

JOLANTA ZRALEK

jolanta.zralek@ue.katowice.pl

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*Sustainable Consumption in a Trap: Attitude-Behavior Gap  
and Its Rationalization*

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Zrównoważona konsumpcja w pułapce: niezgodność postaw i zachowań oraz jej racjonalizacja

**Key words:** sustainable consumption; attitude-behavior gap; rationalization/neutralization techniques

**Słowa kluczowe:** zrównoważona konsumpcja; rozbieżność postaw i zachowań; techniki racjonalizacji/neutralizacji

**JEL codes:** Q01; E21; D12

### **Introduction**

Along with the development of sustainability concept, more and more attention has been focused on sustainable consumption (SC). A clear division between the issues of sustainable consumption and production was introduced under the discussions taking place during the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development organized in Rio de Janeiro in 1992. At this Conference, widely known as Rio Summit or Earth Summit, the name “sustainable consumption” (SC) has been used for the first time [Schrader and Thøgersen 2011, p. 4]. Although final Conference’s documents include the crucial recommendations concerning SC, the participants of Rio Summit did not provide any exact definition of this concept. It was conceptualized a little bit later, at an international gathering in Oslo in 1995, known as the Nordic Roundtable. SC was defined as “the use of services and related products, which respond to basic needs and bring a better quality of life while minimizing the use of natural resources and toxic materials as well as the emissions of waste

and pollutants over the life cycle of the service or product so as not to jeopardize the needs of future generations” [Norwegian Ministry of the Environment, 1994]. Although this so-called Oslo definition has been criticized [Di Giulio et al. 2014, pp. 53–54], it remains the most popular one.

As a kind of “side effect” of the definition occurrence, in the mid-1990s, academics began to research different manifestations of SC in consumer behavior more intensively. One of the most surprising findings was a disclosure of a discrepancy between positive attitudes toward SC held by consumers and their ultimate unsustainable behaviors. Cowe and Williams [2000, p. 5] referred to this phenomenon as the “30:3 syndrome”. They reported that the intention of 30% of UK consumers to buy ethical products translates into approximately 3% of market share of such products. At the same time, Boulstridge and Carrigan [2000] named the identified inconsistency attitude-behavior gap. Since then, numerous authors have attempted to explain the gap referring mostly to Ajzen’s theory of planned behavior (TPB).

This article seeks to describe the phenomenon of attitude-behavior gap as well as to explain the techniques of rationalization and identify them on the example of Polish consumers’ behaviors. To achieve these goals, first I will provide an examination of the literature on the attitude-behavior gap and neutralization techniques. Then, I will present chosen outcomes resulting from the qualitative research conducted in 2015 among Polish consumers.

## **1. An attitude-behavior gap in the light of the theory of planned behavior (TPB)**

Along with the considerably increasing number of findings confirming attitude-behavior gap, this phenomenon itself became an interesting subject of investigations. Caruana et al. [2016, p. 215] indicate two different research directions in this field. First, there are psychological and attitudinal research that focuses on methodological flaws (e.g. the effect of socially desirable answers which respondents provide in surveys despite of the fact that they stay in contrary to individuals’ real convictions), the impact of situational issues (e.g. lack of time) and addition of further constructs that influence the existence of gap and its magnitude. The second literature stream concerns interpretive and cross-disciplinary research that tend to critique the concept of attitude-behavior gap itself.

Among all these attempts of explaining the nature of attitude-behavior inconsistency the special attention was drawn to the theory of planned behavior (TPB) introduced by Ajzen in the mid-1980s [Ajzen 1985, pp. 11–39]. It is an extension of the theory of reasoned action (TRA), which in the 1970s revolutionized understanding of the relationship between attitude and behavior by introducing the mediating role of intention [Hassan et al. 2016, p. 220]. TPB added an additional exogenous variable of perceived behavioral control, which has both direct and indirect (through intentions) effect on behavior [Madden et al. 1992, p. 4]. Thus, TPB model incorporates a general rule that

the more positive and stronger is person's attitude toward the behavior, the stronger and more favorable are subjective norms related to the performance of certain action and the greater is the perceived behavioral control, the stronger is person's intention to perform the action in question [Onel and Mukherjee 2015, p. 5].

Since Ajzen, referring to the structure of TPB, left the possibility of adding more predictors open [see Ajzen 2011, p. 1119], a lot of authors exploring sustainable behaviors were seeking to use this possibility to find an explanation for the gap. Consequently, in the ethical consumption context, Shaw et al. proposed two more variables – ethical obligation and self-identity [Shaw et al. 2000, p. 888–889]. The subsequent research conducted by Shaw and Shiu [2002, p. 114] revealed that these two added factors are even more pertinent to TPB model than the attitude and subjective norm measures.

