

Spill-over' of sustainability values and practices - a psychology PhD thesis proposal

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Introduction

Tuatahi nga mihi ki a koutou katoa kua whakahuihui mai ki tenei hui whakahirahira.

The following presentation relates to my proposed PhD topic. As an audience you're probably reading the title and wondering what relevance my topic has to the symposium theme Claiming Spaces. My immediate response is 'nothing'. Nada, zilch, kore. As a 'fill-in' speaker for a presenter unable to be here, I'm reminded that despite my topics irregularity in the programme, I claim a space as both a psychologist and Maori person seeking to work with in the field of sustainability and conservation. Psychologists and Maori are interested in more than mental health and clinical investigation. We are interested in how the world goes around and seek to claim a space here too. So, this symposium and my participation DOES have relevance and I'd like to acknowledge those who remind me so. Let's take a peep into my world for the next 3 years.

Media Coverage

The number of businesses in New Zealand taking on the challenge to: be 'energy efficient' (Leaman, 2007); engage in 'sustainable business practices' (Watkin, 2007), and to promote conservation strategies among their employees has had an average increase of 10% each year (Collins, Lawrence, & Roper, 2007) with practices becoming more publicly visible (Leaman, 2007; Watkin, 2007). For example, supermarkets are promoting alternatives to using plastic bags, computer companies like Dell have recycling initiatives (Dell, 2005), and businesses like Xerox are aiming for 'zero waste' (Fuji Xerox, 2007). Collins, Corner, Kearins and Lawrence (2004) examined the state of voluntary environment programmes in New Zealand. These were "a range of initiatives that firms choose to undertake to improve their environmental performance beyond what is legally mandate" (Collins, Corner, Kearins, & Lawrence, 2004, p. 57). Fifty seven percent of New Zealand businesses believe environmental

management will be much more important to their business within the next 5 years. Commercial reputations were seen to be at stake and businesses felt pressure from customers and other stakeholders to be more environmentally conscious. While costs could be considered a barrier to more proactive environmental practices, incorporating an environmental strategy can assist businesses to remain competitive in their field. Environmental behaviour, therefore, becomes an 'investment' linked to corporate profit (Fowler & Hope, 2007; Lawrence, Collins, Pavlovich, & Arunachalam, 2006; Nakao, Amano, Matsumura, Genba, & Nakano, 2007).

Public interest in sustainable living and energy efficiency is highlighted by the TV3 series "WASTED: Waging War on Waste" (TV3, 2007). 'WASTED' is a 30 minute show that audits the daily activities of family homes and takes practical steps toward reducing their ecological footprint by calculating their carbon emissions (Landcare Research, 2007; TV3, 2007).

In an effort to change the way New Zealander's think about energy use and consumption, the New Zealand Government passed the Energy Efficiency and Conservation Act (EEC Act) 2000 to promote energy efficiency, energy conservation and the use of renewable sources of energy (Legislation NZ, 2000). In passing the EEC Act, the Energy Efficiency Conservation Authority (EECA) was set up as a Crown Entity responsible for delivering the Government's energy efficiency agenda (Ministry of Economic Development, 2004; National Energy Efficiency and Conservation Authority, 2001). The Government's new National Energy Strategy (Ministry of Economic Development, 2007b) sets out the long-term direction of New Zealand's energy system, so the energy sector and consumers can respond with more certainty and confidence to the energy challenges and opportunities of the future (Ministry of Economic Development, 2007a). Local councils like Hamilton City Council (Hamilton City Services, 2007) and Environment Waikato have also

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been active in reducing household landfill contributions by establishing the 'green bin' recycling initiative, and increasing the number of green recycling centers in and around Hamilton, as well as energy efficiency campaigns (Environment Waikato, 2007). In addition, they have been instrumental in stimulating the intensification of 'green' activities by linking with business (e.g., Genesis Energy) to make awards (e.g., 2007 Waikato Sustainable Business Awards), promoting competitions and making community grants available.

