

Do you want me to be green? The normative status of sustainability in Portugal and Brazil

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Introduction

A high number of laws aiming to improve sustainability have been issued since the last decade. However, social change is only possible when these formal norms acquire also informal value and people start relying on them to transmit a good image of themselves. The fact that people use them to convey a positive image is indicative of their informal value and therefore, of the norm internalization in a given society.

A previous study confirmed the normative status of sustainability social norms among university students in Portugal (Castro & Bertoldo, 2010). In order to assess the social norms' internalization and the underlying social change, countries in different stages of sustainable normatives' implementation were compared –Portugal in Europe and Brazil in South America- resorting to the self-presentation paradigm of the socio-cognitive approach (Gilbert & Cambon, 2003). This paradigm was applied in both countries with two presentation targets: an ecological institute employer (same local/global sustainability norms) and a cement plant employer (different local/global sustainability norms).

Method

In two different studies, Portuguese (n=155) and Brazilian (n=176) participants were asked to answer scales measuring sustainable beliefs, attitudes and behaviors two times: one giving their own opinion and another in order to convey a good or a bad image of themselves. To do so, participants were asked to imagine they were in a job interview for an interesting internship (positive presentation) and for a not very interesting internship but in which they wanted to be kept in the database for future vacancies (negative presentation).

The presentation target also varied: half of the participants had to convey a good/bad image to a cement plant employer while the other half presented themselves to an ecological institute employer.

We have therefore a 2 (kind of presentation: positive or negative) X 2 (target: cement plant or ecological institute) between subjects plan. The own opinion was measured for all participants after the context manipulation.

Results

Participants seem to use sustainable beliefs, attitudes and behaviors to convey a good image, in particular when presenting to the ecological institute (coherent local and global sustainability norms). This was not observed in presentations to the cement plant employer, condition where the positive and negative presentations were not significantly different from participant's own opinion.

These effects were clearer in the Portuguese (PT) than in the Brazilian (BR) sample, as can be seen through differences in mean attitudes (PT: $F(4,305)=20.11^{***}$; $\eta^2=.20$; BR: $F(4,346)=12.07^{***}$ $\eta^2=.12$), beliefs (PT: $F(4,305)=24.54^{***}$; $\eta^2=.24$; BR: $F(4,346)=8.23^{***}$; $\eta^2=.087$) and behaviours (PT: $F(4,305)=6.12^{***}$; $\eta^2=.07$; BR: $F(4,346)=2.39$, $p=.05$, $\eta^2 = .027$).

Conclusion

Our results clearly show the effects of two superposed contexts: a local and a national one. In what concerns the local effect, participants present themselves more pro ecologically when local social norms are aligned with formal sustainability regulations (environmental institute condition) and hardly distinguish their attitudes, beliefs and behaviors from their own opinion when these local norms are different from sustainable regulations (cement plant condition).

Regarding the national effect, the differences previously mentioned were more salient in the Portuguese than in the Brazilian sample. This indicates that the Portuguese society, under European environmental normative, has internalized environmental social norms to a larger extent than the Brazilian -an emergent society that despite its good environmental legislation has not internalized it at the same extent.

References

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