

## LITTERING BEHAVIOR: PSYCHOLOGICAL AND ECOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES

Nadhin Hasthi Awliya<sup>1</sup>, Raffi Asraf<sup>2</sup>, Naufal Ramadhan Purba<sup>3</sup>,  
Cantika Anindya Putri Desky<sup>4</sup>, Reza Harapenta Ginting<sup>5</sup>.

SMAS Al Azhar Medan, Indonesia.

Email correspondence: Nadhinawliya2@gmail.com

Received : 26 November 2024

Published : 08 February 2025

Revised : 18 December 2024

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.59733/medalion.v6i1.169>

Accepted: 19 January 2025

Publish Link : <https://medalionjournal.com/index.php/go>

### Abstract

Littering behavior is a form of antisocial action that has a negative impact on the environment and reflects the psychological dynamics of individuals. This article explores the relationship between this behavior and human disconnection from nature, ecological awareness, and psychological dimensions such as existential fear. With an environmental psychology approach, this article discusses how irresponsible behavior towards the environment can be overcome by increasing ecological awareness and strengthening the relationship between humans and nature.

**Keywords:** *littering, environmental psychology, ecological awareness.*

### Introduction

Littering is one of the major environmental issues in the modern era. This behavior not only reflects a lack of individual responsibility towards the environment but also shows a lack of ecological awareness (Gifford, 2021). Environmental psychology explains that this kind of behavior is often caused by a disconnection between humans and nature, which is exacerbated by an urban lifestyle that tends to exploit natural resources (Schultz et al., 2023). Furthermore, destructive behavior towards the environment can be linked to deeper psychological aspects, such as existential fear. As stated in several studies, human disconnection from the environment often gives rise to feelings of helplessness that exacerbate anxiety about the future of the ecosystem (Razkiazka, 2024). This article aims to explore the relationship between littering behavior with ecological awareness and individual psychological dynamics, and to offer solutions based on environmental awareness.

### Formulation of the problem

Based on the background that has been described, this article attempts to answer several main questions related to littering behavior and the underlying psychological aspects:

1. How does human disconnection from nature affect littering behavior?
2. To what extent does ecological awareness play a role in reducing irresponsible behavior towards the environment?
3. How do psychological dimensions, such as existential fear, contribute to destructive behavior toward the environment?
4. What environmental psychology approaches can be applied to increase ecological awareness and change littering behavior?

This problem formulation is the basis for exploring the relationship between psychological factors and behavior towards the environment, as well as seeking solutions based on ecological awareness.

### Theoretical basis

- Environmental Psychology and Antisocial Behavior

Environmental psychology explains that the relationship between humans and the environment plays an important role in shaping individual behavior. Littering behavior is often driven by a lack of awareness of its impact on the ecosystem, as well as a weak sense of responsibility for environmental sustainability (Gifford, 2021).

- Human disconnection from nature

Disconnection from nature is a major factor influencing antisocial behavior towards the environment. Schultz et al. (2023) showed that individuals who do not have an emotional connection to nature are more likely to commit acts that damage the environment. This disconnection can be physical, such as lack of interaction with the natural environment, or psychological, such as feelings of alienation from nature.

- Existential Fear as a Psychological Dimension

Several studies have noted that destructive behavior towards the environment can also be associated with existential fear, which is a deep anxiety about the future or sustainability of human life (Razkiazka, 2024). This anxiety is often unconscious, but is reflected in actions such as littering which shows apathy towards its long-term impact.

