

WEIRD is not Enough: Sustainability Insights from Non-WEIRD Countries

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Abstract

Henrich, Heine, and Norezayan (2010) published ‘The weirdest people in the world?’ in *Behavioral and Brain Sciences* (as of March, 2023 it has been cited 11 800 plus times in scholar.google). The paper introduced the concept of Western, Educated, Industrialised, Rich and Developed (WEIRD) countries/cultures and research subjects. It makes a cogent case for research based on those samples being unrepresentative of, and not useful to inform policy/behavior change/etc. of non-WEIRD countries. With this paper Henrich, Heine, and Norezayan (2010) have asked psychology and all social sciences to reflect on whether our findings represent the world, or just one small part of it. Macromarketing’s assumptions and beliefs about fundamental human behavior have been shaped by psychology.

Keywords

WEIRD, sustainability, social science, macromarketing, macromarketing systems, provisioning systems

WEIRD and non-WEIRD

WEIRD countries contain approximately 12% of the world’s population, but are the subjects in around 80% of psychology research (Henrich, Heine, and Norezayan 2010). WEIRD countries on average consume to excess (Wooliscroft and Ganglmair-Wooliscroft 2018) and need to adjust/reduce consumption. Some non-WEIRD countries need to increase consumption to provide their populations with a reasonable standard of living. Too often the shifting of production from WEIRD (developed) countries to developing countries has seen the pollution and exploitation of natural resources and human beings exported, with very few of the benefits accruing to the new site of production.

Analysis of marketing would suggest that we have been no less dependent on biased and non-representative samples (Wooliscroft 2011). Or, it could be more charitably said that the samples in business and marketing don’t seek to represent the breadth of human experience. Not that we see that explicitly acknowledged in the vast majority of papers. The implied representativeness of samples, that may even be made up of business school students, is problematic. Senior academics would rightly say that anyone, who like them is an experienced and reflective senior academic, wouldn’t generalise the results to other countries, but many readers who are not so reflective, or who are reading a summary of research, or a press release will be left with a perception of generalizability.

WEIRD Language

The “language of science” is English, according to many commentators (e.g., Ammon 2001). Science itself is free of language

restrictions. It is an approach to knowing. The history of science is not a WEIRD history (Poskett 2022) even though it may sometimes be presented as such. The tale of the emergence of science with the great European men and women of science is a myth.

It follows that science is not ‘Western’. Science is a human project of knowing, questioning, seeking evidence, re-evaluating and knowing more. An endless search where no answer is ‘finished’ or unquestioned.

There are, however, social science scientific results that are Western—the assumptions under which the studies were done are embedded in Western norms and values, the subjects of the research are Western, and the results do not necessarily extend to non-WEIRD societies.

English being the ‘language of science and academia’ also restricts the potential of contributions that represent all people and the whole world. Many words that don’t directly translate between languages—what happens when we research in one language and translate those results to publish them? Have we lost the nuances of the concepts? Without fluency in both languages we can’t tell.

A 2023 paper demonstrates that our language changes the connection structure in our brain (Wei et al. 2023). It behoves us to seek out knowledge generated in other languages, to

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seek to understand it and perhaps to broaden the English language to include untranslatable concepts. As we have done with *Weltschmerz* and *schadenfreude*.

Paradigm dominance is the norm in science (Kuhn 1996) and a new paradigm is the result of the previous paradigm no longer being able to answer the questions of the discipline. We have failed to sufficiently address pollution, inequality/poverty, climate change and many other major issues. Non-WEIRD countries provide us with the opportunity to find different paradigms, different perspectives, values, and insights. At the very least the search will allow us to reflect on our own paradigm in a more objective manner.

WEIRD Through Time

The WEIRD values and predispositions revealed in Henrich, Heine, and Norezayan (2010) reflect a current norm, arising from the industrial revolution and massive shifts in society. Historically many countries that are currently dominated by competitive, individualistic values, were previously considerably more collective in their outlook, norms and predispositions—WEIRD countries that would have been categorised as non-WEIRD. There is considerable variability amongst WEIRD countries, from unfettered competition through to high tax low inequality countries.