In examining media reporting, sustainability and advocacy websites, the television show about reducing one's ecological footprint, businesses prepared to engage in interventions, and government initiatives, the impression that one forms is that there are changes afoot. Sustainability appears fashionable, increasingly economically viable, and businesses are getting involved. This movement is encouraged by organisations like the Sustainable Business Network (SBN) which works with businesses that are interested in sustainable development practice. Whatever their motivations (profits, sustainability, appealing to 'solution seekers', public profile) some businesses are clearly willing and have moved in the direction of sustainability.

Aim of research

My proposed study seeks to investigate the 'spill-over' of workplace sustainability values and practices to staff/employee households. If household values and practices differ to workplace values and practices, staff are thrown into a cognitively dissonant position which they are then required to attend to. The central question in this study is: Do staff change their household sustainability practices to coincide with workplace practices, and under what conditions does this occur?

'Spill-over' is considered to be a process where characteristics in one domain e.g. paper recycling, are transferred by a person to some other domain (Leiter & Durup, 1996). Spill-over can also be understood by the notion of 'spreading' or 'transfer' (Thøgersen & Olander, 2003).

The study will involve:

- a) Recruiting businesses willing to have their sustainability practices publicly documented, and willing to promote participation in the study to their employees;
- b) Recruiting employees willing to complete a survey about the relationship of household

sustainability practices to their workplace and vice-versa;

- c) Recruiting and interviewing a willing subset of employees who have completed the survey and who engage in household sustainability practices.

Why are environmental issues important to psychologists

Over the last 30 years, social psychologists have been interested and more involved in environmental issues often with an inter-disciplinary approach across economics, medicine, political science and sociology, and more recently science and engineering (van der Pligt, 1996). The major research themes in this area relate mainly to the impact of environmental pollution, noise and, natural and technological disasters (van der Pligt, 1996).

The environment does have an effect on our human behaviour and most research tends to look at the negative effects (Bell, Greene, Fisher, & Baum, 2001). In the literature, this is known as environmental stress, that is, our reactions to noxious stimuli or perceived threats to our lives (Bell, Greene, Fisher, & Baum, 2001; Dickson & Murphy, 2007; van der Pligt, 1996). Research into the environment by psychologists is based on the assumption that concern for the environment is a condition for the advancement of successful environmental protection and behaviour modification. Psychological research, as with other discipline related research on energy, the environment and sustainability issues, will help us understand how to encourage or discourage environment-related behaviours (Creighton, 1998; Harre & Atkinson, 2007; van der Pligt, 1996).

Relevant psychological literature

A number of psychological theories are relevant to my proposed study. They are social representation theory, community social marketing, and the social psychology of everyday life and communities of practice. They are briefly reviewed below.

Social Representation theory

"Social representations should be seen as a specific way of understanding and communicating what we already know" (Moscovici, 2001, p. 31). Social representations help us to gain meaning from the world by ordering it, reproducing it in a meaningful way and circulating that point of view (Bauer & Gaskell, 1999). From an energy conservation perspective, representations of sustainability enter into our ordinary lives and circulate through

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conversations with friends, colleagues or the media. Duveen (Moscovici, 2001) claims that the social influence of communication solidifies the representation as reality, establishing an affiliation binding people together.

Wolfgang Wagner and his colleagues (Wagner et al., 1999) provide a useful overview of social representation theory. It is a social psychological framework of concepts and ideas to study psychosocial phenomena in modern societies. The framework is guided by some fundamental assumptions, that is, that social representation is about making the unfamiliar, familiar. The mere act of discussing 'sustainability' provokes images of natural resources, ecological damage, places, histories, conservation and development. This in itself is a process of making the unfamiliar, more familiar and affiliating people to a reality and cause.

