

# **MEDIATING EFFECT OF PESSIMISTIC EVALUATIONS ABOUT THE ENVIRONMENT ON THE RELATION BETWEEN LEARNED HELPLESSNESS AND FIRMS' ENVIRONMENTAL SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY**

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## **Abstract**

The purpose of this study is to investigate learned helplessness and pessimistic evaluations of individuals about the environment with their attitudes toward firms' environmental social responsibility behaviors.

The study conducted on 125 business administration students by asking them to fill out a questionnaire, in which learned helplessness was measured by McLean, A. (2003), environmental concern were taken from Dunlap et.al. (2000) and social responsibility survey developed by Karahan (2006) were used.

In order to examine the relationships between the variables linear regression analysis was conducted and to understand the mediating effects of firm's social responsibility multiple regression analysis was used. Regression results revealed that pessimistic evaluation about environment fully mediated the influence of learned helplessness on attitudes of individuals toward firms' environmental social responsibility behaviors.

The implications of the study for research and practice are discussed and some suggestions are made for future research as well as the strengths and limitations of the study.

**Key words:** learned helplessness, pessimistic evaluations, enviromental behavior and social responsibility.

**JEL Code:** D64, D23, M14

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## **Introduction**

Today to cope with the changing the environmental problems, companies separate their budgets in to the solving these problems. The number of companies involved in enviromental

social responsibility has sharply increased in recent year. According to companies, social responsibility projects are considered vehicles that enhance the awareness of environmental problems. Many researchers have argued that the ultimate goal of these projects is to invoke a sense of responsibility toward the environment, thus to create positive action toward environmental awareness.

On the other hand, although it is asserted that societies reject the companies that do not try to meet increasingly pronounced social and environmental needs, not every member of the societies seem to be attracted by the social responsibility projects.

Some people don't care about their environment whatever happens because they feel helplessness to their environment. An individual must possess a desire to act. But, the people who have learned helplessness, begin to become insensitive toward the environment for the fact that they focus on the negativities in their own lives. On the other hand people who are insensitive to the environment become insensitive to the firms' social responsibility activities. The present study tests the argument which states that the individuals who have accepted helplessness become insensitive toward the environment and hence, they don't care about firms' social responsibilities. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to investigate learned helplessness and pessimistic evaluations of individuals about the environment with their attitudes toward firms' environmental social responsibility behaviors.

## **1. Literature review**

“Learned Helplessness is the notion that after repeated punishment or failure, persons become passive and remain so even after environmental changes that make success possible” (Martinko & Gardner, 1982). “The individual's subjective reaction to the helplessness situation has often been described as the perception or expectation of having little or no control over the events of concern” (Burger & Arkin, 1980). According to Peterson et al (1993), learned helplessness begins with the environmental events. The good examples of learned helplessness are reflect deficits, cognitive mediation and uncontrollable events (Peterson et al., 1993). Uncontrollable events may damage someone's beliefs about controllability of the environment as well as her/his own skills (Mikulincer, 1994) People attempt to avoid or otherwise control the aversive event instrumentally. When instrumentally effective coping responses are not available, then learned helplessness may have its place as an adaptive reaction to uncontrollable events. (Fogle, 1978)

Once a person develops the expectation that many events will be uncontrollable, he or she is at risk of developing helplessness (Seligman, 1975; McLean, 2003). It thinks that it has no control over its situation and that whatever it does is worthless. There are three psychological consequences of this belief. First, there is a loss of motivation. Second, the individual feels anxious and has lower of self-confidence. Third, the individual has difficulty learning that he or she has control, even when there is evidence that an objective is achievable (Schulman, 1999).

Some people when faced the uncontrollable events, they attribute these to global causes, then these factors become present in many situations, as a result the symptoms of helplessness will generalize widely across situations (Alloy et al., 1984). Learned helplessness results from being trained to be locked in the system. The system may be a family, a community, a culture or an institution. Thus it may occur in everyday situations in which people feel or actually have no control over what happens to them, such as battle, terrorism, awful governance, drought, famine or environmental pollution may tend to foster learned helplessness (Saxena and Shah, 2008, p. 26).

Learned helplessness describes the maladaptive passivity that results from believing that important, often negative events are beyond a person's control. People accepted helplessness, begin to be pessimistic about the events around them. So they seem to not care whatever happens. But actually they think that there's nothing to prevent bad events or fix them. They just concern about their personal problems and don't think about environmental problems because of they think that they are powerless and every effort will be useless to solve environmental problems.

On the other hand, some people when faced the uncontrollable events, they are attributed to specific causes. Then factors present in only a few situations and the symptoms of helplessness will not generalize as widely (Alloy et al., 1984). These people care about the events occurring around them besides their personal problems. They are more sensitive to the problems and try to solve them. Because they have an optimistic point of view, they think that there are always something to do.