Sustainability

Many claim that sustainability was invented with the Brundtland Report (Brundtland and Khalid 1987). They are perhaps right in that the word took its current meaning (though that meaning is highly contested) with the Brundtland Report. Other scholars frequently cite the much earlier work of Von Carlowitz (e.g., Brink 2022; Schmithüsen 2013) as the originator of sustainability, with particular focus on forestry, through Von Carlowitz's well developed use of the word *nachhaltigkeit*.

Humans have been living in balance with their surroundings in many places at different times for long periods of time. Constrained resources have led to usage patterns that have evolved to sustainable practices such as crop rotation, the use of human waste as fertiliser, etc.. Communities were typically smaller and interdependence was high (Dunbar 1993). Sustainability is a commons issue (Duffy, Layton, and Dwyer 2017; Nason 2006). Humans have, in all manner of cultures, also over consumed when faced with a seeming abundance of resources. Sometimes to the point of both ecological and societal collapse (Diamond 2011). We must research the whole system if we are to improve the aggregate outcome of our consumption and provisioning systems (Wooliscroft 2021).

Sustainability is a megatrend that is increasingly influencing our lifestyles, work, and consumption patterns, especially fashion consumption (Han, Seo, and Ko 2017). Sustainable fashion is a crucial aspect of this movement, aiming to reduce the environmental and social impact of the fashion industry (Lee et al. 2020). This industry is known for its

resource-intensive production processes, exploitative labor practices, and high levels of waste. Sustainable fashion aims to address these issues through more responsible marketing practices, promoting the use of sustainable materials, implementing fair labor practices, and reducing waste through circular business models (Milanesi, Kyrdoda, and Runfola 2022). The macromarketing view recognizes the potential of marketing to drive positive social change, and sustainable fashion exemplifies this potential. By taking a holistic approach to marketing, sustainable fashion aligns with the macro marketing view's focus on social, economic, and environmental impacts (Houcine and Guercini 2022). Sustainable fashion addresses many of the negative impacts of traditional marketing practices, such as promoting overconsumption and fast fashion (Kong, Witmaier, and Ko 2021).

Macromarketing, Sustainability and non-WEIRD Countries

The Macromarketing Society has a long commitment to global scholarship—hosting its conference in many places around the world, and being keen to expand our reach. The list of authors in the Journal is truly impressive in its representation of scholarship in world. The Journal of Macromarketing has hosted a number of special issues on:

- China and Chinese communities
- Environmental Sustainability
- India
- Vietnam
- Marketing and Development
- Macromarketing in the African context
- Subsistence marketplaces
- Sustainability as a Megatrend
- Turkey and Turkish communities

This issue is the first to explicitly combine non-WEIRD countries and societies with sustainability, seeking insights to the problems associated with sustainability.

Mittelstaedt et al. (2014) identified two schools of thought in macromarketing, with regard to sustainability—developmental and critical. The first paper presented is very much in the critical school, while the other four papers lean towards the developmental school.

The idea for this special issue emerged from a track planned for the 2020 Global Marketing Conference hosted by the Global Alliance of Marketing & Management Associations. That track was, along with so much, severely impacted by the arrival of Covid. The conference changed to an online format and the number of papers was reduced. After the conference the focus for this special issue was expanded from Asia to all non-WEIRD countries.

Sustainability in the World: We Have Much to Learn

The following papers represent the start of a wider conversation about sustainability and what a sustainable world would look like. The papers represent the research of the authors, the careful and considered reflections of the reviewers and represent a discourse that future researchers are invited to join. We are immensely grateful to the authors trusting us with their research and the efforts of reviewers, who have diligently and positively reviewed. Five papers are included in the special issue.

