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COMMUNITY ATTITUDES AND ACTIVISM ON SOCIAL, POLITICAL AND ENVIRONMENTAL ISSUE

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ABSTRACT

The social issues of most concern to the Australian public appear to be Taxes and Health Care, with Environmental issues being ranked as the first or second most important social issue in Australia by only around 15% of respondents to the 2005 *Australian Survey of Social Attitudes*. While citizens are making their views on social and environmental issues heard to some extent, they do so by indirect means rather than direct action. In addition, there is scepticism of big business among the community, particularly of banks and financial institutions who claim to be at the forefront of social reporting. In the current climate of increased awareness of global issues such as climate change and terrorism we might expect citizens to be more involved in, or vocal about, social and environmental concerns than this survey indicates.

INTRODUCTION

The major social issues of concern to the Australian public appear to be Taxes and Health Care, with Environmental issues being ranked as the first or second most important social issue in Australia by only around 15% of respondents to the 2005 *Australian Survey of Social Attitudes* (AuSSA)¹. There is evidence in the Survey however, that citizens are making their views heard, albeit by more indirect than direct means, and this has not changed substantially in previous three years. Coupled with this, is evidence of scepticism of big business among the community, particularly banks and financial institutions, who are among those producing social reports. In the Survey over 75% of the respondents felt that big business goes unpunished when breaking the law (down slightly from 81% in 2003) and 61%

¹ Full information about AuSSA can be accessed via their website: <http://aussa.anu.edu.au/>.

consider that ‘ordinary people’ do not get a fair share of the nation’s wealth.

THE SURVEY

The AuSSA² comprises a survey of 10,000 people over the age of 18, which resulted in a sample of approximately 4,000 people, with a sub-sample of around 2000 used for some questions (there are two versions of AuSSA, with each version containing core questions that are common to both, plus additional questions on specific issues - Version B contained questions on Citizenship, some of which are used in this paper. There were 1,914 respondents to Version B). The survey is conducted through the ACSPRI Centre for Social Research at the Australian National University (King and Tilt, 2006).

Respondents to the survey were predominantly Australian born (75%) and live in the city or suburbs (62%). Their mean income is around \$AU30,000 and the median around \$AU25,000 per annum. Most respondents identified themselves as being either middle class (49.6%) or working class (41%). Approximately equal numbers of males and females responded, most finished at least year 10 of high school, with around half completing 12 years of secondary education. Around 40% had also completed either a trade or Technical and Further Education (TAFE) qualification. The average age is just over 50 years (King and Tilt, 2006). Some of the questions asked in 2005 were also asked in a similar 2003 survey (AuSSA, 2003) and in the following sections comparisons are made where possible.

² Data used in this paper are sourced from: Wilson, S. *et al.* (2006) *Australian Survey of Social Attitudes*, 2005 [computer file] Australian Social Science Data Archive, The Australian National University, Canberra.

ATTITUDES ABOUT INVOLVEMENT IN THE COMMUNITY

When discussing what it means to be a good citizen, most Australians consider the most important components to be complying with laws but also rank highly keeping watch on the government (53% rank it as very important) and helping the less privileged (41% very important). In terms of responses that could be termed some form of ‘activism’, being involved in social or political associations was ranked quite highly by around 67% of respondents when asked what it meant to be a good citizen (ranked 4 or above on a scale of 1 to 7). However, only around 10% of respondents belonged to an environmental, aid or lobby group of any kind. Community confidence in charities was rated as being high, with 60% reporting they have a lot or a great deal of confidence in these organisations.

Activism, however can be classified as a continuum from fairly indirect methods of attempting to influence others (be it Government policy, business and corporations, or community groups) to more direct forms such as demonstrations and protests, and includes support for NGOs or charities that undertake the ‘activism’ on behalf of their members.

ACTIVISM THROUGH INDIRECT MEANS

Indirect forms of Activism in this paper include signing petitions, fund raising for a particular cause or changing buying patterns of a particular product. These types of activity appeared to be used by a number of respondents – over 41% of the survey sample had signed a petition in the past 12 months and another 40% had done so in the more distant past. Similarly, 35% had boycotted products for political, environmental or ethical reasons in the past 12 months, with another 18% doing so some time before then. Of interest is that 27% said they might do so even though they have not done so in the past. Over 65% said they

have or might raise funds/donate money for a social or political activity.

part in a demonstration, and while 39% considered that they might, so far they never have. Similar results were shown in relation to attending a political meeting or political rally. Table 1 shows the relative responses to engaging in these types of direct activities in 2005.

that the indirect form of action includes consumer boycotts and women are more likely to be undertaking general shopping duties than men. The most marked difference appears between social classes, with the middle class being far more likely to undertake all forms of action than other classes.

