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Cultivating Support for the Sustainable Development Goals, Green Strategy and Human Resource Management Practices in Future Business Leaders: The Role of Individual Differences and Academic Training

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Abstract: How we effectively train our future business leaders is critical to the success of implementation of the SDGs. Higher education will play a central role in this effort. This research examines business student support for environmentally-oriented organizational strategy (“green strategy”) and human resource management policies and practices (“green hrm”) in comparison with sustainable development (SD) students to explore barriers faced in educating our future business leaders on the SDGs. We explore if student political orientation, gender, or authoritarianism are associated with different levels of support within each discipline. We also examine if business students prioritize the same U.N. Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) as SD students. Results ($n = 281$) indicate business students (particularly those who are male, conservative, or authoritarian) are less supportive of green strategy and green HR than SD students. However, business student support of prosperity/people-oriented SDGs offers a potential avenue for progress.

Keywords: SDGs; human resource management; higher education; authoritarianism; political orientation; gender; business students; green HRM; green strategy

1. Introduction

There exists a global scientific consensus that climate change will result in unprecedented alterations to the way humans live on earth, and industry accounts for at least 37% of global carbon dioxide emissions [1]. At the current rates of global industrial growth, the challenge facing humanity is that of “an enormous increase in environmental deterioration, just when we need to move strongly in the opposite direction” [2] (p. 6). Hawken’s [3] (p. xii) dire warning that “Every living system on Earth is in decline”, is being consistently reinforced with alarming and ever-increasing evidence.

The larger issue here for business educators in universities may be the necessity to ask the fundamental question “What is business education for?” If it is not to educate students to address the environmental crises, then business higher education may not be educating its students for the critical challenges ahead in their careers as future business leaders. “To create an enduring society, we will need a system of commerce and production where each and every act is inherently sustainable and restorative. Business will need to integrate economic, biologic, and human systems to create a sustainable method of commerce... Just as every act in an industrial society leads to environmental degradation, regardless of intention, we must design a system where the opposite is true” [3] (p. xiv).

Haigh and Griffiths [4] extend the argument and assert that climate change, with its effects on business infrastructure, resources, products, and markets, provides more than sufficient rationale (notwithstanding the moral and ethical considerations) to consider the natural environment in strategic management decision-making as a primary stakeholder. And recognition of the looming environmental crisis seems to finally be entering the corporate mainstream. Over three-quarters of CEOs (76%) say that their firm's future growth depends on their ability to navigate the shift to a clean-technology, low-carbon economy, according to KPMG's Global CEO Outlook [5]. And in 2019, the Business Roundtable changed its statement on the purpose of a corporation to include "We respect the people in our communities and protect the environment by embracing sustainable practices across our businesses [6]" We may be nearing an inflection point in the acceptance of a multi-stakeholder model [7] and triple-bottom line approach (TBL) [8], whereby business contributes and measures not only its creation of economic value, but also its contributions towards societal and environmental value (in a sustainable manner).

Higher education will play an essential role in the adaptation towards more sustainable business practices, "Our duty towards [the] education of future professionals is to make [it] possible for them to participate in the necessary transformation" [9]. This research examines business student support of environmentally oriented organizational strategy ("green strategy") and human resource management policies and practices ("green hrm") in comparison with sustainable development (SD) students. Business education involves teaching the skills and operations of the business industry. Profit maximization and techniques to accomplish this form a significant part of the single stakeholder-focused business education course curricula. In contrast, sustainable development programs engage in creating change in knowledge, skills, values and attitudes to enable a more sustainable and just society for all, and enhance focus on multistakeholder community-driven development and social change. The difference in the positioning of these two programs offered by universities is distinctly evident, and offers an opportunity to empirically assess whether important differences exist between them. We explore whether support of green strategy and green hrm differs between business and sustainable development students, and if student authoritarianism, political orientation, or gender are associated with significantly different levels of support within each discipline. We also examine if business students prioritize the same SDGs as SD students.

