The Psychology of Corporate Social Responsibility and Humanitarian Work: A Person-Centric Perspective

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The field of industrial–organizational (I–O) psychology has and will continue to experience periods of growth and change. Our field has shifted and transformed along with society, through the industrial revolution, the human relations movement, the globalization of business, and the information age. And here we are, in 2013, at the cusp of what seems to be the beginning of a new stage in our development, this time evidenced by the marked attention that both the science and practice arms of I–O psychology are placing on issues of corporate social responsibility (CSR, Aguinis, 2011; Cruse, 2010; Scott et al., 2013), environmental sustainability (Huffman & Klein, 2013; Jackson, Ones, & Dilchert, 2012), and humanitarian work psychology (Berry et al., 2011; Carr, MacLachlan, & Furnham, 2012; Lefkowitz, 2010, 2012; Olson-Buchanan, Bryan, & Thompson, 2013; Schlosser et al., 2013). Together, these areas focus on individuals’ and organizations’ considerations of the greater good, as well as the more lasting implications of business for society, the environment, and human rights. What might have in the past been considered on the periphery of I–O psychology is now the mainstream, with the Society for Industrial and Organizational Psychology itself becoming a nongovernmental organization (NGO) in 2011 (Scott, 2011). These are exciting times, but as is the norm among emerging zeitgeists, we face a massive landscape, which in this case, is already inhabited by many disciplines (strategic management, international business, law, environmental engineering, public policy, political science, etc.). Consequently, we are still discovering the unique ways in which I–O psychology connects to the intersection of business, society, and organizational ethics.

Aguinis and Glavas (2012, 2013) have made important contributions in mapping this terrain. They reveal just how little CSR research has taken a psychological approach, and importantly (and most relevant to the current dialog), they have offered a framework for thinking about where CSR fits within organizational operations (peripheral or embedded). They have also

1. see also Pandey, Rupp, and Thornton (2013) for more examples and a discussion of embeddedness as it relates to corporate environmental sustainability.
delineated the implications of these varying architectural and strategic placements for both employees and organizations. From both a personnel and management perspective, there are many directions one could take such a framework (e.g., Gully, Phillips, Castellano, Han, & Kim, in press), with potential for the further embedding of CSR into talent management, strategic HR, and strategic human capital management. We look forward to reading commentaries that speak to and extend these ideas.

That said, we take a slightly different (but complementary) perspective—one that flips the camera around from a focus on management practices to one that focuses directly on the impact of CSR on the experience of work and the lives of working people. Certainly the study of CSR involves a number of stakeholders (Aguilera, Rupp, Williams, & Ganapathi, 2007)—from shareholders to consumers to local community members to those directly impacted by social (ir)responsibility. However, what is unique about the field of I–O psychology is its focus on working people, and thus it is among this particular stakeholder group where we argue our collective contribution to this multidisciplinary milieu awaits.

We argue for a person-centric approach (Weiss & Rupp, 2010) that considers employees, at various levels of the organizational hierarchy, who witness acts of CSR, who implement CSR, as well as leaders who have the power to initiate CSR on a more strategic level. As person-centric I–O psychologists, we are well-equipped to study issues of perception formation, moral reasoning, motivation, attitude formation, and response behavior as employees witness and take part in acts of social (ir)responsibility while carrying out their working lives (Guo, Rupp, Weiss, & Trougakos, 2011). We are also able to consider personality and contextual variables that play a role in such phenomena, the role of time and accumulated experience, and the impact of all of this on the stress, health, and well-being of working people.

Taking a humanitarian work psychology perspective further adds to our wheelhouse the ability to study the experiences of those carrying out humanitarian work (e.g., Atkins & Thompson, 2012; Berry et al., 2011)—much of which is located more at the “periphery” (to use Aguinis & Glavas’s term) of organizational operations (e.g., private foundations). We might also study hard-hit and exploited working populations that fall victim to CSR, unethical decision making, regulatory noncompliance, and political corruption. This might include the working poor, those in unsafe and unhealthy work environments, migrant workers, as well as populations facing the most dire of situations, such as child laborers, slaves, and those trafficked, those facing deadly working conditions, and child soldiers, among others, who are working in many parts of the developing world (e.g., International Labor Organization, 2013).

In the following sections, we seek to both summarize what we see as some of the more critical theoretical pieces in the puzzle that is the psychology of CSR and to illustrate our position with some of our own research that offers preliminary evidence for some of these ideas.