Among the propositions of enhancing Ajzen's model, a special attention was also drawn to neutralization/rationalization [Gruber and Schlegelmilch 2014, p. 43]. Describing it as a mental process that facilitates coping with the dissonance occurring when individuals' behavior either violates consumers' norms or is inconsistent with their attitudes, Chatzidakis et al. incorporated neutralization into TPB model stating that this factor may both negatively affect an intention and moderate the relationship between TPB antecedents and intention [Chatzidakis et al. 2007, pp. 89, 95] (Figure 1).

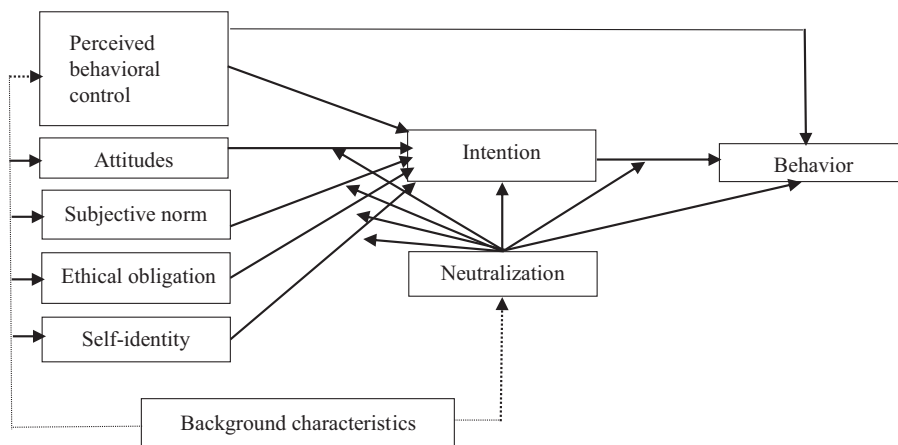


Figure 1. Extended TPB model incorporating neutralization influences

Source: Chatzidakis et al. [2007, p. 95].

## 2. Rationalization and its techniques

Defense mechanisms like neutralization and rationalization date back to early research in psychology. At the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century Welsh neurologist and psychoanalyst Ernest Jones noticed a kind of humans' need to clarify the behaviors

which are in fact mindless, intuitive, emotional and often even unconscious. Jones came to the conclusion that such a rationalization derives from the natural human desire to build a “theory of oneself” and reflects human aspiration to be a fully rational entity [Jones 1908, p. 166]. Subsequently, Sykes and Matza [1957, pp. 667–669], when examining the issues of delinquency, significantly developed the research in this field by identifying five major types of neutralization techniques. These authors indicated: “the denial of responsibility” – the person is not personally responsible for a violation of social norms because of external factors he/she cannot influence, “the denial of injury” – although a certain behavior is wrong it is tolerable because nobody was harmed, “the denial of the victim” – in fact a victim is the one, who did something wrong and the current injury is only a kind of punishment for this previous misbehavior, “the condemnation of the condemners” – those who condemn the norm violating behavior engage in similar actions, and “the appeal to higher loyalties” – the person misbehave because he/she is trying to attain the higher order goals.

In reference to the science of consumer behavior, the idea of using neutralization techniques to justify norm-violating behaviors was initially implemented by scholars dealing with a problem of deviant behaviors e.g. shoplifting. Later on, the scientific inquiry was extended also to the rules of ethical/sustainable behaviors to finally shed a new light on the attitude-behavior gap. Along with the research development the new techniques of neutralization were identified. In 1974, Klockars introduced “the metaphor of the ledger” [see Harris and Daunt, 2011, p. 837] – in a long-time perspective, good behaviors earn a “credit” that allows the person to engage into wrong behaviors without feeling guilty. Minor [1981, p. 298] proposed “defense of necessity” – if certain behavior is perceived as necessary, the acting person does not need to feel guilty about its consequences, even if they are considered morally wrong. McGregor [2008, p. 270] points out that there were four more techniques identified in the ‘90s. First two, offered by Coleman [1994], were described as: “denial of the necessity of law” – in case of given type of behavior there are no laws/rules, so they cannot be violated, and “claim of entitlement” – the person has a right to both engage to the certain action and to benefit from any action he/she undertakes, and these rights justify potential harm. The other two techniques were introduced by Henry and Eaton [1999] who named them: “the claim of relative acceptability” – although the certain action is wrong, the behavior of others is even worse, thereby the less harmful action can be justified, and “the claim of individuality” – a lack of interest in how do others judge the behavior. Harris and Daunt [2011, pp. 837–838] describe the next two neutralization techniques which were identified by Cromwell and Thurman in 2003: “the claim of postponement” – despite feeling guilty, the person postpones the evaluation of wrong behavior until a later time hoping that afterwards it will be easier to deal with this feeling, and “justification by comparison” – conviction that although the action is wrong the person might have behaved in even worse way, so the current behavior is wrong but not the worst. More recently, Rosenbaum et al. [2011, pp. 29–52] were researching an unethical retail disposition (URD) which is