### Discussion

- Garbage as a Symbol of the Failure of Ecological Awareness

Waste that is thrown carelessly not only pollutes the environment, but also reflects human failure to understand their ecological responsibilities. Gifford (2021) points out that this behavior is often driven by a lack of concern for long-term impacts, which is rooted in a lack of environmental education. Littering has become one of the most significant environmental issues in the modern era. Its impacts not only pollute the physical environment, but also reflect human failure to understand and carry out their ecological responsibilities. In this context, ecological responsibility involves the awareness that humans have an obligation to maintain the sustainability of the ecosystem for the sake of the balance of nature and the welfare of future generations. When individuals or groups of people litter, this behavior reflects a lack of awareness of the long-term impact of their actions on the environment. Gifford (2021) stated that antisocial behavior towards the environment, including littering, is often caused by a lack of concern for long-term consequences. This apathy is rooted in a lack of understanding of the cause-and-effect relationship between human behavior and environmental damage. This factor is exacerbated by the lack of effective environmental education in the community. Environmental education not only aims to provide information about the importance of maintaining cleanliness, but also to form a mindset that places humans as part of an interconnected ecosystem.

Lack of environmental education makes many people think that littering is a small act that does not have a significant impact. In fact, the accumulation of these actions can cause major damage, such as water, soil, and air pollution. In addition, waste that is not managed properly also contributes to natural disasters, such as flooding due to water channels being clogged by waste. This shows that the lack of understanding of ecological responsibility is not only an individual problem, but also a serious threat to collective well-being. To address this issue, a holistic educational approach is needed. Effective environmental education must involve emotional, cognitive, and practical elements. For example, educational programs that integrate hands-on experiences, such as cleaning up or recycling, can help individuals understand the impact of their behavior while building empathy for the environment. In addition, public campaigns that use emotionally-charged narratives, such as stories about the impact of waste on wildlife or ecosystems, can also motivate collective behavior change. By increasing public awareness and understanding of ecological responsibility, littering behavior can be minimized. More than just a problem

habits, this behavior is a reflection of the relationship between humans and their environment. Therefore, solutions that focus on community education and empowerment will be key in creating a generation that cares more about the environment and the sustainability of the earth.

- **The Role of Psychology in Understanding Environmental Behavior**

In the context of psychology, littering can be seen as a manifestation of an individual's inability to establish an emotional connection with nature. Schultz et al. (2023) noted that nature-based educational programs can help increase ecological awareness and reduce antisocial behavior towards the environment. Littering behavior often reflects an individual's lack of emotional connection to nature. In the perspective of environmental psychology, this behavior can be influenced by social norms and environmental conditions. For example, areas that are left slum due to lack of investment in the environment make people around them consider littering to be normal.

To overcome this behavior, nature-based education is one effective approach. Through experiential learning programs, students can be directly involved in environmental conservation activities such as tree planting, beach cleaning, or monitoring endangered species. This direct involvement is expected to foster a sense of ownership and responsibility for the environment. Littering behavior not only has a negative impact on the physical environment, but also has significant psychological implications. A dirty and littered environment can cause feelings of discomfort, stress, and anxiety for individuals living around it. This condition can reduce the quality of life and mental well-being of the community. When a person is exposed to an environment filled with waste and pollution, their information processing capacity can be exceeded, leading to increased stress and decreased psychological well-being. Helmi (2014) explains that exposure to an unclean environment can cause sensory overload, which ultimately has a negative impact on an individual's mental health.

Furthermore, research by Leuwol et al. (2023) shows that environmental quality has a significant positive correlation with the psychological well-being of individuals in metropolitan cities. A clean and well-maintained environment contributes to improving mental well-being, while a dirty and untidy environment can reduce it. In environmental psychology, littering is often considered a form of antisocial behavior towards the environment. This behavior reflects not only a lack of ecological awareness, but also an individual's inability to establish an emotional connection with nature. When individuals do not feel emotionally connected to their environment, they tend to view nature as a separate entity that has no direct relevance to their personal lives. As a result, careless behavior, such as littering, emerges, which ultimately harms the ecosystem and the wider community.

Schultz et al. (2023) highlighted that emotional connection with nature, known as nature connectedness, plays an important role in shaping pro-environmental behavior. This connection includes a sense of belonging, appreciation, and concern for nature. Unfortunately, modernization and urbanization often make individuals lose direct interaction with nature, thus reducing the level of this emotional connectedness. This decline can lead to low awareness of the importance of maintaining environmental cleanliness and sustainability. Schultz et al.'s research shows that nature-based educational programs can increase emotional connectedness to nature.