The results of the 2005 survey indicate that

TABLE 1: PARTICIPATION IN DIRECT ACTIVISM (%)

(N = 2180)	Taken part in demonstration	Attended political rally	Contacted politician	Contacted media	Joined internet forum
Have done in the past year	4.8	5.1	13.8	5.0	1.7
Have done in more distant past	16.2	17.4	19.8	9.6	1.7
Have not done but might	39.1	37.8	44.7	42.4	27.9
Have not done and would never	38.1	38.1	20.5	41.6	66.1
Can't choose	1.8	1.7	1.3	1.5	2.7

SOURCE: AUSSA 2005

DIRECT ACTIVISM

Analysis of survey responses reveals that more direct forms of activism are less apparent. Direct activism includes taking part in organised demonstrations or rallies, contacting politicians, contacting the media about social issues, or joining an internet forum or discussion group set up around a social or political issue. The inclination to take part in a demonstration or political rally remained around the same in 2005 as it did in 2003 with only about 11% admitting to have taken part in a march, protest or rally in the last two years. Over a third (38%) of Australians stated they would never take part in a demonstration or political rally. Analysis of the survey results showed that women are more likely to engage in indirect action than men, but that gender makes no difference in their likelihood to engage in direct action. This is not surprising given

most people appear to prefer indirect methods of making their views known, whether that activism is aimed at governments or private enterprises. Methods used most include donations, petitions or changing consumption patterns. Such a preference for indirect action is supported by the fact that over 40% of respondents have never belonged to any voluntary association, and only 22% are actively involved in one. Around 88% have never belonged to a political party. These findings are consistent with research on environmental activist groups undertaken in 1994 and again in 2004, which found that even organised 'activists' favour an indirect approach when attempting to influence the behaviour of corporations (Tilt, 1994, 2004; Danastas and Gadenne, 2006). The least likely type of activism to be used is an

internet forum, which is surprising given that 60% of the sample used the internet more than once a week, and 40% use it once a day or more.

It appears that many actions undertaken by citizens are aimed at influencing or changing the behaviour of private enterprises, such as large corporations, which infers a certain mistrust of those organisations. The AuSSA survey asked Australians about their views of big business, and these responses are considered in the sections below. In terms of their involvement with companies or business, less than half of the respondents owned shares in an Australian company, slightly fewer than did in 2003, with only 5% owning shares in more than ten companies.

Just over half those in the sample were employed during the week they were asked to respond to the survey.

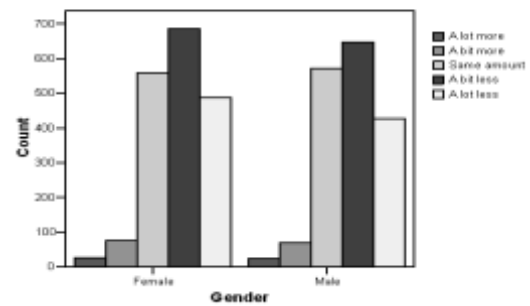
CORPORATE POWER

Interestingly, most Australians answering the survey consider that big business should either have less power (34.5%) or a lot less power (29.2%) than they currently have (see Figure 1). The number of people suggesting business should have less power has increased since the previous survey undertaken in 2003 when only 14% considered they should have a lot less power. 57% of people considered that the Federal Government is either entirely or mostly run for a few big interests; a figure that has not changed since the 2003 survey. Yet, less than 20% of people in the 2005 survey considered addressing the gap between rich and poor as the first or second most important issue facing Australia today.

