

# Psychology of Social Change

– academic workshop

**Workshop topic:** developing (formal) psychological and cognitive theories to understand and characterize the mechanisms underlying social change, e.g. social tipping dynamics. Using this information to help inform the design of interventions aimed at creating broad social change, for instance applied to sustainability and climate action.

- **Date:** Monday 15 June 2026.
- **Location:** Institute of Advanced Studies. Organized in collaboration with [Marketing Insights for Societal Transitions](#), UvA.

## Description

Understanding and changing human behavior is crucial to addressing the climate and ecological crisis. Behavioral science, and psychology in particular, can help us understand how individuals can be encouraged to act more pro-environmentally and engage in collective climate action.

However, to achieve its full potential, environmental psychology needs to increase its rigour and integration with other fields. One important step is to formalize psychological theories by expressing them into mathematical equations and computer code. This is especially crucial as behavioral science increasingly takes a 'systems view', explicitly conceptualizing behavior as arising from interactions between individual, social, and environmental factors. Complex systems are notoriously difficult for humans to understand and predict. Without the help of formal theories, systems thinking risks remaining a vague collection of concepts rather than a powerful way to understand, predict, and influence behavior for a sustainable future.

One prominent concept in current-day discourse on sustainable behavior and social systems is the 'tipping point'. Climate science increasingly focuses on the risks and consequences of crossing earth system tipping points, such as melting Arctic ice or changing in Gulf stream ocean currents. Since the last five years, individual and collective responses to climate change are increasingly conceptualized as 'social tipping points' (or sometimes 'positive tipping points'): nonlinear processes of desirable, transformative change in social systems. This narrative suggests a race between two sets of nonlinear, irreversible events: if we can trigger social tipping points to achieve decarbonization before climate tipping points occur, then we may stay within a safe zone for humanity and avert danger.

As the scientific and popular literature on social tipping points has boomed, so has criticism of the term. Critics question both the (un)intended consequences of the use of 'tipping' as a narrative ('climate tipping' may lead to a doomsday 'crisis narrative', and 'social tipping' framing may not lead to meaningful effects on real-world climate action) as well as the validity of describing social change as a tipping process (since mathematical models of complex systems include precise criteria and definitions that are not often explicitly tested). Most importantly, our current models of social tipping points are mostly descriptive (arising from social psychology) and lacking in predictive power, or statistical (arising from integrated models of sustainability transformation) but lacking in

psychological richness. There is little rigorous, empirical validation for models of social tipping. This means that, despite the appeal of ‘social tipping points’ as a climate solution, we are currently poorly able to predict or control social change in desired directions. Moreover, we lack well-validated psychological theories on the effect of ‘social tipping’ narratives on people’s perceptions of change, and the resulting effects on their behavior.

The proposed meeting will directly address these issues. We will work on developing (formal) psychological and cognitive theories to understand and characterize the mechanisms underlying social change, particularly social tipping dynamics. One crucial way to achieve this goal is to bring together distinct communities (see below) that all have crucial and complementary expertise. Together, we will connect the dots between individual perceptions and behavior, social dynamics, and policy for societal transformations. This will improved the design of interventions aimed at creating broad social change, especially applied to sustainability and climate action.

### **Disciplines involved**

This meeting will bring together researchers from these fields, which at the moment rarely overlap:

- **environmental psychology**, a subfield of social psychology and applied behavioral science that specifically focuses on pro-environmental behavior (but often lacking formal rigour and mostly focusing on individual behavior);
- **cognitive (neuro)science**, focusing on detailed models of humans beliefs and behavior (but rarely studying real-world decisions relevant for pro-environmental choice beyond the lab);
- **social simulation and behavioral science**, excelling in large-scale simulations of behavior in complex environments (but mostly lacking realistic models of human beliefs and behavior).

### **Participants**

Limited to 24 in-person participants.

Organisers: [Anne Urai](#) (Leiden University), [Sara Constantino](#) (Stanford University), [Fabian Dablander](#) (University of Amsterdam), [Jan Willem Bolderdijk](#) (MIST, University of Amsterdam), [Vitor Vasconcelos](#) (University of Amsterdam)