There are various approaches regarding the factors that affect the process of formation and shaping the human behavior related to environmental issues. Among these, cognitive variables (e.g. causal attributions, the awareness of knowledge about environmental problems) and psycho-social approach that includes individual factors (e.g. personal responsibility, locus of control and attitudes) are foreground. (Hines et al., 1987; Bamberg & Möser, 2007). For instance, in order a person to act a targeted action intended for a specific environmental

problem, it is required that the person has the knowledge about that specific problem. The point is that having knowledge about the problem is precondition for the action to emerge. On the other hand, besides the knowledge and skill, personal factor should not be ignored in the action. For example, the locus of control requires that individuals must be aware of their qualifications about performing positive behavior towards environment. Hungerford and Volk (1990) claimed that a person who feels powerless to make changes in society and has an external locus of control will not display environmental citizenship behaviors and needs help to deal with environmental problems. The one of the result of Hines and his friends' (1987) study show that the individuals having internal locus of control (thinking he/she can make change with his/her behavior) were more likely to have engaging in responsible environmental problems. The other result is the individual with positive attitudes were more engaging in responsible environmental behaviors (Hines et al., 1987).

On the other hand, people having positive attitudes about the environment are tend to be more sensitive in behaving environmentally (Hines et al., 1987; Hungerford and Volk, 1990). People with egoistic values focus on maximizing individual outcomes, people with social-altruistic values focus on concern for the welfare of others and people with biospheric values focus on the environment and the biosphere (Groot and Steg, 2007) According to Schultz and Zelezny (1999), people with egoistic values are concerned about environmental issues because of the negative consequences that may result to self. People with social-altruistic values are based on negative consequences to other people and people with biospheric values concern about all living things (Schultz and Zelezny, 1999). According to Groot and Steg (2008), people with prosocial value orientation focus on optimizing outcomes for others. On the other hand people having a proself value orientation focus on optimizing outcomes for themselves (Groot and Steg, 2008).

According to Poortinga et al. (2004), values are seen as causally antecedent to specific beliefs and attitudes and behavior. It is argued that values and worldviews act as filters for new information so that the attitudes and beliefs concern about specific environmental problems or attitudes toward certain behaviors are more likely to emerge. Emerging these specific attitudes and beliefs determine environmental behavior. (Poortinga et al., 2004) Groot and Steg (2008) assert that values serve as a guiding principle for selecting or evaluating behaviors, people and events (Groot and Steg, 2008).

The result of the study including 455 participants in Netherlands made by Poortinga et al (2004), show that environmental concern was related to personal basic values. But the self-enhancement value dimension was negatively related to environmental concern. According to

Poortinga et al (2004), environmental behavior is not only dependent on motivational factors but is also determined by individual opportunities and abilities (Poortinga et al., 2004).

Schultz (2000) assert that individuals' concern for environmental problems can be based on the relevance of environmental damage to self, people or all living things. The type of environmental concern depends largely on the relevance of attitude objects to activated values. In his study including 180 undergraduates students he found that there are distinct clusters of environmental attitudes: biocentric concerns focus on all living things, altruistic concerns focus on other people and egoistic concerns focus on the self.

Kilbourne et al. (2001), examined relationship between technologic, economic and politic dimensions of dominant social paradigm and environmental attitudes. They made a research with 386 university students from United States, Denmark and England. The result show that when individuals' belief in the economic dimension of the DSP increase, their perception of the existence of environmental problems decrease. The people having an economically optimistic point of view, don't believe that individual or social change should be necessary to protect the environment because they think that general economic progress would take care of environmental problems in the longer run. The other result of the study is when individuals' belief in the politic dimension of the DSP increase, their perception of the existence of environmental problems decrease. In other words people having a politically optimistic point of view think that when environmental problems emerge then politic institutions will solve them (Kilbourne et al., 2001).

According to Cameron et al. (1998), solving environmental problems in the society depend on the willingness of individuals to engage in environmentally responsible behaviors (Cameron et al., 1998). Kaiser and Shimoda state that people can feel either conventionally or morally responsible for the environment. The result of their study show that people feel morally rather than conventionally responsible for the environment. They claimed that people feel responsible because of feeling guilty. As people feel guilty for what they do or fail to do for the environment, they seem to feel morally rather than conventionally responsible for the environment (Kaiser and Shimoda, 1999).