These programs, such as forest walks, tree planting, or beach cleanups, provide hands-on experiences that can strengthen an appreciation for the environment. These experiences not only increase understanding of the importance of protecting the environment, but also foster an individual's sense of responsibility to act in a pro-environmental manner. In addition, interactions with nature can help reduce antisocial behavior, including littering, by building awareness that individual actions have a direct impact on the environment and surrounding community. Thus, a nature-based approach can be an effective strategy to overcome littering behavior. In addition to creating ecological awareness, this approach also helps individuals re-establish an emotional connection with nature, which ultimately contributes to environmental sustainability and collective well-being.

- **Psychological Dimension: Existential Fear**

Existential fear, although not always conscious, can influence a person's behavior towards the environment. Studies show that anxiety about the future is often expressed through seemingly destructive actions, such as littering (Razkiazka, 2024). Therefore, increasing awareness of environmental impacts can help reduce this anxiety and encourage more responsible behavior.

Existential fear is a psychological dimension that is often not realized but has a major impact on human behavior, including behavior towards the environment. This fear arises from anxiety about the uncertainty of the future, death, or loss of meaning in life. Razkiazka (2024) shows that this kind of anxiety is often expressed through destructive behavior, such as littering. Although on the surface this behavior looks simple, psychologically, this action can reflect apathy towards the future due to feelings of helplessness or loss of hope for better change. Littering behavior often emerges as a manifestation of unresolved emotional dissonance. When someone feels anxious about the future, they may feel they have no control over a larger situation, such as climate change or global environmental degradation. This feeling of helplessness then translates into actions that appear to be indifferent to the environment. However, this behavior is actually a form of escape from the emotional tension they are experiencing, where individuals choose to ignore their ecological responsibilities in response to frustration with the state of the world.

To address this phenomenon, it is important to raise public awareness about the relationship between existential fear and environmental behavior. Environmental education should not only emphasize the importance of maintaining cleanliness and sustainability, but should also provide space for individuals to understand their emotions regarding the future. By understanding that their actions have a real impact on the environment, individuals can feel more connected to the world around them and find meaning in the small contributions they make. Approaches that can be taken include community-based educational programs that not only provide information but also create deep emotional experiences.

For example, activities such as planting trees together or cleaning beaches can help individuals feel a sense of control over their future and increase their sense of ownership of the environment. In addition, campaigns that highlight the positive impacts of pro-environmental actions can also inspire hope and reduce existential anxiety. By helping individuals overcome their existential fears through environmental awareness, destructive behaviors such as littering can be minimized. In addition, this action also provides an opportunity to build a more meaningful relationship between humans and the environment, where every small contribution is part of the solution for a better future. This not only helps preserve the earth, but also provides a sense of hope and empowerment that is much needed by individuals in facing the uncertainties of life.

- **Solution: Raising Ecological Awareness**

Environmental education and social campaigns are the main solutions to overcome littering behavior. Community-based approaches have been shown to be effective in creating long-term behavioral change, especially when combined with direct nature experience programs (Schultz et al., 2023). Littering is a global problem that has negative impacts on the environment, health, and quality of life. One of the main solutions to overcome this problem is through environmental education and social campaigns. Environmental education aims to increase public awareness of the importance of maintaining environmental cleanliness and the consequences of littering. Meanwhile, social campaigns serve as a tool to mobilize the community to actively participate in maintaining environmental cleanliness.

Community-based approaches are a highly effective strategy for creating long-term behavioral change. Engaging communities in educational programs and social campaigns creates a sense of shared responsibility and builds solidarity to address environmental issues. Programs that involve direct experiences in nature have also been shown to increase the effectiveness of this approach. Schultz et al. (2023) showed that when individuals engage in activities such as beach cleanups, tree planting, or waste management directly, they tend to experience increased empathy for the environment and awareness of the impact of their behavior on the ecosystem. In addition, this approach can be strengthened through digital media, which allows social campaigns to reach a wider audience. Educational content on social media, such as short videos, infographics, and viral challenges about keeping the environment clean, can attract the attention of various groups, especially the younger generation.