Little, Ho, and Eti-Tofinga (2023) in “Not WEIRD at all! Towards More Pluralistic Economies and Sustainable Livelihoods” provide insights into female micro-entrepreneurs experiences and position in a non-WEIRD country, Malaysia. They map the impacts of the micro-entrepreneurs on their families, their communities and collectively on the nation. While some of the respondents are licensed many are part of an ‘informal’ economy. A call for more inclusive models of research and a broadening of scholarship to represent reality feature in this strong article.

In “Really That Sustainable? Exploring Costa Ricans’ Green Product Involvement” Conejo et al. (2023) consider how sustainable are the attitudes of Costa Rica’s citizens. Costa Rica has an international reputation for being a sustainable country, with a high share of the country in forest and largely renewable electricity. In spite of its reputation the authors demonstrate that consumption and unsustainable behaviors are increasing in Costa Rica. Like many countries in the world, political rhetoric on how exceptional the country is has allowed unsustainable practices to increase.

With a substantial sample they find demographic differences in involvement with green products. The authors also suggest how Costa Ricans might move to more sustainable consumption.

Pedersen et al. (2023) in “Consumer Attitudes Towards Imported Organic Food in China and Germany: The Key Importance of Trust” consider the phenomena of trust as it relates to imported organic food, using the cases of China (non-WEIRD) and Germany (WEIRD). Both countries exhibit domestic bias for organic food - likely a result of wider sustainability considerations and campaigns against ‘food miles’ or their equivalent. However, a bias toward WEIRD country organic produce generated by more trust in the institutions around production, that will likely lead to competitive advantage and a price premium for WEIRD country organic producers, is present. The importance of trust in value creation and realisation is key in all countries. Sustainability activities without trust represent green washing and not only damage trust in sustainability transitions, they also damage the reputation of the discipline of marketing and with that our ability to be part of the solution to over consumption, waste, etc..

In Kunchambo, Little, and Cheah (2023) “Common Cause, Coopetition or Competition? Resource Contestation in Food Waste Recovery Networks” the authors focus on one of the world’s most significant problems, food waste. While many

in the world remain under nourished food that has been produced for consumption, prepared for consumption, distributed for consumption and purchased for consumption often spoils without being consumed. The phenomena of hunger while food goes to waste is a world wide issue. But the solution is not necessarily the same.

Kunchambo, Little, and Cheah (2023) find a ‘different reality’ in non-WEIRD contexts relative to WEIRD research on the same phenomena. Transporting WEIRD solutions to the rest of the world will almost certainly not result in success. This paper helps us to remember to be market focussed, where ever that market might be. Assumptions about how people, cultures and societies will behave based on our own experiences are, often, misleading.

Hasan, Wooliscroft, and Ganglmair-Wooliscroft (2023) conducted a study on the drivers of ethical consumption in a developing country, Pakistan. The study highlights that the values and motivations that drive ethical consumption behavior in non-WEIRD countries are specific to the cultural context. The study explores the different values and motivations that drive a broad range of ethical consumption behavior, with religious values and health being significant motivators for ethical consumption choices, often in combination with environmental concerns. Environmental conservation is not yet a key concern for ethical consumers in Pakistan, likely, due to a lack of knowledge and economic constraints.

The study aims to provide information for public and private organizations to target initiatives that fit with the country-specific context while providing potential insights for other similar non-WEIRD countries. The article provides an overview of different aspects of ethical consumption, including green consumption, consumer boycotts, voluntary simplicity, fair trade, and sustainable consumption.

Future Research in the Area

While a special issue is a start, we need to hear more non-WEIRD voices and solutions to the problems facing the world. We need to hear more solutions from our own history, how societies and economies have lived in balance with the environment. The solutions might not all appeal, but the nature of sustainability is that, at some point, we might not have a choice.

The UNSDGs will not be solved by WEIRD voices alone, nor will they be solved by non-WEIRD voices alone. They won’t be solved in isolation, but through a systems approach to these wicked problems. That is an invitation to macromarketing, and macromarketing curious, scholars everywhere to research important and difficult questions.

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