People accepted helplessness don't care about environmental problems and so become insensitive toward the activity of firms' environmental social responsibility. According to Garrod and Chadwick (1996), concern for the environment become a major new force in shaping future society and these concern have centred on the attitudes and activities of firms. But the result of their study including 175 medium and large sized companies show that as

38% of the participants seeing the regulatory authorities as being the source of greatest environmental influence, 27% of the participants seem customers as being the source of greatest environmental influence (Garrod and Chadwick, 1996).

Groot and Steg (2007), made a study with 184 students of the University of Groningen. The results show that altruistically oriented people more strongly intended to donate to humanitarian organizations, whereas biospherically oriented people had a stronger intention to donate to environmental organizations (Groot and Steg, 2008).

Customers are the one of the most important stakeholders. Therefore when firms deciding their corporate policies, they must take into account the customers. Because customers can influence the firms by buying or refusing to buy products. If customers demand responsible social and environmental actions from firms, firms must responds these demands. Especially when customers' beliefs are rooted in enduring personal values, then firms must listen and respond to these beliefs in coherent way (Collins et al., 2007). Roberts and Bacon (1997), emphasis on conscious consumer behavior about environment. The result of their study including 605 persons show that there are correlation between environmental concern and conscious consumer behavior. When consumers think that people must live in balance with nature, then limit their use of products made from scarce resources, choose the product that create less pollution and try to make ecologic decisions about product to buy. These behaviours show the consumer having concern about environment, will choose products and services that will have less impact on the environment (Roberts and Bacon, 1997).

According to Peterson et al., (1993), if someone's self-defeating actions are described as learned helplessness, then her/his passiveness would be mediating by her/his beliefs about helplessness (Peterso et al., 1993).

Ellen et al (1991) made a study with 387 participants to examined the relationship between perceived consumer effectiveness and environmental concern. Perceived consumer effectiveness is a belief that efforts of an individual can solve the environmental problems. It is related to the concept of learned helplessness. Because an individual may think that there is no much any one can do about environment because as long as the other people refuse to conserve, the efforts to protect the environmet will be useless. The results show that effectiveness was a significant predictor for three of the six behavioral measures, purchase, recycling and contribution to environmental group. Greater perceived effectiveness was associated with greater likelihood of performing these individual behavior (Ellen et al., 1991).

Webster (1975) stated that the socially conscious consumer care about consequences of his or her private consumption on environment. According to him that socially conscious consumer must be aware of the environmental problems and he/she must also be aware of his/her purchase decisions are responsive to the problems. In his study including 231 participants he found that there was little relationship between socially conscious consumer and social responsibility. But perceived consumer effectiveness was strongly related to socially conscious consumer. This mean that socially conscious consumer feels strongly that he or she can do something about pollution and tries to consider the social impact of his or her purchases (Webster, 1975).

In other study including 135 undergraduates from a private university in Philadelphia, the participants were divided into prosocial and proself. They were asked to evaluating the Employee Trip Reduction Plan applied by Pennsylvania Department of Natural Resources. Under the provisions of this plan, large businesses would be required to reduce the number of cars entering their parking lots by encouraging employees to use public transportation. In this study it was determined that more prosocial participants supported this plan relative proself participants (Cameron et al., 1998). Whereas the one of the results of the study made by Gärling et al., (2003), show that prosocials and proselfs were both equally influenced by awareness of biospheric consequences. The results don't imply a prosocial value orientation makes people more environmentally concerned or likely to perform proenvironmental behavior (Gärling et al., 2003).

Given these theoretical arguments and research findings, we offer the following hypothesis:

*Hypothesis 1. Learned helplessness is positively related to pessimistic evaluation about the environment.*

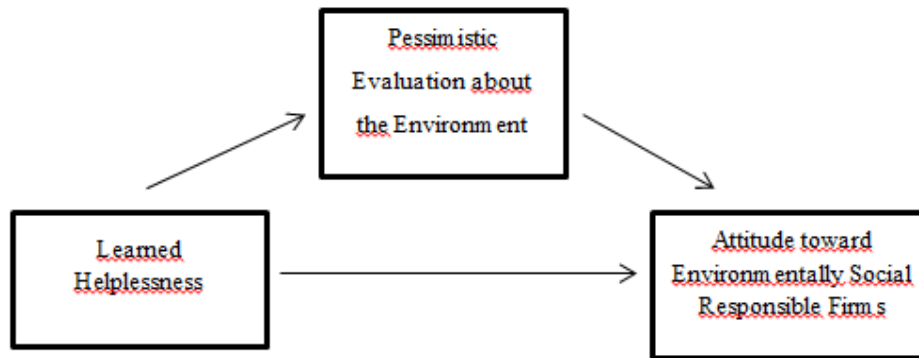
*Hypothesis 2. Learned helplessness is negatively related to individuals' attitudes toward environmentally social responsible firms.*