a type of consumer fraud, whereby consumers purchase a product with the intent of using it and then returning it to a retailer for a refund. They introduced three more techniques: “one time usage” – a single usage of a product is a kind of temporary usage, so a return does not break the rules if someone has never intended to keep it, “first-time, only-time crime” – the misbehavior is wrong but acceptable because it happened only one time, and “outsmart the system” – norm-violating behavior is a matter of pride instead of shame because it is the way of beating the system.

All enumerated techniques may precede non-normative behavior or may be used by individuals as a justification of the action that they have already undertaken. In the first case we are dealing with neutralizations, in the second case we should speak about rationalization strategies [Fritsche 2005, p. 484]. Depending on the circumstances the same justification practice may be alternatively employed in these two roles and one person may use more than one technique to justify given misbehavior [see Harris and Daunt 2011, p. 838].

### 3. Research methodology and sample characteristics

The results discussed here are part of a wider research project concerning sustainable consumption. The preliminary, qualitative phase of research was conducted among Polish consumers (residents of the Silesian province) in September 2015. Since sustainability is a complex, multifaceted concept and this phase of research was intended to be exploratory in its nature, the method of individual in-depth interviews was applied. In total, 16 interviews were conducted and each of them lasted from 1 to 1.5 hour. Following the qualitative rationale of the research, participants were selected through a process of the purposive sampling. As I wanted to get to know the opinions of “ordinary consumers”, the respondents were deliberately diverse in terms of their age and none of them was neither professionally or voluntary involved in any sustainable movement. The main characteristics of the sample are shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Sample characteristics

| No. | Gender (F/M) | Age | Education                  | Economic activity | Household size (number of members) | Income                |
|-----|--------------|-----|----------------------------|-------------------|------------------------------------|-----------------------|
| 1.  | M            | 42  | higher (Master's degree)   | active            | 3                                  | above the average     |
| 2.  | M            | 68  | higher (Master's degree)   | active            | 2                                  | far above the average |
| 3.  | F            | 67  | higher (Master's degree)   | active            | 2                                  | far above the average |
| 4.  | M            | 31  | higher (Master's degree)   | active            | 4                                  | average               |
| 5.  | F            | 40  | higher (Bachelor's degree) | active            | 4                                  | above the average     |
| 6.  | F            | 29  | higher (Bachelor's degree) | active            | 4                                  | average               |
| 7.  | F            | 30  | higher (Master's degree)   | active            | 3                                  | above the average     |
| 8.  | F            | 30  | higher (Master's degree)   | active            | 3                                  | below the average     |
| 9.  | F            | 58  | higher (Master's degree)   | active            | 2                                  | far above the average |
| 10. | F            | 29  | secondary                  | active / student  | 3                                  | average               |

| No. | Gender (F/M) | Age | Education                | Economic activity | Household size (number of members) | Income                |
|-----|--------------|-----|--------------------------|-------------------|------------------------------------|-----------------------|
| 11. | F            | 31  | higher (Master's degree) | active            | 3                                  | average               |
| 12. | F            | 24  | higher (Master's degree) | active            | 3                                  | average               |
| 13. | M            | 23  | secondary                | active / student  | 4                                  | average               |
| 14. | M            | 23  | secondary                | active / student  | 4                                  | average               |
| 15. | F            | 74  | secondary                | retired           | 2                                  | far above the average |
| 16. | M            | 79  | higher (Master's degree) | active/retired    | 2                                  | far above the average |

Source: Author's own research.

#### 4. Findings – unsustainable behaviors and their rationalization

Although the objectives of the research were focused mostly on the way of perceiving sustainability and its manifestations in consumer behaviors, the limited knowledge of rationalization techniques was also disclosed. To encourage respondents, the third person test was applied during the whole interview. Thereby, the opinions concerning justification strategies were obtained mostly indirectly, as a description of behaviors of “others”.

