## *Measuring Behavioral Proximity to Improve Behavioral Change Strategies*

### ◼ SUMMARY

Resource depletion and climate change have reinvigorated interest in sustainable consumption and this interest will grow with the emergence of large consumer classes in India, China, and Brazil. It is critical that scholars and policy makers use all available theoretical tools to motivate sustainable consumption patterns. Ideally, behavioral change strategies will maximize the likelihood of positive spillover (when a change in one behavior leads to changes in other behaviors). However, most behavior change initiatives group behaviors in descriptive or place-based sectors: household, institutional, commercial, transportation, etc., which fail to capitalize on meaningful similarities between behaviors.

The central contention of this study is that by failing to capture basic similarities and differences between behaviors, these groupings are neither socially, psychologically, nor behaviorally meaningful. For instance, behavior change in the transportation sector may involve reductions in mobility, tire pressure adjustments, or hybrid vehicle purchases. Similarly, sustainable consumption 'at home' might encompass using low flow showerheads, taking shorter showers, planting drought-tolerant native species, and/or installing a rain barrel. However, these behaviors vary greatly in their economic cost, social visibility, knowledge required for action, and several other factors thought to be important in decisions about which behaviors to adopt. This deficiency may limit the effectiveness of behavioral change strategies by focusing on inappropriate social or psychological levers.

The purpose of this study is to explore how members of the general public actually conceptualize and articulate what they perceive to be the similarities and differences among pro-environmental behaviors. There are many ways to characterize behaviors. We are interested in which characteristics the public uses to describe associations between behaviors and which behaviors share those characteristics. A more nuanced and systematic understanding of the relationships between behaviors will allow for more effectively designed groupings of behavior and better behavior change strategies. This information will help inform policies that increase the adoption of environmentally friendly behavior and reduce energy and water use. Having a sense of which behaviors are similar and different and *why* is an important first step in determining what kinds of policies might be useful for certain clusters of behavior.

To gather this information we will make use of the Wilma H. Schiermeier Olentangy River Wetland Research Park. This facility provides an ideal setting for meeting with members of the public from across Columbus as it is centrally located and provides comfortable space for interactions with participants. Using both qualitative and quantitative methods, we will gather data on individual's perspectives on the similarities and differences among a suite of behaviors to contribute to reducing the carbon and water footprint of those living in Columbus and beyond.



### ◼ SENR Contact

Jeremy Brooks
Visiting Assistant Professor
469D Kottman Hall
2021 Coffey Rd.
Columbus, OH 43210
614.292.9787
brooks.719@osu.edu
http://senr.osu.edu