2. Support for Green Strategy and Green HRM: Business vs. Sustainable Development (SD) Students

As consumers increase their demands for businesses to adopt environmentally responsible behavior, and society recognizes the impact of such economic activities on nature, business school educators must ensure that future business leaders are positive role models, capable and caring individuals. A large scale systemic shift is needed in organizational strategy, systems, and processes to reflect this fundamental change to a multi-stakeholder business model orientation [10]. The one-dimensional single shareholder purpose of organizations needs to be replaced by strategic and human capital practices that take the development of social, environmental, and human capital into account. Within organizations, effective strategic HRM engagement is essential in navigating this transition, and business higher education must provide the training to address this need. Students in our current business higher education programs may represent a large proportion of the future leaders implementing such multi-stakeholder changes, and need to be adequately prepared.

However, recent research suggests concerning trends: that business students possess enhanced levels of self-interest, may lack empathy, and may exploit common resources [11]. A study by Westerman et al. [12] indicates that narcissism is higher among business students (than among students from other academic disciplines). Narcissism has also been linked to a wide range of undesirable outcomes in the workplace, including white-collar

crime [13], and risky decision-making [14]. Further, a study by Bergman, et al. [15] of business students demonstrated that they possess lower levels of environmental ethics combined with enhanced materialism. As a result of this review of prior research, we propose that business students may demonstrate less support for multi-stakeholder business transitions than non-business students:

H1. *Business students will show lower levels of support for green organization strategy and green HRM policies and practices than sustainable development students.*

3. Authoritarianism, Political Affiliation, and Support for Green Strategy and Green HRM

We also explore the relationship of the individual difference variables of authoritarianism and political affiliation to determine potential precursors to one's support of green strategy and green HRM. Authoritarianism reflects an orientation amongst individuals to choose the subjugation of individual freedom for the security of the state or an authority figure. Authoritarian individuals have needs to manage uncertainty, fear, and threat, and strive for security and dominance in social situations [16]. They combine conventionalism and a desire for maintenance of current systems and the status quo with a submission to the relevant authority, with a willingness to be aggressive on behalf the authority. Authoritarians, as a result, would be less likely to endorse green strategy and green HRM, which endorses a departure from the conventional business model. Further, research by Fritzsche et al. [17] demonstrated that perceived climate change threat was associated with an increase in authoritarian tendencies, suggesting that authoritarian reactions can be general and need not be directed exclusively toward the perceived sources of the threat.

In terms of political affiliation and green business, social identity theory may provide some suggestions. Conceiving of oneself in terms of a particular social identity has been shown to influence our environmental attitudes and behaviors, how relations between groups impact environmental outcomes, and how the content of social identities leads group members to act in more (or less) pro- or anti-environmental ways [18]. In the United States, political affiliation has recently shifted towards a model more closely oriented towards identity politics, with those who identify as conservative/Republicans being less likely to support climate change science and action [18,19]. As a result, we suggest the following:

H2. *Student authoritarianism and a conservative political orientation will significantly reduce support for green organization strategy and green HRM policies and practices.*

4. Gender Differences in Support for Green Strategy and Green HRM

A considerable amount of past research supports the statement that gender differences impact business ethics [20]. Women have been shown to be more sympathetic and more intuitive than men [21], and have also been perceived as more helpful and aware of others' feelings [22]. Gilligan (and others) argue that the genders possess fundamentally different moral orientations in that women operate from a position of caring as a predominant moral orientation, whereas men utilize justice in shaping their ethical orientation [23–25]. Further, Arlow's research indicates that women place less emphasis selfish interests and expediency when evaluating ethical issues [26]. Khazanchi found that women are better than men at recognizing unethical actions [27], and Ameen et al. found that female students were also better able to identify ethically questionable student behaviors and activities as being more unethical than were their male student counterparts [28]. Ruegger and King also reported that women identified several areas of ethical concern as more unacceptable than did men, including a firm's duty not to exploit its stakeholders [29]. Wehrmeyer and McNeil found that women in organizations were more likely to be actively involved in conscientious activism/environmental behavior [30]. And women demonstrate stronger feelings overall in regards to ethical issues [31]. Kohlberg's [32] moral development stage approach has also indicated robust gender differences [33–36].

And according to Hofstede, “men tend to stress ego goals more whereas women tend to stress social goals” [37] (p. 11). Finally, research by Bergman et al. demonstrated that female business students had higher levels of environmental ethics than men [15]. As a result of this prior research and theory, we explore whether female business students will be more likely than men to support green strategy and HRM.

