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How business and management scholars can address big societal challenges

Emma Hughes and Tony Dundon

Synopsis

The paper advances a new society–actors–processes–policy (SAPP) framework in addressing big societal challenges. The framing evaluates policy debates linked to societal challenges published in business, management, and employment journals. SAPP contributes to policy and practice development by examining the relationship between organizations, people management, policy-making, and big societal challenges across three levels: individual, organizational, and wider society. For policymakers, the framework encourages collaborative dialogue with academics and other stakeholders. For management and academic scholars, SAPP helps to make theorizing relevant to wider communities and adds to how scholarship can contribute to future and sustainable policy making.

Introduction and Background

Scholars in management and business spaces tend to neglect big societal challenges and policy relevant implications. For example, only 2.8% of articles in high-ranking management journals have critically evaluated grand societal challenges (Harley and Fleming, 2021). Further, Aguinis et al. (2022) conclude that only 1.5% of articles (in their review) considered policy implications relating to human resource management (HRM) or organizational behavior (OB). Our contribution to these debates is two-fold. First, we analyse policy recommendations relating to big societal challenges published

in business, management, work and employment, and sociological journals. Second, we offer a new SAPP framework to help scholars and wider stakeholders better connect theory with policy.

The specific research questions examined are:

- How, and to what extent, are policy options pertaining to big societal challenges embedded in management and employment research?
- What are the implications for policy-makers, management theory, and future research?

Methodology

We searched for policy implications and recommendations associated with societal challenges in general management, HRM, work and employment relations, sociology, and organization studies journals. To focus our search, we formulated the following broad search string to include “Global challenges” OR “societal” OR “grand challenges” OR “contemporary challenges” OR “practical challenges.” We first searched the titles, keywords and abstracts in 18 journals ranked as 4 or above in the Chartered Association of Business Schools journal list. Searching the journal databases returned 1,802 articles in total (including conventional articles, book reviews, editorials, Etc).

We then reduced the sample of articles to 984, by excluding those that were published outside the time frame of September 1st

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2010 - September 1st 2022 (inclusive). This time frame was chosen to include known significant societal events, such as COVID-19, Black Lives Matter protests, the #MeToo movement. During the second sift, we reduced our article sample to 515, by removing articles focusing on historical events rather than contemporary challenges; articles examining organization-specific issues not wider challenges; articles that were not focussed on either general management, HRM and workplace issues were also excluded; as were book review papers. At the final sifting stage, articles were excluded if they did not discuss explicit or implicit policy implications in their discussion or conclusion sections. We used the following definition of policy: "governance principles that guide the choices, behaviours and courses of action of individuals, organizations, communities and societies" (Markman & Wood, 2022: 2).

441 was the final number of articles in the academic spaces of business, management, HRM and/or work and employment relations scholarship which focused on wider societal challenges and offered policy relevant implications.

Outcomes and Findings

We found that only 4% of articles published between September 1st 2010 and September 1st 2022 (inclusive) focused on societal challenges, and even fewer considered policy implications or recommendations (3%). Our analysis indicates that management and employment research has the potential to add far more to these debates. Accordingly, the paper advances the SAPP framework based on the dimensions of societal challenges, actor agency, process of change, and policy enactment (see Figure 1).

The "society" dimension of the framework encourages policy-makers to collaborate with scholars to identify research projects that could inform policy on grand challenges. The second dimension of SAPP,

"actors", involves policy-makers working with scholars to gather the perspectives of relevant stakeholders on future sustainable societal issues. The third and fourth dimensions of the SAPP framework are interlinked and involve policy-makers and scholars focusing on how processes of change are in tension with policy-enactment issues to develop suitable interventions.

The first process of change, "the reorientation of objectives," is in tension with the policy enactment issues, indicating a "disconnection from the reality of policy and practice." For example, organizations may be changing their stated corporate vision in response to changes in society, but the success of new policies, practices, and governance are rarely meaningfully evaluated.

The second process of change, "the reconfiguration of experiences," is in tension with another policy enactment issue, "disengaged from the front line." Here, policy-makers can be out of touch with worker and manager experiences of real world change challenges. The final process of change, "the repositioning of decision-making governance," can generate yet a third policy-enactment issue, that of being "detached from complexity." In this sense, policy-making often overlooks power relations. The third and fourth SAPP dimensions also highlight the need for policy makers and scholars to evaluate how geographical (e.g., regional); temporal (e.g., time specific) and situational (e.g., sector related) context spaces can influence processes and outcomes.

The article in AMP is conceptual and theoretical. Future research could develop SAPP further, to empirically examine other big societal challenges: for example, technology or artificial intelligence, what is meaningful about sustainability, mental health at work, or global poverty. Such future research may extend the framework's utility to bridge academia, policy and real-world practices.

The underlying paper was published in the *Academy of Management Perspectives*, and a full copy can be obtained at: <https://doi.org/10.5465/amp.2021.0123>

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Forthcoming Research Bulletin

Title: On the benefits of insurance and disaster risk management integration for improved climate-related natural catastrophe resilience

Authors:
Sheehan, B., Mullins, M., Shannon, D., McCullagh, O

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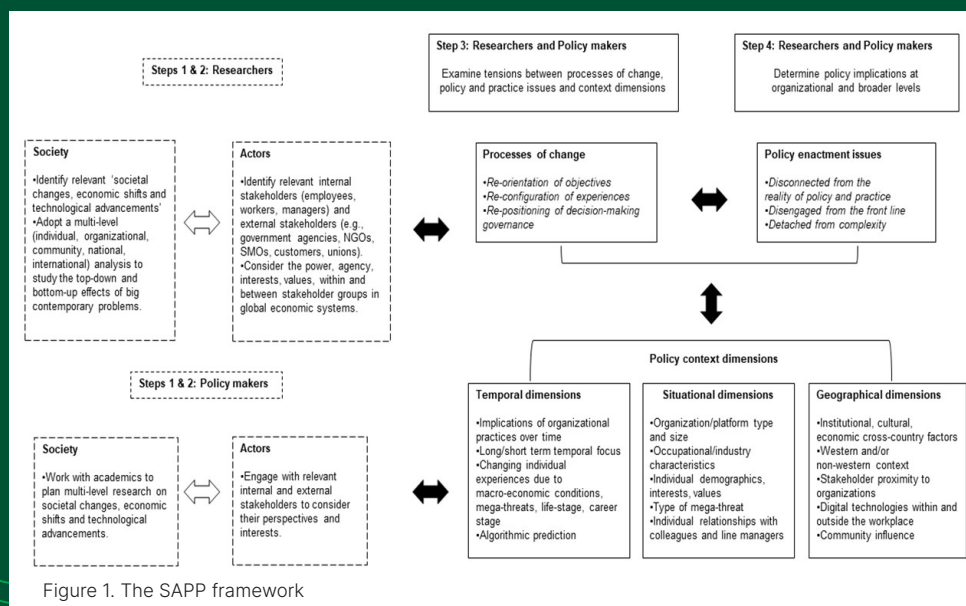


Figure 1. The SAPP framework