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Discussion Paper

Extending the Better Balance Model: How Psychology Could Help to Solve the Problem of Sustainability

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Extending the Better Balance Model: How Psychology Could Help to Solve the Problem of Sustainability

Abstract

This paper extends the Better Balance Model of Sustainability presented in our previous discussion paper, in which we proposed that solutions to issues such as climate change and population growth may emerge if businesses seek to better understand and harness the underlying human motivations responsible for driving sustainable and unsustainable behaviour. By drawing on psychological theory, we propose that sustainable behaviours could be encouraged by redressing three key imbalances: (1) When human drives/motivations are unbalanced – this can lead dysfunctional and unsustainable behaviour; (2) When there is an imbalance between learning from positive and negative outcomes – this can lead to unsustainable behaviour; (3) When there is an imbalance between people's public and private identities – this can lead to dysfunctional and unsustainable behaviour. Sustainable behaviour is therefore a function of balancing these three key aspects. The paper concludes by presenting a model of sustainability that can be applied as a tool to redress imbalances and encourage balance and, thus, sustainable behaviours.

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Views expressed are those of the authors and not necessarily those of the organisations they represent.

Introduction

The massive environmental, social and economic challenges facing the world are well documented: climate change, population growth and increased consumption are said to create the perfect storm that will challenge the sustainability of human life on this planet (Leach et al, 2012). It seems that the resources and demands on the planet are hopelessly imbalanced, resulting in what is commonly known as a 'three planet lifestyle': one planet consuming the resources that would require three planets to sustain (Hails, 2006). The proposed solutions are also well documented and range from proactive approaches such as creating shared value (Porter & Kramer, 2011) and corporate social responsibility (e.g. Elkington, 1997; Brammer, Jackson & Matten, 2012) to reactive solutions, such as legislation and codes of conduct that seek to control corporate and individual behaviour (e.g. the Sarbanes–Oxley Act of 2002). While we respect the integrity, ambition and impact of current interventions, we suggest that they are lacking in one key regard, and that is an in-depth exploration of the root cause of the sustainability problem, which is human behaviour.

A psychological approach to sustainability

Much current debate in the area of sustainability frustratingly focuses on reducing negative symptoms of human behaviour rather than understanding and changing the root causes of it. In our approach, we seek to redress this shortfall in current thinking. The key tenet of our proposition is that the world is out of balance because the motivations and therefore the behaviours of people are out of balance. In exploring solutions that work, the prerequisite is to understand the causes rather than the symptoms of this, more simply to achieve a deeper understanding of why and how we are motivated to behave in the way we do. Armed with an understanding of the cause of the problem, we suggest solutions that can restore balance within ourselves, in our relationships with each other and with the wider world. If it is human nature that got us into this mess, then we must look to our humanity to get us out of it. Put simply, we must achieve a better balance (Pain & Money, 2014), in business and in society more generally.

In order to achieve lasting solutions to the challenges we face, we need to look at sustainability in a different way. We draw on three key themes in the psychology literature that all address the issue of balance versus imbalance:

1) When human drives/motivations are unbalanced – this can lead to dysfunctional and unsustainable behaviour.

2) When there is an imbalance between learning from positive and negative outcomes – this can lead to unsustainable behaviour.

3) When there is an imbalance between our public and private identities – this can lead to dysfunctional and unsustainable behaviour.

We will explore and build on each of these themes in turn, before proposing a psychological solution to the sustainability problem.

Balancing human drives/motivations

We build on a progressive theory in the field of human motivation, proposed by Lawrence and Nohria (2002) that identifies four human drives which, when unbalanced, cause harm to individuals, but when balanced, result in individuals flourishing. With the aid of neuro-scientific evidence, Lawrence and Nohria argue that as human beings we are driven to:

- Acquire: gain material goods and status commensurate with our aspirations

- Bond: be a part of a group that cares for us and gives us identity

- Comprehend: understand the world around us

- Defend: protect things that are important to us

While the work bears similarities to that of Maslow's hierarchy of needs (1943), it differs in one important way: each of the drives is seen to compete with the others for dominance, rather than, in the case of Maslow's hierarchy, one building upon the achievement of the other. In their book, *Driven*, Lawrence and Nohria (2002) provide compelling arguments for balancing these drives at the level of the individual, highlighting examples of individuals who harmed themselves or others because the drives in their lives have become unbalanced, usually because one of these drives became dominant at the expense of others.

