



Review

From prediction to process: A self-regulation account of environmental behavior change



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ABSTRACT

Recently, environmental researchers have been urged to widen the theoretical scope and integrate other behavioral moderators to better understand and bridge the frequently observed intention-behavior gap in the environmental domain. The present article seeks to meet this call by reviewing and highlighting the relevance of self-regulation for environmental behavior change. The article focuses on the two primary components of self-regulation: goal setting and goal striving. Self-regulation research differs from the prediction models commonly employed in environmental research (e.g. theory of planned behavior or value-belief-norm theory), as it focuses on the dynamic psychological mechanisms that result in either success or failure in acting relative to a certain standard or goal. Similar to the intention-behavior gap, self-regulation research recognizes the occasional failure of people to adhere to their own environmental standards and goals. However, unlike prediction models, self-regulation research gives directions on how to reduce the frequency by which these failures occur.

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1. Introduction

The wealth and magnitude of environmental problems ranging

from climate change and sea level rise to mass extinction of species and plastic-filled oceans severely threaten the prospects of future societies. As a result, climate and environmental scientists are speaking with profound clarity about the immediate necessity of progressing toward a more sustainable world (IPCC, 2013). This shift demands fundamental societal changes including

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constructing low-carbon infrastructure, building energy-efficient housing, crowding out environmentally harmful production methods, and reducing overall consumption levels. At the heart of the change process is the individual citizen. The developed world has for decades evolved around a market economy consisting of individuals purchasing products and services at an ever-increasing rate. It is thus not surprising that many environmental problems can be traced back to the accumulated choices of individuals. Large scale attitudinal studies have found that most people acknowledge the severity of environmental problems and the responsibility of individuals to take action (e.g. [European Commission, 2008](#)). Unfortunately, the positive environmental attitudes and intentions are not always reflected in people's behavior ([Carrington, Neville, & Whitwell, 2014](#); [Kollmuss & Agyeman, 2002](#)). This raises the interesting question of why people who are willing and have the adequate means to live environmentally friendly fail to do so. Obviously, the question is by no means novel as environmental psychology researchers have been interested in this psychological discrepancy for decades. Nonetheless, [Bamberg \(2013a\)](#) has recently raised criticism of the sufficiency of the prevailing theoretical frameworks within environmental psychology and their struggling effort to bridge the intention-behavior gap. The criticism is in part directed at these frameworks' inability to account for the self-regulatory aspects of behavior change.

Social psychological research has for decades underpinned the relevance and significance of self-regulation in behavior determination and behavior change. The strong attention to self-regulation has not yet spilled-over into environmental psychology, where self-regulation processes so far have been largely overlooked. In environmental psychology, the prevalent focus has been directed towards predicting the psychological mechanisms underlying the performance of environmentally friendly behaviors. A similar focus has for long been prevalent in health psychology, but more recent efforts have increasingly recognized the significance of self-regulation in the performance health behavior (e.g. [De Ridder & De Wit, 2006](#); [Mann, De Ridder, & Fujita, 2013](#); [Hofmann, Adriaanse, Vohs, & Baumeister, 2014](#)).

The prediction models commonly applied in environmental (and health) psychology assume that the immediate predecessor to behavior is either intention (e.g. theory of planned behavior) or personal norm (e.g. value-belief-norm theory). Research has repeatedly found only a modest relationship between intentions or personal norms and the performance of environmentally friendly behaviors (e.g. [Bamberg & Möser, 2007](#)). Though prediction models to some extent are capable of explaining why people perform a specific environmental behavior, they pay little or no attention to the performance of multiple environmental behaviors over time. For example, in the theory of planned behavior ([Ajzen, 1991](#)) no formal distinction is made between decisions concerning the intention to initiate a behavior and those concerning the maintenance of that behavior over time ([Rothman, Baldwin, Hertel, & Fuglestad, 2011](#)). There is a need to broaden the perspective of prediction models to gain further insight into the environmental behavior change process. The process-oriented approach of self-regulation provides some of the answers as to what is needed to successfully attain environmental goals. Self-regulation models differ from prediction models in that they seek to elucidate the dynamic psychological mechanisms that result in either success or failure in acting relative to a certain standard as opposed to predicting future behavior ([Mann et al., 2013](#)). This process-oriented approach to understanding behavior change builds on the assumption that people to a wide extent have the necessary knowledge to execute the task. The focus is instead directed towards outlining how that knowledge is transformed into behavior and why people well-knowing of how to live environmentally

friendly fail to conform.

To date, the most competent effort to integrate self-regulation in environmental research has been provided by Sebastian Bamberg. Following his criticism of the prevailing theoretical frameworks, [Bamberg \(2013b\)](#) introduced a conceptual response to the criticism – the stage model of self-regulated behavior change. Although the model provides a strong contribution to empirical researchers, it does not elaborate on the specific processes of self-regulation nor the characteristics or structure of the environmental goals people strive to achieve. The present paper aims to fill this gap by reviewing social psychological research on self-regulation and discuss it in the context of environmental behavior change. The paper examines the antecedents to setting environmental goals, the interconnectedness with other existing goals, and the most appropriate goal characteristics. Furthermore, it discusses the self-regulation strategies commonly employed during goal striving and their impact on the likelihood of goal attainment.

2. Self-regulation

Self-regulation refers to the broad set of processes by which people adopt and manage different goals and standards of thoughts, feelings, or behaviors and ensure that these are met ([Baumeister & Heatherton, 1996](#); [Carver & Scheier, 1990](#)). Many challenges are represented in self-regulation including which goals to pursue, planning how to pursue them, shielding them from competing goals and concerns, and deciding on the brink of success or failure to continue or abandon goals ([Fujita, 2011](#); [Oettingen, Hönig, & Gollwitzer, 2000](#)). Generally, self-regulation can be conceived as a cybernetic control process consisting of three components: (a) goal setting, (b) monitoring for discrepancies between goals and current states, and (c) implementing behavior that is consistent with goals to reduce the behavior-goal discrepancy ([Carver & Scheier, 1998](#); [Inzlicht, Legault, & Teper, 2014](#)). Central to the self-regulation process is the role of feedback loops, which connects the three components to each other. Feedback loops can take either a discrepancy reducing or discrepancy enlarging form. Discrepancy reducing feedback loops occur when the monitoring system senses a discrepancy between desired and current states, where after people initiate action to adjust their behavior to conform to the goal or standard they desire ([Carver & Scheier, 1998](#)). This refers to approach behaviors such as eating more fruits or increasing frequency of bike riding. In contrast, discrepancy enlarging feedback loops involve acts of avoidance, wherein deviations from the comparison point is increased through the inhibition of normal response tendencies – for example not eating high-caloric foods or avoiding excessive fashion consumption ([Carver & Scheier, 2004](#), pp. 13–39; [De Ridder & De Wit, 2006](#)). In other words, self-regulation is the process that enables humans to guide their behavior over time and builds on the capacity to influence, modify, and control their own behavior ([Baumeister & Heatherton, 1996](#); [Karoly, 1993](#)).

Self-regulation is important to the understanding of environmental behavior change. Inherent to behavior change is the transitional substitution of past environmentally harmful behaviors with new, more environmentally friendly ones. During the behavior change process, people will undoubtedly encounter difficulties arising from past behavioral tendencies or environmentally harmful temptations elicited internally or from the external environment. An environmentally harmful temptation refers to a problematic desire that interferes with important environmental goals (e.g. not recycling a plastic bottle, if deemed inconvenient in the situation). The encounter with past tendencies and temptations are especially true of environmental behaviors as these often involve a degree of personal sacrifice in order to promote the

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