**Individuals’ Experience With CSR Is Ultimately About Justice, and Justice Is Ultimately About Multiple Motives and Needs**

Whereas Aguinis and Glavas discuss organizational justice as an “underlying mechanism . . . through which CSR leads to important outcomes for employees, organizations, and society” (p. 318), our employee-centric position is that CSR is justice. That is, although research on organizational justice has traditionally focused on how fairly employees perceive themselves as having been treated; contemporary justice research also considers how individuals respond to the (mis)treatment of others (O’Reilly & Aquino, 2011; Skarlicki & Kulik, 2005). Earlier research on “third-party” justice perceptions focused on perceptions of the treatment of one’s coworkers. However, I–O psychology research has extended the
third-party justice domain to include external stakeholder groups as potential victims of injustice, such as local communities, the environment, and groups whose civil and human rights can be infringed upon via organizational actions (e.g., child laborers, immigrants), as well as third parties beyond the organization who observe such mistreatment (e.g., customers, shareholders, judges, policy makers; Rupp, 2011; Rupp, Ganapathi, Aguilera, & Williams, 2006).

We highlight that the very reason CSR has become such a cogent issue is because of third parties’ voiced concerns about the fair treatment of companies toward their stakeholders (employees, society, and the environment). Nike, for example, faced an extensive consumer boycott after the New York Times and other media outlets reported abusive labor practices at some of its Indonesian suppliers. Organizations’ CSR rankings, which include their labor violations, rightly or wrongly, attract considerable publicity. These pressures clearly demonstrate that the current CSR movement has not been completely voluntary, and exists to the extent to which third parties seek to hold companies accountable for unfair treatment. Our field has studied the process by which individuals hold transgressors morally accountable for their actions for some time (Aquino, Tripp, & Bies, 2001; Cropanzano, Chrbot-Mason, Rupp, & Prehar, 2004; Folger & Cropanzano, 2001; Greenbaum, Folger, & Ford, 2011). Applying this research to the study of CSR offers to expand our knowledge of the experience of perceived corporate social (ir)responsibility. Studying these factors expands the scope by which I–O psychology can contribute to the CSR movement.

Indeed, if we can view perceived CSR as a form of perceived justice, then along with this perspective comes decades of knowledge to assist in jump starting our exploration of individual-level CSR phenomena. The most important (we feel) is the integrative multimotive framework that summarizes the major justice theories according to the reasons working people have for seeking justice (for both themselves and others; Cropanzano, Byrne, Bobocel, & Rupp, 2001; Cropanzano, Rupp, Mohler, & Schminke, 2001; see also Bauman & Skitka, 2012). This research points to the instrumental (self-interest, Adams, 1965), relational (identity/exchange, Blau, 1964; Lind & Tyler, 1988), and moral/ethical (deontic, Folger, 1998, 2001) motives underlying individuals’ justice concerns, which are linked to fundamental needs for control, relatedness, and meaningful existence, respectively. Crucial for the current discussion is the fact that whereas the first two motives are largely relevant to the self, the latter (deontic) transcends the self and views justice has a universal moral virtue.

Research has supported the deontic model, showing that individuals respond strongly when they observe injustice, even when they are in no way victimized by the transgression and even when their instrumental and relational motives are controlled for (Turillo, Folger, Lavelle, Umphress, & Gee, 2002). Extending this research into the CSR domain, this perspective proposes that employees are likely to react positively to their employer’s socially responsible behaviors (e.g., charitable donations, community support, and environmental protection) and negatively to their socially irresponsible activities (e.g., polluting the air and water) because of a universal belief in the deservingness of ethical, humane, and socially responsible treatment (Aguilera et al., 2007). In short, by understanding the moral perspective of justice, we are able to uncover the extent to which employees’ attitudes, behaviors, and well-being are motivated by how their employer (or potential employer) treats a broader set of stakeholders both internal and external to the firm.

For example, empirical studies have shown that individuals’ CSR perceptions positively relate to applicants’ job pursuit intentions (Evans & Davis, 2011; Greening & Turban, 2000; Jones, Willness, & Madey, in press; Turban & Greening, 1997), as well as employees’ organizational citizenship behavior, organizational commitment, and organizational identification (Brammer,
Our own research has additionally found that CSR matters for both potential and current employees, even when their own experiences of justice are controlled (Rupp, Shao, Thornton, & Skarlicki, in press). This research is important because it illustrates the relevance of studying individual-level CSR phenomena within an organizational justice framework and highlights the multiple motives underlying individuals’ concerns and reactions to perceived CSR.