Community Social Marketing

Social marketing is the use of marketing principles and techniques to improve the welfare of people and the physical, social and economic environment in which they live. Community Social Marketing understands these as fundamental principles to encouraging behaviour modification (Kotler, Roberto, & Lee, 2002; McKenzie-Mohr & Smith, 1999). Social marketing is a carefully planned, long-term approach to changing human behaviour. The behaviour change may involve doing something new (covering up in the sun), doing something differently (washing the car on the grass rather than the side of the road) or stopping doing something altogether (drink driving). Social marketing is also used to create environments that support the desired behaviour (Andreasen, 2002; Smith, 2008). Social marketing uses many commercial marketing principles and techniques, however, it aims to benefit the target audience and society as a whole rather than seeking a financial profit (McKenzie-Mohr, 2007). The Ministry for the Environment also employs social marketing techniques. In its promotion of sustainability in Aotearoa, it creates a market representation about the nature and benefits of business sustainability and circulates this representation (Ministry for the Environment, 2007). The intent is to create a reality of 'best practice' that binds businesses together through talk, action and perception.

The Social Psychology of Everyday Life

According to Chaney (2002) everyday life is considered the unremarkable and taken for granted events in our lives. Social and cultural circumstances of everyday life will differ. Chaney (2002) argues

that common expectations of a reality exist. These mundane routines or rhythms of everyday flows is consistent with the theory of 'sampling community discourses' (Guerin, 2007) where natural or normal conversations function within a social community of everyday events and do not act as a private language.

In terms of sustainability, advocates want the practice to become an everyday mundane taken for granted activity, that is, part of the everyday flows of businesses and households functioning within a larger social community and context.

Communities of Practice

Communities of practice are groups of people who share a concern, a set of problems, or a passion about a topic (sustainability), and who deepen their knowledge and expertise in this area by interacting on an ongoing basis like Waikato EnviroNet ("Waikato EnviroNet", 2007)¹. These people meet because they find value in their interactions. As they spend time together they typically share information, insight, and advice. They discuss their aspirations and their needs, and they may even develop a common sense of identity. They become a "community of practice" (Wenger, McDermott, & Snyder, 2002). If today's marketplace is fuelled by knowledge and knowledge is power, cultivating communities of practice needs to be considered a key requirement in effective knowledge transfer. By creating, sharing and applying knowledge within and across teams, and within units and business 'communities', leverage can occur off this network to maintain or gain a market advantage for example. It is about becoming a practitioner, rather than just learning the practice (Brown & Duguid, 2000). Knowledge is too valuable a resource to leave for chance and sharing of knowledge allows communities to keep up with the rapid change (Wenger, 1998; Wenger, McDermott, & Snyder, 2002). From a sustainability point of view, the Sustainable Business Network could be considered one such model.

The SBN is a national network with an office in Auckland that employs about five staff, maintains an informative and newsy web site, and facilitates workshops for business's that wish to follow the sustainability path (Sustainable Business Network, 2007). SBN promotes sustainable practice in New Zealand and supports businesses on the path to

¹ Waikato EnviroNet is a group of staff members interested in or involved with teaching, research, and initiatives relating to the environment. Its members come from a variety of Schools within the University of Waikato.

becoming sustainable. They link businesses and provide a forum for the exchange of ideas and experiences, defining 'sustainable business' as the integration of economic growth, social equity and environmental management, both for now and the future (Sustainable Business Network, 2007).

Other theories and sub-disciplines of psychology I anticipate being helpful to my study are:

- Cognitive Dissonance Theory
- Theory of social change: workplace as a social change agent
- Community Psychology
- Environmental Psychology

Concluding comments

Social psychological research can make an important contribution to helping us analyse and understand the view points of stakeholders - you, me, businesses, communities and cultures with regard to environmental issues and sustainability practices.

Psychologists can use social psychological concepts and ideas to study psychosocial phenomena in modern societies, and can act as social change agents by creating environments that support desired behaviours. In these ways, social psychologists can help people, groups, communities, societies, and cultures make that which is unfamiliar, familiar.

It is difficult to measure the impact this study can have on businesses and households per se, however, if employees do change their household sustainability practices because of workplace practices, then government campaigns toward sustainability could use this as a model for expanding existing initiatives or developing future policies toward sustainable energy use (Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, 2002; Environment Waikato, 2007; Hamilton City Services, 2007; Ministry of Economic Development, 2004; National Energy Efficiency and Conservation Authority, 2001).

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