

**A PSYCHOLOGY OF ENVIRONMENTALLY SUSTAINABLE
BEHAVIOUR**

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Declaration

This thesis contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree in any other university and, to the best of my knowledge or belief, contains no material previously published or written by another person, except when due reference is made in the text.

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Abstract

Environmental sustainability has received increasing attention in both scientific and public life over the past 40 years. Almost all problems are the result of the behaviour of people. Hence, successful solutions to environmental problems must be social as well as technological. Psychology has offered a variety of theoretical approaches to understanding environmentally sustainable behaviour (ESB), including rational-economic, social dilemmas, attitude and behavioural models. A related psychological literature also exists regarding the ways in which ESBs may be promoted most effectively in the community.

The early chapters of this thesis provide a critical review of the major theoretical approaches in psychology to understanding ESB, as well as the ways in which the psychological literature has conceptualised applied intervention programs to promote ESB. It is suggested that a more holistic framework for conceptualising ESB is required which allows for the integration of the strengths of the variety of current approaches, and which also helps to understand their potential limitations. As such, a social-ecological framework is detailed that draws upon principles from both social and ecological psychology and has as its central tenet that ESBs should be conceptualised as the result of the ways in which members of a community interact with their environments. In particular, it is argued that people's ESBs will be influenced by the extent to which they perceive particular environmentally relevant objects as 'affording' (Gibson, 1979) negative impact on the natural environment.

Two field experiments were conducted (a pilot and a larger main study) which aimed to apply the social-ecological framework to the promotion of water and energy consumption within a local community in the city of Perth, Western Australia. The results of both field experiments showed significant reductions in water consumption as a result of the installation around the home of labels that aimed to attune residents to the water consumption affordances of various appliances. The same effects were not, however, obtained from energy consumption labels.

In light of these differential effects upon water and energy consumption, a third, qualitative, study was conducted to examine the potential differences in residents' representations of these two resources and the ways in which residents constructed the use of these resources in their talk. A series of in-depth interviews was conducted with a sample of residents who had taken part in the main field experiment. These were analysed from the perspectives of social representations theory (Moscovici, 1984) and discursive psychology (Edwards & Potter, 1992; Potter & Wetherell, 1987). This analysis revealed important differences in the ways in which these two resources were constructed. It also showed the ways in which community members were able to position themselves as responsible 'users', rather than 'wasters' of resources, the importance of justice and equity in residents' resources discourse, and the ways in which 'truth' in the environmental domain is constructed and ascribed to certain groups.

The results of the field experiments and qualitative study together suggest that whilst attuning residents to the environmental impact affordances of relevant objects in their homes does affect their ESBs, this process can not be separated from the influence of the social environment in which these behaviours are embedded. It is also argued that such social environmental influences may be best understood in terms of the linguistic devices that members of a particular society have at their disposal to explain and legitimate their behaviour.

The major conclusion of the thesis is that attempts to investigate and promote environmentally sustainable behaviour should utilise multiple understandings from the social sciences, rather than remaining wedded to any one particular theoretical or methodological approach. The social-ecological framework that has guided the theoretical and practical work contained in this thesis represents an attempt at such integration. The implications of the findings for public policy efforts to promote ESB are also discussed.

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The following publications have emanated from this PhD:

Refereed Articles

Kurz, T. (2002). The psychology of environmentally sustainable behavior: Fitting together pieces of the puzzle. *Analysis of Social Issues and Public Policy*, 2, 257-278.

Articles under review

Kurz, T., Donaghue, N., & Walker, I. (under review). Utilizing a Social-Ecological Framework to promote water and energy conservation: A field experiment. *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*.

Both of these articles are reproduced in the thesis in their full, original state (chapters 2 and 5). This accounts for the small degree of repetition and some minor inconsistencies in Anglo/American spelling throughout the thesis.

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