Our thesis is that drives/motivations function not only at the level of the individual, but also at the level of societies, cultures and organisations, resulting in pathologies and patterns of behaviour that lead to sustainable or unsustainable outcomes. We therefore extend the study of drives/motivations from the individual level to explore the impact of drives at a societal level. We argue that a balance in drives/motivations in society is equally important and that an imbalance in these essential and potentially disruptive human drives can, when they affect mass populations, lead to significant societal imbalances and cause extreme harm.

For example, we argue that the current lack of environmental and social sustainability of our businesses and societies are a direct result of an imbalance that favours the drive to acquire – a common feature of Western society since the industrial revolution and a trend that is also now common in the BRICS countries (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa). Indeed, while economic success is a vital component, our society seems unbalanced in favour of the drive to acquire money, status and possessions, perhaps because financial currencies are most easily transferable and are used to purchase goods and services that fulfil many of our needs. It is, though, not the only component of healthy, balanced communities in terms of human drives that make us what and who we are as a species and, indeed, what we believe and how we act.

In applying drive theory to the field of sustainability, we are also influenced by the notion of human flourishing from a positive psychology perspective. In particular we draw on the work of Seligman (2011) on approaches to life – which also suggests that a balance of motivation and activities is associated with flourishing.

Despite the different philosophical origins of Lawrence and Nohria's (2002) and Seligman's (2011, 2012) work, we see the practical implications of their insights for business as complementary rather than contradictory. In particular, the qualitative and quantitative operationalisation of drive theory as an approach to sustainability in our research revealed that the drive to comprehend could be usefully be sub-categorised into comprehending both the 'why' and 'how' of sustainability.

We label the 'why' aspect of comprehending as 'a drive for meaning', which, building on Seligman, is a desire for a purpose bigger than the self. The 'how' of comprehending, we label as a 'drive for learning', essentially a desire to understand how the world works.

As a result, we identify the following drives:

Figure 1: Human drives in relation to sustainability

ACQUIRING	BONDING	MEANING	LEARNING	DEFEND
Gaining material goods and wealth	Being part of a group which cares for us and is part of our identity	A purpose that is bigger than yourself	Continue to learn, grow and develop	A need to protect things that are important to us

Balancing the focus between positive and negative

Seligman (2011) is perhaps most famous for launching the positive psychology movement as a response to a historical bias of psychology literature in which the bulk of research focussed on dealing with the prevention of negative behaviours. Seligman rightly pointed out that the prevention of a negative was not the same as the creation of a positive – and called for more research into human flourishing. In doing so, his work has also challenged individuals and organisations to reflect upon success and focus on replicating this, rather than a dominant bias towards preventing negative outcomes. The thesis being that as a human species, we are more likely to achieve success if we study, understand and aim for it, rather than trying to prevent failure. We seek to extend this logic to the current debate in business and society, and we contend that: current sustainability models focus on symptoms rather than causes; they often focus on what people should not do (e.g. consume) rather than what we can do; and they are reactive rather than proactive. This is negative, limiting and not empowering.

In order to achieve lasting solutions to the challenges we face, we need to look at business and its role in society in a new and radically different way. With a number of empirical studies underpinning this summary document, this is, to the best of our knowledge, the first time that important advances in motivational psychology (Lawrence & Nohria, 2002, and Seligman, 2011) have been applied to the field of environmental and social sustainability. In doing so, sustainability is made more tangible, empowering and relevant.

Balancing the internal and external selves/identities/reputations

The alignment between internal (more private) and external (more public) identities has been associated with functional behaviours of individuals – while misalignment is often associated with dysfunctional behaviours. We could see consumption as a function of an imbalance, where the purchase of material goods and status is used to compensate for misalignments at deeper personal levels. In achieving functional alignment, Hillenbrand and Money (2015) suggest that individuals may want to cultivate a positive view of their core selves, in which a purpose or meaning that is greater than one's own success is embraced. This is similar to Seligman's (2011) notion of purpose, however it moves current work forward by explaining a social process of witnessing and sharing that is key to the development of a functional self.

The process outlined by Hillenbrand and Money (2015) invites individuals to share their alignments and misalignments in a culture of acceptance. In this way they can be seen and accepted for who they really are. A key tenet of this theory is that the identity of each individual is developed and expressed within a group/relationship setting. Since each individual can only find a sense of functional identity through relating to others, the functionality of the group/relationship will impact each individual and vice versa, see Figure 2 below.