*Hypothesis 3. Pessimistic evaluation about the environment is negatively related to individuals' attitudes toward environmentally social responsible firms*

*Hypothesis 4. Pessimistic evaluation about the environment mediates the relationship between the learned helplessness and individuals' attitudes toward environmentally social responsible*

On the basis of these hypothesis, we created the following research model:

**Fig. 1: The Research Model**



## 2. Methods

### Sample and Procedures

This study aims to investigate the relationships between learned helplessness and pessimistic evaluations of individuals about the environment with their attitudes toward firms' environmental social responsibility behaviors. In this respect, this study attempts to reach 170 business administration students by asking them to fill out a questionnaire in Şırnak University in Şırnak, Turkey. Full instructions were given on how to fill in the questionnaire, along with the study objectives, but only 125 students responded to the questions. The response rate of 74%. Of the 125 respondents, 54.5 percent were female. Respondents reported an average age of 20, 22 years.

### Measures

Surveys include, in addition to demographic items, learned helplessness, environmental concern and individuals sensitivity toward firms' environmental social responsibility. With the exception of one scales (individuals sensitivity toward firms' environmental social responsibility), the measures were originally constructed in English. To assure equivalence of the measures in the Turkish and the English versions of the survey instrument, we performed a standard translation and back-translation procedure. The Turkish version was subsequently pilot-tested on students of the participating university who were not included in the final sample. On the basis of the feedback, we reworded a few items to ensure clarity.

Learned helplessness was measured with a 14-item scale developed by McLean, A. (2003). New ecological paradigm with a 15-item scale developed by Dunlap et.al. (2000) was



used to assess pessimistic evaluation about the environment. Karahan's (2006) survey was used to measure social responsibility and it contains 5-items. In the questionnaire, a five point Likert-type scale evaluates the respondents ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

### 3. Results

**Tab. 1: Means, Standard Deviations, Reliabilities and Correlations among Study Variables**

Variables	Mean	S.D.	1	2	3
1.Learned helplessness	2.69	0,52	(0.72)		
2.Pessimictis Evaluation	3,29	0,88	0,56	(0.68)	
3.Social responsibility	3,42	0,77	0.37	0.59	(0.58)

Table 1 illustrates the means, standard deviations, reliability coefficients and intercorrelations between of all study variables. The information contained in Table 1 suggests that all measures have internal consistency.

**Tab. 2: Results of Regression Analysis for Mediation**

	Model 1	Model 2
Variables	Pessimistic Evaluation $\beta$	Social responsibility $\beta$
Direct effects		
Learned helplessness	0.52*	-0.26*
Mediating effects		
Learned helplessness		0.4
Pessimistic Evaluation		-0.21*
Overall R <sup>2</sup>	0,34	0,24
Overall Model F	11.56*	5.37*

\*p<0.01

Table 2 presents results of the regression analysis. Following the Baron and Kenny's (1986) recommended conditions for establishing mediation, we tested mediation hypothesis using a hierarchical multiple regression analysis. As shown in Table 2, Hypothesis 1 was supported by showing that learned helplessness was related to pessimistic evaluation. Hypothesis 2 was also supported as learned helplessness was related to social responsibility. Hypothesis 3 was fully supported as pessimistic evaluation about the environment is negatively related to individuals' attitudes toward environmentally social responsible firms. Our mediation hypothesis also received full support from the data. As it is evident from the table 2, pessimistic evaluation about environment fully mediated the relationship between learned helplessness and social responsibility.

## **Conclusion**

The first result of the study is that the individuals accepted learned helplessness will be pessimistic about environmental events. They think every effort will be useless to solve the environmental problems. So they become insensitive towards environmental problems. The second result of the study is that when individuals increased the degree of helplessness, they become insensitive toward firms' activities about environment. The consumers with these features don't support environmentally social responsible firms buying their product. The third result is that the individuals having a pessimistic point of view don't consider environmentally social responsible firms in purchase decisions. They think that the efforts of these firms can't solve the environmental problems. The fourth result is that the pessimistic evaluation about environment mediates between learned helplessness and individuals' attitudes toward environmentally social responsible firms.

This study suggests that learned helplessness play an important role in students' assess of social responsibility. It is found that individuals feels helplessness, they don't care about firm's environmental social responsibility. This results suggests that it is better if firms can apply some training programs designed to teach individuals how to cope with and overcome pessimistic behaviour.

Finally our study has several limitations. First, the data was collected from college students. Second, the study was carried out only Şırnak city in Turkey. Third, the study was applied to small sample. Future studies can be conducted on different sample characteristics (age, income etc.) and in different countries. Besides they can examine to this issue in terms of culture of country, economic development and government's environmental policies.

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