It might be thought that working class people are likely to be more sceptical of big business than the middle or upper classes, as those earning a higher wage are more likely to be in management or executive positions, have greater ties to big business, and thus be

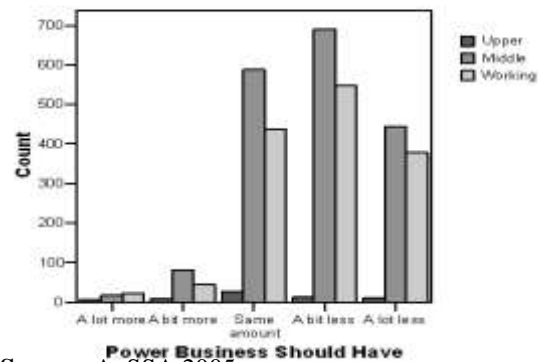
less suspicious of their motives. However, the survey results suggest this is not the case. There is no statistical difference between middle class and working class responses to this question (p = 0.128). It can be seen from Figure 2, that in both categories, the majority of people consider that business should have less power.

Figure 1: Power big business should have by gender



Source: AuSSA 2005

FIGURE 2: Power big business should have by social class



Source: AuSSA 2005

PUBLIC CONFIDENCE IN BUSINESS

In contrast with the apparent scepticism however, when asked how much confidence they have in major Australian corporations, 41% of the respondents stated they have a lot or a great deal of confidence, with 53% saying not very much or none. People appear slightly less confident in banks and financial institutions (28% a lot; 69% a little or none). There is evidence that banks in Australia (among other industries) are aware of these attitudes and their recent increase in

social and environmental reporting, as well as changes to some of their activities, may be an attempt to address this. Westpac, for example, produces annual Social Impact Reports. The poor perception towards business contrasts starkly with a high level of confidence in charities, 60% stating they have a lot or a great deal of confidence in charitable organisations.

When the results on public confidence are considered taking account of whether the respondents were employed, there does appear to be a difference (Figure 3). Employed respondents were almost equally split between having quite a lot and not very much confidence in business, while those not employed (which includes unemployed, retired and home duties) had less confidence ($p = 0.002$). This again has implications for social reporting – it is less likely that the unemployed will have access to annual reports or separate social and environmental reports.

CONSUMER INFLUENCE

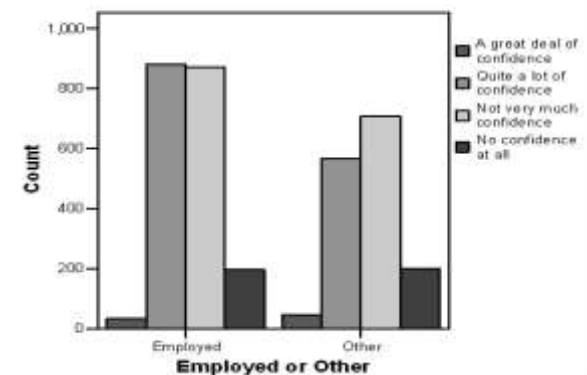
In terms of how people might try to influence big business, the act of changing purchasing behaviour is, as discussed earlier, very common. Supporting this, there is some evidence that respondents feel there is tension between consumers and big business, with 58% stating there is a lot or some tension in existence. This is a slight decrease from 2003 when around 68% perceived there to be tension. In 2005, 35% of respondents had used consumer power to exert influence over business in the past 12 months, by boycotting products for political, environmental or ethical reasons. Another 18% had done so before then, and 27% saw it as a legitimate form of influence, saying they might do so even though they have not done so in the past.

CONCLUSION

It seems that many people are concerned with the amount of power afforded to big business in our society and confidence in those organisations is not particularly high. They are considered to have too much power, to have too much support from the Federal Government and to receive a disproportionate amount of the nation's wealth.

This contrasts however, with the low level of participation in community groups and political organisations, and the decision not to speak out on social and political issues through demonstrations or rallies.

FIGURE 3: CONFIDENCE IN BIG BUSINESS



Source: AuSSA 2005

The contrast in attitudes leaves some important questions, such as whether it is simply a result of apathy within society, or whether citizens feel powerlessness and see no avenues for bringing about change – the comparatively high level of the use of consumer boycotts might indicate this is one area where society members feel they may be able to make a difference. Or, do citizens believe that organisations such as NGOs, governments and the media are already doing enough through their activities? These, and other questions, are important areas for future research.

In a world of increased awareness of global issues such as climate change and terrorism, we might expect citizens to begin to become more involved in, or vocal about, social and

environmental concerns. Evidence from Australia examined here indicates this should not be taken for granted.