H3. *Female students will be more supportive of green organization strategy and green HRM policies than male students.*

5. Support for the Sustainable Development Goals: Business vs. Sustainable Development (SD) Students

In September 2015, 193 world leaders adopted 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), with an agenda calling for a plan of action for people, planet and prosperity. The resolution specifically called for all countries and all stakeholders, acting in collaborative partnership, to implement this plan which is “...urgently needed to shift the world on to a sustainable and resilient path...(to) stimulate action over the next 15 years in areas of critical importance for humanity and the planet” [38]. To achieve the goal of the full involvement of “all stakeholders, acting in collaborative partnership, to implement this plan” [38], it would be beneficial to understand which SDGs resonate with different stakeholders and people, and why, so that educational interventions can be focused in a way that will make these efforts more successful.

To this end, we explore whether significant differences exist between business and sustainable development students in how they prioritize the SDGs. As noted previously, business schools focus their students on a single stakeholder profit-based model, and prior research indicates that business students possess enhanced levels of self-interest [14], are more materialistic and have lower environmental ethics [15]. As such, we speculate that business students will be more likely to support prosperity/people oriented SDGs, as they are more likely to be interpreted as reflecting more proximal immediate economic concerns. In contrast, we anticipate that sustainable development students, who are engaged in a multidisciplinary major with a global, restorative approach to environmental and social justice, will be drawn towards providing greater support for more collaborative efforts, represented by SDGs more focused on the environment, and peace and partnership efforts that transcend national boundaries.

H4. *Business students will prioritize the people and prosperity-oriented SDGs, whereas sustainability students will prioritize the planet-oriented SDGs and the peace and partnership-oriented SDGs.*

6. Materials and Methods

Participants were 281 undergraduate students at a university located in the southeastern United States, which included business ($n = 228$) and sustainable development ($n = 53$) students. The mean age of our final sample was 21.51 years, with a range of 18–60 years. The sample consisted of 142 males, 135 females, and four participants who did not indicate gender (approximately 51% male and 48% female). The enhanced size of the business student sample reflected the larger business student cohort at the southeastern U.S. university. Participation in the study was voluntary, and no extra credit was provided. Participants completed an online survey during midpoint of the semester, administered during class time or online outside of class time.

7. Measures

Authoritarianism. The authoritarianism scale developed by Funke was used in this study [39]. It is a 12-item Likert scale instrument that measures authoritarian submission, authoritarian aggression, and conventionalism in an individual.

Green Organizational Strategy. The green corporate environmental strategy scale, developed by Ramus et al., was used [40]. It's a 13 item Likert scale instrument, representative questions include measuring perceived support for firms' publishing an environmental policy, on annual report on progress, setting targets for environmental performance, applying environmental considerations to purchasing and labor decisions, and applying the same environmental standards at home and abroad.

Green HRM. The green human resource management scale, developed by DuMont et al., is a six item Likert scale which measures an individual's preferences for working in a firm that implements individual performance goals, training, performance assessment, rewards and compensation, and promotion decisions based on environmental performance by employees [41].

Political Orientation. Political views were assessed using the scale developed by Feldman and Stenner, a 7-point Likert scale from "extremely liberal" to "extremely conservative" [42].

Preference for Sustainable Development Goals. The 17 SDGs were rank ordered (most to least important) by students from 1–17 in order of how important each goal was to them personally (lower rankings representing higher importance). For the purpose of data analysis, and based on the categories provided in the UN Resolution A/70/1 and similar to the work of Swain [43], we subcategorized the SDGs into three basic groups reflecting their primary focus and orientation: (1) SDG People/Prosperity (SDGs 1–10); (2) SDG Planet (SDGs 11–15); and SDG Peace/Partnership (SDGs 16–17) as follows.

SDG People/Prosperity consists of the first 10 SDGs: no poverty, zero hunger, good health and well-being, quality education, gender equality, clean water and sanitation, affordable and clean energy, decent work and economic growth, industry innovation and infrastructure, and reduced inequality. These SDGs reflect a focus on the health and economic welfare of people within societies.

SDG Planet consists of SDGs 11–15, and includes support for climate action, life below water, life on land, sustainable cities and communities, and responsible consumption and production. These SDGs focus on the development of systems and processes that transcend one's immediate community, and impact planetary environmental health.

