

On how business students' personal values and sustainability conceptions impact their sustainability management orientation

Evidence from Germany, Indonesia and the USA

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Abstract

Purpose – This paper aims to develop and empirically test a framework on how personal values and sustainability conceptions affect students' sustainability management orientation (SMO). An understanding of this connection gives insight into the question whether students are likely to engage in sustainable business practices in their future work.

Design/methodology/approach – A cross-sectional and comparative research design is used, using survey data of business students from Germany, Indonesia and the USA ($N = 475$). The proposed mediation models are tested by bootstrap procedures using Hayes's (2013) PROCESS macro for SPSS.

Findings – Self-transcendence values translate into more nuanced sustainability conceptions since individuals with self-transcendence values are more likely to conceptualize sustainability beyond their own (narrow) self-interests. In turn, the stronger individuals' sustainability conceptions, the higher the likelihood that they prefer sustainable management practices in their future professional working field.



There are no conflicts of interest. No third-party funding was used.

Research limitations/implications – Implications arise for researchers to investigate the engagement of future managers with different personal value types in sustainability practices and to gain insights into values and sustainability conceptions as a learning outcome. Limitations of this research – for instance, arising from potential common method bias – are discussed.

Practical implications – The findings point to the need to (re-)design appointment processes for management positions in a way that allows taking into account individuals' personal values and sustainability conceptions. This research may also help firms and higher education institutions to empower their workforce/students to develop more integrated perspectives on sustainability challenges as well as teaching methods that address students' effective learning outcomes, e.g. their values.

Originality/value – The paper offers a new framework and a cross-country perspective on psychological antecedents of individuals' SMO as an important prerequisite for responsible behavior in the business context.

Keywords Sustainability, Personal values, Cross-country study, Management orientation, Sustainability conceptions

Paper type Research paper

1. Introduction

Responsible management seen from the perspective of sustainable development includes dealing with the well-being of humankind and the biosphere, from generation to generation and collaborative efforts across all sectors of society. Responsible management aims to achieve sustainable business by influencing its triple bottom line (Elkington, 1997). The idea of sustainability and especially its application to management is a way to manage responsibly between what has been described as the social foundations of human life and the ecological planetary boundaries to create a just and safe space for humanity (Rockström *et al.*, 2009; Leach *et al.*, 2013). Fuelled by the declaration of the UN Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (2005-2014) and the finalization of the Principles for Responsible Management Education (PRME) in 2007, a vivid debate among policy makers, business leaders and the academic community has evolved around the question of how individuals can be empowered to deal with the complex and interrelated phenomena associated with a transformation toward sustainability at local, national and global levels (see, for instance, PRME 10th Anniversary Special Issue in the *International Journal of Management Education*, edited by Parkes *et al.*, 2017; see also Louw, 2015; Adom̄bent *et al.*, 2014). Contributors to this debate widely agree that it is not enough to teach students about responsible management. Instead, it is important to enable them to master responsible management (McDonald, 2013).

Given the prominence of the concept of sustainability management, i.e. “the formulation, implementation, and evaluation of both environmental and socioeconomic sustainability-related decisions and actions” (Starik and Kanashiro, 2013, p. 12), in the current debate, there is surprisingly little research on sustainability management orientations (SMO) as a psychological antecedent of sustainable management practices. SMO is defined as individuals' inclination to direct their attention to management practices which allow the achievement of economic growth through “the demonstration of environmental integrity and social responsiveness” (Louche *et al.*, 2010, p. 97). As sustainability is a highly normative lens to use when making management decisions (Beckmann and Pies, 2008), SMO can be assumed to be strongly influenced by psychological antecedents such as personal values (Alonso-Almeida *et al.*, 2015; Crane and Matten, 2016). So far, only a few contributions in the field address the relationship between people's values and preferences of sustainability management (Shafer *et al.*, 2007; Adams *et al.*, 2011; Simmons *et al.*, 2013; Lehnert *et al.*, 2016). Moreover, recent research highlights a lack of conceptual frameworks linking various individual-level antecedents in different socio-cultural settings (Krambia-