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PHD COMPLETED – DR ANNA LEE ROWE

Anna Lee Rowe is Senior Lecturer in the *Graduate Business School* at *Curtin University of Technology*, Perth, Western Australia. She was recently awarded a PhD from *Macquarie Graduate School of Management*. Her principal supervisor was Professor James Guthrie, now at *The University of Sydney*. Her co-supervisor was Professor Alma Whiteley at *Curtin University of Technology*. Anna's main research interests are in the area of corporate environmental management and environmental reporting.

Below is a brief outline of Dr Rowe's PhD entitled 'Greening Corporate Dragons' Management and Reporting in Shanghai'

INTRODUCTION

What was once the discernment of a 'green' social organisational fringe, Corporate Environmental Management (CEM) and Corporate Environmental Reporting (CER), have increasingly become a core business strategy (Gray, Owen and Adams, 1996; Mathews, 1997; World Bank, 2001; SustainAbility/UNEP, 2002; Schaltegger, Burritt and Petersen, 2003). Research studies in this arena have been centred predominantly on industrialised nations (e.g., Guthrie and Parker, 1990; Patten and Trompeter, 2003), and until recently, comparatively sparse focus on developing nations (Belal, 2000), particularly in empirical studies on CER in China (Chan and Welford, 2005).

The impetus for undertaking this research in addressing the gaps in CEM and CER in the People's Republic of China (PRC) has never been more pressing. The challenge to

China presents a classic case of poverty reduction through industrialization, with enormous balancing between environmental degradation, increases in living standards, and long-term growth projections (Diener and Rowe, 2007). As the most populous nation on earth with one fifth of humanity (1.3 billions), China provides ‘telescoping’ lessons in understanding the embracing of CEM and CER in rapidly emerging nations.

Accounting and business operations have key roles in contributing to the environmental management of balancing between the short-term economic growth and long-term sustainability of the ecosystem (Gray, 2002). Motivated by the PRC’s dynamic economy with unique institutional structure and embryonic stage of environmentalism (Luo and Yuwen, 2001; Chan and Welford, 2005), the broad research objective for this field study was to explore the normative assumptions underpinning the ‘greening’ phenomena of CEM and CER as perceived by senior managers in Shanghai. For the purpose of this study, the ‘greening’ metaphor relates to senior managers’ perception of conceptualising CEM and CER within the Chinese context in Shanghai. Gladwin (1993, p. 38) considers greening as meaning many things, but it can be “viewed as a process by which human activity is made compatible with biospheric capacity” and it is “the most important phenomenon of our time as human survival literally depends on it.”

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

In order to investigate the emerging greening phenomena of CEM and CER in Shanghai, the investigator needed to penetrate the social contexts of the senior managers interviewed in such a way that perceptions and respondents’ ‘theories’ can emerge. To achieve this, the *constructivist* epistemology was chosen using a modified

grounded research approach (Strauss and Corbin, 1990; 1994; Whiteley, 2004). The *constructivist* paradigm can help accountants, senior managers and policy-makers discover what is happening, and *why* organizational actors do what they do (Parker and Roffey, 1997).

Hence, the appropriate epistemology is therefore interpretivist (Guba and Lincoln, 1994; Lincoln and Guba, 2000). The ‘realities’ presented by the respondents must be interpreted and understood (*verstehen*), rather than empirically measured, and explained (*erklaren*). This study focused on capturing respondents’ interpretations of multiple realities rather than measuring an assumed single reality. A field setting was chosen utilizing the multiple case study method.

The qualitative data was collected by means of interviews with senior managers and executives from fifteen enterprises operating in Shanghai. It has been suggested by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) office in Beijing that: “company managers are a key target group of major importance to the environmental situation in China...” (Hebel, 2003). They were likely to possess ‘emic’ knowledge (i.e., participants’ interpretations and the unique values of a particular society) about their organisations (Brislin, 1976; Marshall, 1998).

The primary respondents’ perceptions were triangulated with the views of “outsiders” and historiography analysis of publicly available information (e.g., Chinese Statistical Year book, corporate documents, and press releases). “Outsiders” are those individuals informed about environmental issues who may have different perspectives than the primary corporate data sources (e.g., Chinese environmental protection officials, the Australian Consul-Generals in

Shanghai and Senior Trade Commissioners in Beijing).

