sustainable efforts, noting that "We don't have to say oh lets go look at it in Oregon, they can say 'What's Lexington doing?' That would be my goal, for people to say, "Lets see what those folks in Lexington are doing".

This research project has shown that there are a wide variety of research opportunities within the green and ethical community. There is an increasing interest in small livestock farming within city limits, as well as an increase in creating small working farms in an atypical urban setting. Something of increasing importance would be to research the changing North Lexington area, as a variety of new organizations and

business, many of which are green or sustainable move in, and change the local perceptions (and perhaps the local makeup) of a previously disenfranchised area. Though this project was short in duration, it has shown that Lexington is a rich and interesting setting for research on the growing green, ethical, and sustainable movement.

On a personal note, I would like to thank my research participants. The individuals who assisted me on my project throughout the summer have been nothing but amazingly kind in providing me the gift of their time. Their graciousness in sharing their lives with me, often times welcoming me into their homes, has not only been instrumental to the success of this project, but has also left me feeling incredibly positive about our interactions and about the great things happening in Lexington. I'd also like to thank the Undergraduate Research Office for their generous research grant that made it possible for me to take on this project, as well as my advisor Dr. Lyon, for helping me to shape my ideas and interests into a cohesive research project.

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