Figure 2: Layers of self (adapted from Hillenbrand and Money, 2015)
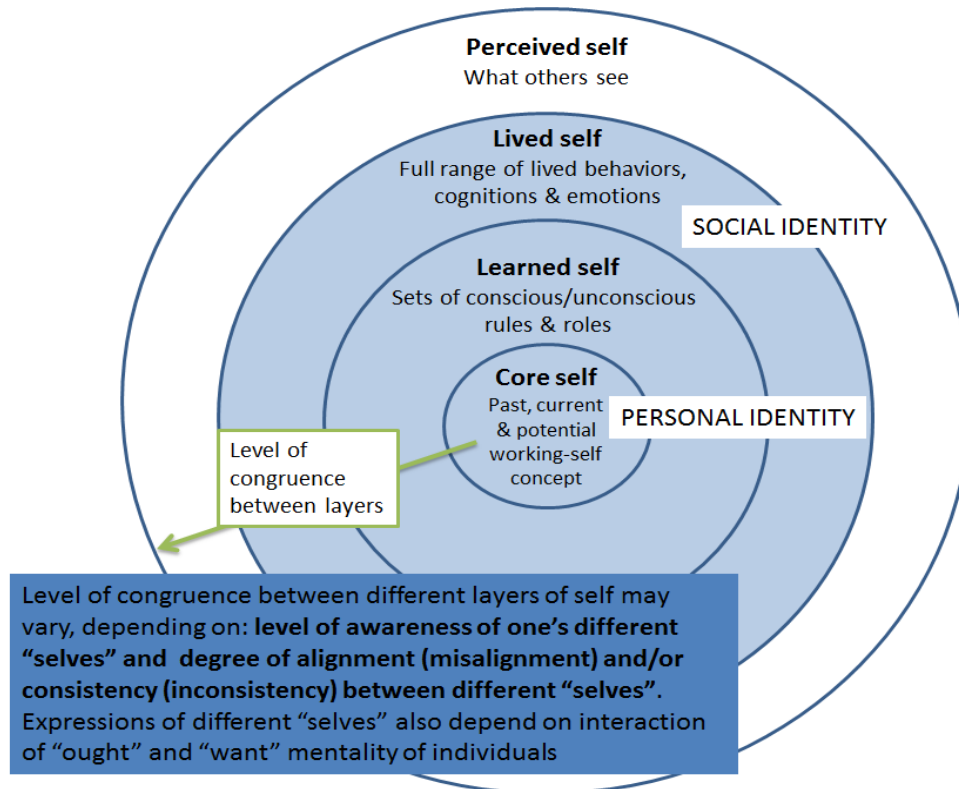
Applying Hillenbrand and Money's (2015) layers of self to the field of sustainability, we suggest that organisations can help to create a culture of open sharing between individuals regarding sustainable behaviour. Rather than framing sustainability as a 'should' or 'ideal' state, organisations are encouraged to allow stakeholders to share their experiences of sustainability, thereby connecting it to a core sense of self, rather than at a surface level. In the next section, we present a psychological model of sustainability that extends this thinking to the organisational level – by balancing an organisation's internal and external worlds through a process of balancing the needs of internal and external stakeholders (see Figure 4).

A key mechanism for change within this model is the creation of social norms that are consistent with the core identity of individuals, as well as both their public and private worlds. Achieving consistency between a personal sense of self, as well as the expectations of family and friends

(private life) and society and working life (public life) are seen to be critical to the achievement of functional selves as well as consistently sustainable behaviours.

Towards a psychology-based model of business sustainability

In an attempt to combine insights from the above three discussions on balance/imbalance, we argue that the purpose of business should be to grow sustainably, and ultimately this can only be achieved by playing an active part in restoring and maintaining a healthy balance among the various drives in our societies. In this way business can provide an antidote to the excess of imbalance that has occurred through recent human history.

We present a model that redefines the purpose of business using psychological principles and which embraces a wider sense of humanity. It invites organisations to consider their role in society in terms of five key dimensions, as: (1) a provider, (2) a facilitator, (3) a co-creator, (4) an educator and (5) a defender; as described in Figure 3, below.

Figure 3: Defining the purpose of business in terms of balancing drives (adapted from Money et al, 2015)

| A PROVIDER	A FACILITATOR	A CO-CREATOR	AN EDUCATOR	A DEFENDER
of quality products	of conversations and communities	of purpose	in the space of sustainable consumption and well-being	of what is important to people
(acquiring)	(bonding)	(meaning)	(learning)	(defending)

Importantly, these drives, when in balance, could potentially be of considerable benefit to society and alleviate some of the pressing problems we face now and in the future. International business, we argue, has the scale, geographic cross-boundary reach and engagement with mass populations of employees, consumers and other stakeholders to help restore the balance in our societies and have a positive impact on the world and how it consumes resources, impacting favourably on its reputation and also restoring trust. In doing so, we focus on the causes of sustainable and unsustainable behaviour, rather than the reducing of symptoms as most mainstream sustainability models do. This article presents a novel conceptualisation of

sustainability and demonstrates how businesses can leverage the power of psychology for the benefit of themselves and others.