SDG Peace and Partnership consists of SDGs 16–17, and includes peace and justice and strong institutions, and partnerships to achieve the goal. The last two SDGs speak to establishing equitable systems of justice and cross-national collaboration.

8. Results

The first hypothesis was tested using an independent samples t-test analysis. The results supported the hypothesis for both green organization strategy and green HRM policies. Specifically, SD majors were more supportive of green organization strategy ($M = 4.75$, $SD = 0.27$) compared to business students ($M = 4.13$, $SD = 0.77$), $t = 9.95$, $p < 0.001$. Similarly, SD majors were more supportive of green HRM policies ($M = 4.47$, $SD = 0.57$) compared to business students ($M = 4.02$, $SD = 0.88$), $t = 4.56$, $p < 0.001$.

The second hypothesis was tested by examining correlation coefficients between authoritarianism, political orientation, green strategy, and green HRM policies (see Table 1). The results partially supported the hypothesis, with both authoritarianism and political orientation having significant negative relationships with green organizational policies and green HRM strategy.

Table 1. Authoritarianism, Political Affiliation, and Support for Green Strategy and Green HRM.

	Green Strategy	Green HRM
Authoritarianism	−0.42 ***	−0.27 ***
Political Orientation	−0.33 ***	−0.30 ***

Note. The values in the table are correlation coefficients. *** $p < 0.001$.

However, when these relationships were examined separately for business and SD students, an interesting pattern emerged. Specifically, we found that authoritarianism interacted with major in predicting support for green HRM policies, $b = 0.47$, $p < 0.05$, with business and SD students low in authoritarianism showing similar levels of support ($M = 4.32$ for business and $M = 4.44$ for sustainability), but there was a large difference between business ($M = 3.89$) and SD students (4.57) who were high in authoritarianism. No significant interaction was observed for green organization strategy between major and authoritarianism. In addition, it was found that political orientation interacted with major in predicting support for green organization strategy, $b = 0.22$, $p < 0.05$, with business and SD students who lean liberal showing similar levels of support ($M = 4.29$ for business and $M = 4.75$ for sustainability), but there was a larger difference between business ($M = 4.01$) and SD students (4.76) who lean conservative. Finally, political orientation interacted with major in predicting support for green HRM policies, $b = 0.26$, $p < 0.05$, with business and SD students who lean liberal showing similar levels of support ($M = 4.28$ for business and $M = 4.43$ for sustainability), but there was a larger difference between business ($M = 3.84$) and SD students (4.55) who lean conservative.

The third hypothesis was tested using an independent samples t-test analysis. The results support the hypothesis for both green strategy and green HRM policies. Specifically, females were more supportive of green strategy ($M = 4.38$, $SD = 0.68$) compared to males ($M = 4.10$, $SD = 0.78$), $t = 3.24$, $p < 0.01$. Similarly, females were more supportive of green HRM policies ($M = 4.25$, $SD = 0.76$) compared to males ($M = 3.95$, $SD = 0.90$), $t = 3.03$, $p < 0.01$. When examined within majors, the same pattern was observed in business students, with females being more supportive of both ($M = 4.25$, $SD = 0.73$ for green strategy and $M = 4.16$, $SD = 0.82$ for green HRM) compared to males ($M = 4.03$, $SD = 0.79$ for green strategy and $M = 3.90$, $SD = 0.91$ for green HRM), both $p < 0.05$. Interestingly, however, there was no significant gender difference for SD majors in support for green strategy ($M = 4.67$, $SD = 0.34$ for males and $M = 4.78$, $SD = 0.24$ for females) or green HRM ($M = 4.32$, $SD = 0.78$ for males and $M = 4.52$, $SD = 0.45$ for females), $p = 0.172$ and 0.348 , respectively.

Finally, the fourth hypothesis was tested using an independent samples t-test analysis in which business and SD students were compared in their support for SDGs. The results supported the hypothesis that business students gave higher importance to SDGs prosperity/people ($M = 6.55$, $SD = 1.17$) compared to SD students ($M = 8.44$, $SD = 1.35$), $t = 10.07$, $p < 0.00$. The reverse was also true for SDG planet and SDG peace. Specifically, SD students expressed higher support for SDG planet ($M = 8.65$, $SD = 2.53$) compared to business students ($M = 11.77$, $SD = 1.93$), $t = 8.24$, $p < 0.001$, and they showed higher support for SDG peace ($M = 12.73$, $SD = 3.36$) compared to business students ($M = 14.34$, $SD = 2.88$), $t = 3.15$, $p < 0.01$.