In its implementation, the government, non-governmental organizations, and the private sector can collaborate to create innovative, sustainable programs. Incentives, such as awards for communities that successfully reduce waste, can also be additional motivation. With a combination of education, social campaigns, and community-based approaches, it is hoped that littering behavior can be minimized, thereby creating a cleaner, healthier, and more sustainable environment. One approach to increasing awareness of ecology is through environmental education based on nature experiences, which can foster a sense of ownership and responsibility for

## Littering Behavior: Psychological and Ecological Perspectives

Nadhin Hasthi Awliya et al

nature. Destructive behavior towards the environment can cause psychological conditions such as existential fear in the form of unresolved feelings of anxiety regarding the future of our nature which is starting to deteriorate. An environmental psychology approach that can be applied is through an educational program based on nature experiences. Schultz et al. (2023) showed that through direct involvement in environmental activities such as beach cleaning, tree planting, or other conservation activities, individuals can develop a sense of responsibility towards the environment and increase their ecological awareness.

### Conclusion

Littering is not only an environmental problem, but also a reflection of human disconnection from nature and a lack of ecological awareness. Psychological dimensions, such as existential fear, also influence this behavior, although not always consciously. By increasing ecological awareness through education and community-based interventions, more environmentally responsible behavior can be realized. Human disconnection from nature can lead to littering due to a lack of understanding and emotional connection to the surrounding environment. For example, an urban lifestyle that tends to be exploitative and lacks direct interaction with nature causes individuals to feel separated from the ecosystem, so they are more likely to ignore the impact of their behavior on the environment.

### References

- Beck, U. (2022). *Ecological Modernization: A Global Perspective*. Cambridge University Press.
- Clayton, S., & Myers, G. (2022). *Conservation Psychology: Understanding and Promoting Human Care for Nature* (3rd ed.). Wiley-Blackwell.
- Dunlap, R. E., & Van Liere, K. D. (2023). *The environmental paradigm revisited*. *Journal of Environmental Education*, 54(1), 19–28.
- Gifford, R. (2021). *Environmental Psychology: Principles and Practice (6th ed.)*. Optimal Books. Helmi, A. F. (1999). Beberapa Teori Psikologi Lingkungan. *Buletin Psikologi*, 7(2), 34-47.
- Kasser, T. (2022). *Ecological sustainability and human well-being*. *Ecopsychology*, 14(2), 125–130.
- Leuwol, T. A., Kefi, A. I., Gultom, T. A., Antasya, J. D., Witjaksono, R. N., & Adiwena, B. Y. (2023). Pengaruh Kualitas Lingkungan terhadap Kesejahteraan Psikologis Individu di Kota Metropolitan. *Jurnal Psikologi Lingkungan*, 5(1), 15-27.
- Schultz, P. W. (2023). *Nature and well-being: Linking psychological need satisfaction with ecological health*. *Ecopsychology*, 15(3), 175–190.
- Razkiazka, M. H. (2024). *The Role of Depression in Existential Dread: A Psychological and Existential Perspective on the COVID-19 Pandemic*. *Jurnal Cakrawala Akademika*, 1(4), 1374–1391
- Schultz, P. W., Bator, R., & Truelove, H. B. (2023). *Promoting pro-environmental behavior: Theory and practice*. *Annual Review of Environment and Resources*, 48(1), 97–123.
- Steffen, W., Rockström, J., & Richardson, K. (2022). *Planetary boundaries: Guiding human development on a changing planet*. *Science*, 375(6586), 1437–1446.
- Stern, P. C. (2021). *Toward a theory of environmentally significant behavior*. *Journal of Environmental Psychology*, 76(3), 101729.