Organisations could also link this thinking to balancing of internal and external worlds through the use of a process. In a similar way to the process suggested at an individual level, an organisation can reflect on balance and imbalance at an organisational level. Here we suggest using an adaption of the RELATE process (Money et al, 2012), which invites organisations to reflect on gaps between their values, behaviours and stakeholder expectations and through this process to share their stories, see Figure 4 below.

Figure 4: Better Balance Process (adapted from Money et al, 2012)
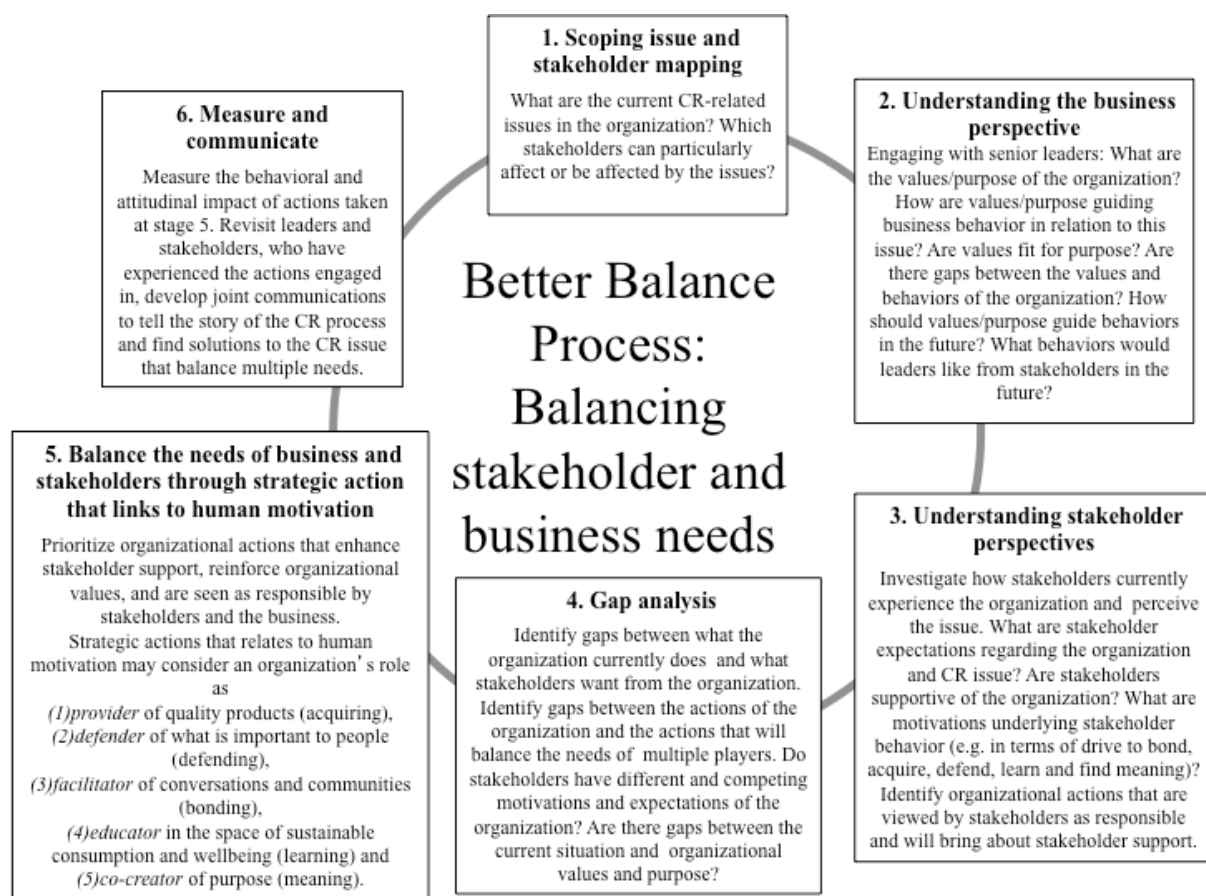
We believe that applying this model and process can help business address the seemingly insurmountable challenges of the future, as we move into what might be called an 'age of good', where we learn to grow sustainably in a world where resources are increasingly scarce and societal needs ever more demanding.

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