9. Discussion

To accomplish the Sustainable Development Goals, the UN is seeking the involvement of all countries and all stakeholders, especially universities and educational institutions. The UN also notes that stimulating action towards the accomplishment of the SDGs is of critical importance to humanity and the planet. To achieve effective engagement and involvement of diverse stakeholders, we need to understand if there exists diversity and differences in how they perceive the SDGs, and if so, how to constructively address it.

The results of this research indicate that such diversity exists in our higher education classrooms. Business students were less supportive of green strategy and green HRM than SD students. Further, business students who were either male, authoritarian, or conservative were particularly unsupportive of green strategy and green HRM in organizations. If our future business leaders carry these attitudes into the workplace, it raises important issues regarding the environmental and social costs. At a time when “Transforming our world” [38] is a key agenda with addressing the climate crisis, future business leaders need to be an engaged stakeholder.

One possible avenue of inquiry suggested by our results is that business students prioritize the prosperity/people-oriented SDGs. These results may dovetail with prior research indicating that authoritarian-oriented individuals prefer benevolence values (values which apply primarily to those who are close to us with whom we frequently interact and/or identify) over universal values (values which apply to all of humankind) [44]. Business education may need to develop strategies that leverage the strong linkages that exist between the SDGs focused on the enhanced well-being of local communities, and the relationship between planet SDGs and peace/partnership SDGs in achieving such goals. This implies that better communication of the SDGs in the business school classroom may begin with issues of local importance, which resonate more effectively, and may represent an entry point for business students to embrace a multistakeholder perspective.

Future research could examine if pedagogical tools which enhance perspective-taking could be developed that use a local lens to help business students bridge a profit maximization single stakeholder-oriented “benevolence” viewpoint towards a broader “universalist” multistakeholder approach. Case methodology is a particularly intriguing option, and it may also be effective in building empathy in business students, as well as embedding this tool within training and development processes with current leaders and employees in organizations [45]. Consistent espousal of shared multistakeholder business values and effective behavioral modeling provided by those viewed as high status within a university setting, such as faculty, Deans, or highly-respected peers or alumni may also help to provide legitimacy to multistakeholder approaches for skeptical students. Additional suggestions could include faculty involvement in a multistakeholder business school curriculum that provides a greater emphasis on external outreach and service to others (including real-world internships, study abroad opportunities, and service learning) which may serve to reduce the attraction of business to students less interested in perspective-taking and those with reduced empathy. Faculty may also need additional developmental training on multistakeholder business theory, so that they are more knowledgeable and effective in the classroom. And the enhanced usage of guest speakers from social or environmental stakeholder groups and role playing to expand the perspectives of both faculty and students could also be considered. Outside of the classroom, clinical interventions could include cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT), which has shown success in increasing patients’ awareness of the impact of their behaviors, and can enhance perspective-taking and activate more empathy [46]. Each of these suggestions provide directions for future research to determine their efficacy in enhancing business student sustainability perceptions in higher education.

As this research was exploratory in nature, future research could methodologically explore the primacy, strength, and dimensionality of the relationships in more detail by examining a breadth of academic disciplines with a larger sample size of universities, and consider the potential for longitudinal research to determine the stability of the relationships and/or the ability of educational interventions to affect change, as well as the use of experimental designs (with control groups). The use of self-report measures may also have contributed to common method variance. However, the outcomes included in the current study were either attitude- or perception-based, and therefore are most effectively measured by self-report instruments [47]. Another potential limitation is that respondents may have engaged in socially desirable responding, considering the sensitive nature of the variables examined in the study. However, we do not believe it to be a major concern for the current study for two reasons. First, the data was collected through an online survey panel and the responses were anonymous, reducing the need for the respondents to engage in socially desirable responding. Second, the variables we used in our analyses were resistant to inflation due to an unclear basis or direction for socially desirable responses.

In summary, one size does not fit all in higher education. The results of this research indicate that we need to understand our audience and begin the multistakeholder sustainable business education process where we are likely to find the most acceptance or least resistance.

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