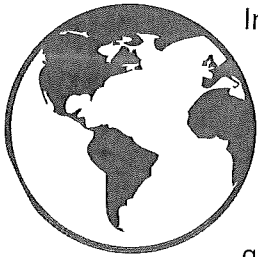


'Spill-over' of Sustainable Practices: A PhD Proposal

By Mohi Rua - Recipient of the 2006 NZPsS Presidents Scholar Award
with Dr Linda Waimarie Nikora.



Introduction

Businesses in New Zealand taking on the challenge to be energy efficient, sustainable and conservationally minded are on the rise (Collins, Lawrence, & Roper, 2007). Supermarkets are getting rid of plastic bags, computer companies are recycling and Xerox has a 'zero waste' objective. Many are going beyond what is legally mandated. Collins, Corner, Kearins and Lawrence (2004) report that 57% of NZ businesses believe environmental management will be much more important to them in the next 5 years increasingly becoming an 'investment' linked to corporate profit (Fowler & Hope, 2007). Whatever their motivations some businesses are clearly willing and have moved in the direction of sustainability.

My research

Through case studies of businesses, surveys of their employees, and interviews with staff my study seeks to investigate the 'spill-over' of workplace sustainability values and practices to staff/employee households. 'Spill-over' is where characteristics in one domain are transferred by a person to some other domain (Leiter & Durup, 1996). If household values and practices differ from workplace values and practices, staff are thrown into a cognitively dissonant position requiring attention. The central question in this study is: Do staff change their household sustainability practices to coincide with those of the workplace and under what conditions?

Psychology and the Environment

Psychologists have always been interested in environmental issues often linking with other disciplines to better understand environmental effects on people and vice-a-versa (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 will help us understand how to encourage or discourage environment-related behaviours (Creighton, 1998; Harre & Atkinson, 2007; van der Pligt, 1996). A number of psychological theories are relevant to my study.

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 and circulating it in a meaningful way (Bauer & Gaskell, 1999). Representations of sustainability enter into our ordinary lives and circulate through interactions with people and media. Social representation is about making the unfamiliar, familiar. The mere act of discussing 'sustainability' provokes attention. In environmentally conscious businesses the circulation of sustainability representations through images, discussions and policies should result in taken-for-granted practices.

Community Social Marketing (CSM)

CSM 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 (Kotler, Roberto, & Lee, 2002; McKenzie-Mohr & Smith, 1999). These are fundamental principles to encouraging behaviour modification. CSM is a carefully planned, long-term approach to changing human behaviour. The behaviour change may involve doing something new (riding a bike to work instead of driving), doing something differently (washing the car on the grass rather than the side of the road) or stopping doing something altogether (tipping paint down the storm water drains). CSM is also used to create environments that support desired behaviours (Andreasen, 2002; Smith, 2008). CSM aims to benefit the target audience and society as a whole rather than seeking a financial profit.

The Social Psychology of Everyday Life

'Everyday life' is considered the unremarkable and taken for granted events in our lives (Chaney, 2002). Social and cultural circumstances of everyday life will differ but common expectations of a reality will continue to exist. These mundane routines or rhythms of everyday flows are 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 (Wenger, McDermott, & Snyder, 2002) 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. If today's marketplace is fuelled by knowledge and knowledge is power (Sartre as cited in Foucault, Kritzman, & Sheridan, 1988, p. xiv), 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, units and business 'communities', leverage for example, can occur to maintain or gain a market advantage. Sustainability 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 rapid change.

Concluding comments

I am in the early stages of my study and keen to follow up on further theories and sub-disciplines of psychology such as Cognitive Dissonance Theory, Theory of Social Change: workplace as a social change agent, Community Psychology and Environmental Psychology. I hope these areas will continue to develop my understanding of sustainability and related behaviours.

This study also has relevance to Maori as they have a stake both in the demand for energy and, also importantly, in the possibility of alternative supply options. The Government has a Research, Science & Technology policy framework to invest in research relevant to Maori with sustainability as a key theme (Ministry of Research Science and Technology, 2008). Maori are also significant small business owners and the findings of this research could have economic implications or even future directions in terms of business sustainability and practice with relation to traditional Maori environmental values. Maori still own and retain significant resources and land in particular where renewable energy sources can be located. There are significant co-benefits for Maori land owners working with the private sector and the Government to ensure energy security. Through the collaborative use of land, Maori can participate in economic development as entrepreneurs and not lessors (Ball & Wilson, 2007).

Finally, it is difficult to measure the overall impact this study might have on businesses and households, however, if employees do change household sustainability practices because of workplace practices, then sustainability campaigns could use this as a model for expanding existing initiatives or developing future sustainable policies.

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