

# Shifting Focus: Fostering Commitment to the Goal of Sustainable Development

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shortcomings could be addressed by shifting the focus away from specific behavior changes towards fostering the motivation underlying the engagement in sustainable behaviors. We argue that environmental psychology should not settle for transient behavior modifications but dig deeper and provide insights into how profound changes in this underlying motivation, that is, people's commitment to the overarching goal of sustainable development, can be elicited. In this way, environmental psychologists could make a meaningful contribution to achieving the large-scale behavior changes that are needed for a sustainability transition.

## 1 Shifting focus from behavior management to sustainable development as a personal goal

Research in environmental psychology has accumulated a significant body of knowledge on how to evoke the performance of specific sustainable behaviors in people via various levers (for overviews, see, e.g., Bergquist et al., 2023; Nisa et al., 2019; see also Mertens et al., 2022, for nudging techniques, Maki et al., 2016, for financial incentives, or Nguyen-Van et al., 2021, for social incentives). However, most of these interventions target single behaviors that in isolation do not make a significant contribution to sustainable development at large. In addition, many interventions fall short of exerting a long-lasting influence on people's behavior. We propose that both these

## 2 Goal-directed sustainable behavior

Human behavior is inherently purpose-driven and oriented towards goals that are deemed personally relevant. A person who deems power important will take actions that increase their influence over resources, for example, choose a job with promotion options, network strategically, and run for leadership positions (Arieli et al., 2011). Likewise, a person who deems sustainable development important will accordingly align their behavior with this goal, for example, rather eating vegan than meat-based meals, rather taking the train than an airplane, and rather voting for a 'green' party than one without an ecological program (Kaiser & Wilson, 2004). The important observation is that people who are committed to a goal will be more likely to show a multitude

of behaviors that serve the purpose of achieving said goal.

Various concepts within environmental psychology serve to encapsulate the idea of commitment to (at least certain facets of) sustainable development. Constructs such as environmental attitude (e.g., Kaiser et al., 2010; Milfont & Duckitt, 2004), pro-environmental orientation or environmental concern (Dunlap et al., 2000; Schultz et al., 2004), environmental self-identity (Van der Werff et al., 2013), and biospheric values (e.g., Stern & Dietz, 1994), among others, all denote an individual's intrinsic aspiration to safeguard the natural environment. These constructs signify an individual's deep-seated apprehension regarding the state of the natural environment and provide the motivational basis for actions aimed at preserving or enhancing it. Importantly, people with a strong commitment to sustainable development are more likely to show a variety of sustainable behaviors that serve the underlying goal. Moreover, the extent of commitment to a goal has a compensatory function for behavioral costs in that people with higher commitment levels are more likely to accept higher behavioral costs (e.g., financial, temporal, or physical effort) that come with sustainable actions (Kaiser et al., 2010; Henn et al., 2020). Accordingly, a successful enhancement of commitment will manifest in more sustainable behaviors, specifically ones that come with higher behavioral costs (see Henn et al., 2020). The establishment of such a commitment surely requires but is not sufficiently determined by factual knowledge (e.g., an understanding of environmental issues and effective actions; Abrahamse & Matthies, 2019; Staats et al., 1996). Another essential component seems to be an emotional aspect or a sense of meaning that renders this information personally relevant.

### 3 Towards fostering commitment to the goal of sustainable development

Although the assessment of variables representing commitment to sustainable development is quite common in research (e.g., as moderators or predictors) they are rarely the aim of interventions. At most, studies situationally activate a sustainability goal, but these usually do not evoke lasting changes in how people think and feel about sustainable development (e.g., Van der Werff et al., 2013). In order to meet the challenges of massive behavior and lifestyle changes necessary for a sustainable transition of societies, it is thus essential for psychologists to redirect their research efforts towards unraveling and reshaping the motivational underpinnings of sustainable behaviors (for a similar argument, see Hornsey & Fielding, 2017), that is: people's commitment to sustainable development.

To achieve this goal, we argue that environmental psychologists can adapt existing approaches from other subdisciplines of psychology which have proven to successfully change ingrained thought patterns and motivational foundations of behavior. Some of the methods used in clinical and counseling psychology include motivational interviewing (Miller & Rollnick, 2004, 2012), or values exercises (e.g., from acceptance and commitment therapy [ACT]; Hayes et al., 2013; Pledger et al., 2015) which induce profound shifts in individuals' priorities and behaviors. These approaches provide clients with a safe, unconditionally appreciative space for reflecting their values, for example, by exploring and resolving ambivalences regarding a valued goal in motivational interviewing (see Klonek et al., 2015, for an application in the domain of pro-environmental behavior), or by focusing on meaning and purpose in one's own life in ACT. Since these approaches assume a certain extent of problem awareness or existing motivation, it is pivotal to note that a majority of individuals in many affluent

and overconsuming countries places substantial importance on sustainable development (see, e.g., UBA, 2022, for Germany; Sparkman et al., 2022, for USA). This signifies an existing reservoir of motivation and commitment that can be harnessed and fortified.

Paradoxical thinking (Frankl, 1975; Watzlawick et al., 1974) is another example of a clinical approach that has successfully been applied in social psychology, especially for resolving intergroup conflict (Hameiri et al., 2019). Its central idea of exaggerating problematic behavior in a sometimes even absurd manner so that clients are urged to reflect on the fallibility or even irrationality of their beliefs is applicable to non-sustainable behavior as well. Notably, the resulting behavior change is driven by changes in the underlying motivation (e.g., epistemic openness, identity threat; Hameiri et al., 2018) and a broader cognitive shift (e.g., towards greater cognitive flexibility; Knab et al., 2021). Similar approaches could be used to foster commitment to sustainable development, especially among those who have the lowest levels to begin with.

## 4 The transition to a just and sustainable society requires people's commitment to sustainable development

To comprehensively promote sustainable behavior and enact structural transformations, sustainability must become a paramount goal for all individuals (including those with more power to induce change, e.g., politicians, CEOs). As a discipline dedicated to the complexity of the human psyche, we must transcend the mere surface-level control of behavior and address processes of profound motivational changes within people. By elevating the importance of sustainability in

individuals' minds, we should be able to ignite a cascade of behavioral changes that extend beyond superficial and short-termed actions.

In conclusion, the path to promoting sustainable behavior lies not solely in refining behavioral interventions, but rather in invigorating individuals' intrinsic commitment to sustainability itself. Human behavior is inherently propelled by goals, and our efforts should be concentrated on cultivating a profound dedication to the sustainable development of human existence on the planet. As psychologists, we can develop the knowledge and tools to ignite these motivations, to guide individuals towards their commitment to sustainability that reverberates at the level of their values and identities.

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