

# It's not easy 'being green', study says

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Think you don't recycle enough? You're not alone. However, people's ability to overcome self-doubt plays a critical role in how successfully they act in support of environmental issues, according to a new study co-authored by management and organizational behavior scholars from Rice University, the University of Michigan and the University of Toronto.

The researchers examined the role of self-evaluations among those who support environmental issues and the evaluations' effect on supportive behaviors. Their study, "It's Not Easy Being Green: The Role of Self-Evaluations in Explaining Support for Environmental Issues," will be published in the February issue of the *Academy of Management Journal*. The co-authors are Scott Sonenshein, an associate professor of management at Rice's Jones Graduate School of Business; Katherine DeCelles, an assistant professor of [organizational behavior](#) and human resources management at Toronto's Rotman School of Management; and Jane Dutton, the Robert L. Kahn Distinguished University Professor of Business Administration and Psychology at Michigan's Ross School of Business.

"Supporting social issues often requires perseverance from individuals who want to make a difference," the authors wrote. "Our research explains how the mixed self-evaluations of these individuals spring from their interpretation of issue-support challenges."

Sonenshein said people's support for environmental issues and their doubt in their behavior's effectiveness manifests itself in benign daily tasks such as recycling or the mode of transportation one chooses. "It's

this ongoing challenge," Sonenshein said. "No matter what you do, the sense from the study is that it's never enough. (For example), you could drive your Prius to work or you could walk to work instead. It's this never-ending set of doubts of 'Am I doing enough to help the environment?' It turns out that people are very different in how they can respond to these kinds of persistent doubts. Some people are able to cope with that through building immunity through their self-assets, and other people, unfortunately, fizzle and burn out."

For their study, the authors first developed a theory about how supporters of environmental issues evaluate themselves in a mixed fashion—positively around having strengths (self-assets) and negatively around questioning their performance (self-doubts). The authors then derived three profiles of environmental-issue supporters' mixed selves: self-affirmers, who positively channel doubt; self-critics, who respond to doubt with feelings of guilt and hopelessness; and self-equivocators, who become psychologically derailed by doubt.

The researchers then related these profiles to how supporters of [environmental issues](#) behave. They found that self-affirmers engaged in the most extensive issue-supportive behavior, which reflects the individuals' strong psychological foundation based on low self-doubts and high self-assets. The authors also found that even among the most dedicated issue supporters, doubts play an important role in their experiences and may be enabling or damaging, depending on the composition of the mixed self.

"I would like to see a deeper understanding and appreciation of the difficulty of being an environmentalist," Sonenshein said.

"(Environmentalists) have a psychologically very difficult task in front of them in part because of the enormity of the problem that they are solving, and that creates a pretty difficult psychological environment for them to be effective."

The authors concluded that while "being green" or a supporter of some other social issue is not easy, "... our study takes an important step toward understanding the role of this mixed self-evaluation in helping (or hindering) individuals' actions that play a valuable role in advancing a social issue in work organizations and beyond."

**More information:** For a copy of the study, "It's Not Easy Being Green: The Role of Self-Evaluations in Explaining Support for Environmental Issues," see [sonenshein.rice.edu/uploadedFiles/Publications/its%20not%20easy%20being%20green\\_abstract.pdf](http://sonenshein.rice.edu/uploadedFiles/Publications/its%20not%20easy%20being%20green_abstract.pdf).

Provided by Rice University

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