SCOPE AND LIMITATIONS

The context of the study is limited to CEM and CER in Shanghai. It relates to a particular point in time in which the study was conducted. It must be noted that due to the perceived sensitivity of both private individual opinions in China and the environmental management issues for some respondents, 'politically correct' responses may prevail either intentionally or unintentionally. Ontologically, "realities are apprehendable in the form of multiple, intangible mental constructions" (Guba and Lincoln, 1994, pp.109-110). Hence, when the epistemology on which the research stands is interpretive in nature, these limitations take on a different character.

CONCLUSION

Findings from this PhD demonstrate the tacit nature of CEM and CER lying beneath the regulative structure in Shanghai. On reflection, respondents' perceptual realities and emergent theoretical models provided 'frame breaking insights' when thinking about the nature of CEM/CER and the corresponding nature of the individuals who are expected to enact and/or comply with environmental regulations and rules. The language in the Western setting concerning CEM is almost always definitional, which tends to encourage greater CER transparency. Chinese language in contrast is suggestive, tactful, bordering on ambiguity (Trompenaars, 1993).

The 'emergent literature' directed by findings from this study presents opportunity for future research. It calls for a more comprehensive investigation of CEM and CER in China applying a thought-provoking set of theories with larger future research encompassing several business sectors in different Chinese regions that goes

beyond the economic and environmental aspects, which includes social sustainability. Notwithstanding the embryonic stage of CEM and CER in China, the 'greening' phenomenon here offers the rest of the world the opportunity to learn from their approach to dealing with these challenges (Rowe, 2006).

Furthermore, this study serves as a timely opportunity for organizations having (and those wishing to have) business dealings with the PRC to secure competitive strategies in bracing themselves for future increase in CEM leading to greater CER. Similarly, as an emerging economic powerhouse, companies in China too are compelled to gravitate towards world class institutional norm for CEM and greater accountability through CER.

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ENVIRONMENT EXTRA !

ENVIRONMENTAL INVISIBILITY— MAJOR INITIATIVES TO SUPPORT THE DEVELOPMENT OF SMEs IN MALAYSIA

The National Small and Medium Enterprise Development Council convened its sixth meeting and endorsed a number of key initiatives to further support the development of small and medium enterprises (SMEs) in Malaysia.

Chaired by the Prime Minister, the Council comprises of Ministers and Heads of 18 key Ministries and Agencies involved in SME development. The Council sets strategies, formulates broad policies, and oversees coordination to enhance effectiveness of Government programmes for SME development.

National SME Development Blueprint 2007
The Council endorsed the National SME Development Blueprint 2007. The Blueprint provides the assessment of the implementation of key programmes to support SMEs in 2006, as well as identifies key programmes to be implemented in 2007. More than 287,000 SMEs assisted through implementation of 213 key programmes in 2006.

The Council was briefed on the implementation and achievements of Government programmes to support SMEs in 2006. A total of 213 key programmes were implemented in 2006, involving a total expenditure of RM7.8 billion. The main focus of the programmes was on enhancing the capacity and capability of SMEs, particularly in the areas of entrepreneurship development, marketing and promotion,

product development and technology enhancement.

The implementation of these programmes benefited more than 287,000 SMEs. Amongst the outcomes of these programmes are:

- About 128,000 SMEs, women entrepreneurs, graduates and students received entrepreneurship and technical training;
- About 34,000 SMEs received advisory services provided by various Government agencies;
- More than 5,100 SMEs were provided with industrial and business premises;
- About 780 SMEs benefited from business matching and expansion programmes such as the Industrial Linkage Programme and SMIDEX 2006; and
- Additionally, 272 SMEs received grants and financial assistance to improve and upgrade their technology and business processes through the Technology Acquisition Fund, Grant for Certification and Quality Management System, and Grant for Product and Process Improvement.

GREATER ACCESS TO FINANCING

In the first eleven months of 2006, a total of RM42.3 billion of financing was approved by the banking and development financial institutions to more than 95,000 SME accounts (Full year 2005: RM38.1 billion to about 90,000 SME accounts).

The banking institutions' outstanding SME loans amounted to RM103.1 billion at the