Considering all the possible ways of justifying unsustainable behaviors, we need to admit that researched consumers reported only few of them. A prevailing strategy was the denial of responsibility. As the obstacles that are responsible for not behaving in sustainable manners the participants were pointing to: the place of living, the lack of information about sustainable products, low income and misleading promotional actions. This technique is reflected by following statements: “The place of living strongly restricts our engagement for sustainability. [...] if someone lives in the city he has no chance to compost the rests from the kitchen [...]. Conversely if I live in the village where the public transportation is underdeveloped I must drive my car to get to work daily” (M42); “A fact that I don't buy sustainable products derives from the fault of producers and retailers. They don't advertise sustainable products, don't inform consumers, so I'm just unaware that given product is more sustainable than the other” (F67); “If someone has low income it is difficult to buy something which is sustainable. This kind of products is usually more expensive” (F40); “It is advertisement and promotion that fools people. They buy too much and don't calculate if they really need something or not” (M79).

Respondents also invoked the denial of injury (benefit): “[...] we can't be sure if this climate change that we observe today is really caused by humans' activity” (F67), and appeal to higher loyalties: “Today people have no time because they need to work a lot and they must take care of their families. In this daily rush I just don't pay attention to such a thing like switching off the light or buying local food. I usually buy products in a hurry without checking the details” (F30). Two participants referred to

the claim of entitlement: “While my husband is shaving he needlessly uses too much water. When I’m asking him to turn off the tap he usually becomes irritable and says that he has a right to shave in quiet and I’m disturbing him” (F29); “If I want to live normally it is obviously connected with wasting and polluting [...]. It is going too far if, for example, we are not allowed to build the road because there are rare species of animals living in the area. The road is important to facilitate people’s life. It is more important than the animals, which may be moved to another neighborhood” (M23). Finally, one consumer applied the strategy called the claim of relative acceptability: “It happens that I sometimes forget to take my own shopping bag. If I need to buy it at a counter I always pay attention if it is biodegradable one. As I noticed other consumers just don’t care and they buy shopping bags mindlessly” (F74).

## Conclusions

A growing body of research concerning sustainable consumption focuses on the attitude-behavior gap and its possible grounds. Involving neutralization as a core item that undermines sustainable behaviors seems to be legitimized explanation of this problem. As a variable incorporated into the TPB, neutralization influences both the ultimate behavior and its antecedents. However, it must be emphasized that not all sustainable behaviors fit to the scheme described in TPB (they are not “planned”) and applying this concept to explain the gap is only one of the directions of scientific search. In fact, there is still no agreement why the discrepancy occurs. Simultaneously, a great significance of this issue derives from the fact that many environmental or social problems need to be solved immediately and our lack of knowledge in this field limits the efficacy of SC policy tools. It seems to be a kind of trap that extensive actions undertaken to encourage consumers to behave in more sustainable way lead to comparatively modest effects. In case of Polish consumers, the problem is even more salient because the researches of focal issues are not developed yet. Therefore, the problems described in this article should be treated not as a ready solution but rather as an incentive to further scientific inquiry.

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### **Sustainable Consumption in a Trap: Attitude-Behavior Gap and Its Rationalization**

The main finding which derives from the research on sustainable consumption discloses that although consumers' attitudes toward the concept of sustainability are positive, individuals relatively rarely follow sustainability rules in their daily life. This phenomenon called attitude-behavior gap has not been clearly explained. Some authors, relying on Ajzen's theory of planned behavior, seek to clarify it through the lens of rationalization techniques. The objective of this article is to describe the phenomenon of attitude-behavior gap as well as to explain the techniques of rationalization and identify them on the example of Polish consumers. This goal is achieved by presenting the results of literature analysis and introducing selected outcomes of qualitative field research.

#### **Zrównoważona konsumpcja w pułapce: niezgodność postaw i zachowań oraz jej racjonalizacja**

Podstawowym wnioskiem badań nad zrównoważoną konsumpcją jest ustalenie, że pomimo pozytywnych postaw wobec samej idei zrównoważenia konsumenci stosunkowo rzadko zachowują się zgodnie z jej zasadami. Próby wyjaśnienia tego zjawiska nazwanego niezgodnością postaw i zachowań nie doprowadziły dotąd do jednoznacznych ustaleń. Część autorów, powołując się na teorię planowego zachowania przyczyny istnienia niezgodności upatruje w procesie racjonalizacji. Celem artykułu jest opisanie zjawiska niezgodności postaw i zachowań, wyjaśnienie technik racjonalizacji i ich zidentyfikowanie w zachowaniach polskich konsumentów. Cel ten osiągnięto przedstawiając wyniki analizy literatury oraz wybrane wyniki badań jakościowych przeprowadzonych wśród polskich konsumentów.