**Individuals’ Involvement With and Response to CSR Involves Self-Determination**

Another major theoretical perspective that has been applied to the psychology of CSR is self-determination theory (SDT; Deci & Ryan, 1985, 1991, 2000; Ryan & Deci, 2000). SDT proposes that individuals perceive their social contexts as providing varying degrees of autonomy, which then dictates the extent to which they view their behavior as being self-determined (i.e., intrinsically motivated), which impacts the optimization of human functioning and adjustment (Gagne & Deci, 2005). Rupp, Williams, and Aguilera (2011) argued for the usefulness of considering the CSR-related relative autonomy of organizational contexts. This involves assessing the extent to which the organizational context provides individuals (throughout the organizational hierarchy) autonomy in participating in, advocating for, and implementing CSR-related initiatives on behalf of the firm. Specifically, employees can comply with and advocate for CSR activities due to external pressures (external regulation); they might participate in CSR programs to avoid the feelings of guilt (introjected regulation); they might attach personal importance to the participation in CSR initiatives (identified regulation); or they might find being a part of the firm’s CSR actions to be intrinsically rewarding (intrinsic motivation). In Aguinis and Glavas’s terms, the former two conditions are likely to relate to peripheral CSR, whereas the latter two conditions are likely associated with embedded CSR.

We expect that employees are more likely to feel motivated by and/or react favorably to their employer’s CSR activities when they have more CSR-related relative autonomy (i.e., when they participate in and advocate for CSR due to personal interest) as compared to when their engagement in CSR is more externally regulated. We tested some of these notions in a recent study involving a large group of working adults across multiple countries (Rupp et al., 2013) and found that CSR-related motivation moderated the relationship between employees’ perceived CSR and their work engagement, such that the relationship was stronger when employees perceived more CSR-related relative autonomy. This research serves as one of the first attempts to explore how employees’ motivations surrounding CSR influences the way in which CSR shapes employees’ attitudes and behaviors. Future research might include Aguinis and Glavas’s peripheral versus embedded continuum as an additional contextual variable influencing employee engagement in the face of CS(i)R.

**Psychological Embeddedness and the Dynamic Nature of CSR**

Aguinis and Glavas point to the myriad potential benefits of embedding CSR in the strategy, operations, and core competencies of the organization. Whereas this is largely a contextual variable dealing with operational issues, we would call for additional research on individual-level (person-centric) psychological embeddedness. As we highlighted above, multiple motives can underlie individuals’ CSR concerns—including instrumental, relational, and moral/ethical/deontic. Both justice theory and SDT link these motives to psychological needs concerning control/competency, belongingness/relatedness, and meaningful existence/autonomy/self-determination, respectively (Rupp et al., 2011). It is likely that these varying motives...
and needs are simultaneously and differentially activated at any one time, and, over time, as primary motives change via experience, that CSR values that were at one point more psychologically peripheral become internalized and psychologically embedded.

The key here is that neither CSR nor CSR perceptions are static constructs. The extent to which social and environmental issues are valued by an organization is influenced by the individuals who have the power to shape policy (and make decisions on the level of CSR operational embeddedness that a firm takes on)—and their values and motives are shaped by their experiences, which accumulate over time. Rupp and Williams (2011) (see also Rupp et al., 2011) describe a case in which global banks require companies involved in large-scale infrastructure projects (financed by the banks) to sign a voluntary code of social and environmental conduct known as the Equator Principles. The authors trace the climate for CSR within the banks over a period of time starting with the adoption of this policy and uncover a rich and dynamic developmental process. The policy to require participating companies to commit to the Equator Principles, while noble, was originally a strategy to mitigate financial risk—because within large infrastructure projects (e.g., hydroelectric dams, oil pipelines), no one organization is financially responsible if an environment disaster or labor scandal derailed the project (leaving the banks to hold the risk for the nonrecourse loan). However, it appears that through their experience with the Equator Principles initiative, CSR values became more internalized by the banks’ leadership, as evidenced by more embedding of CSR into general bank operations (beyond project financing). These developments went ultimately beyond a financial incentive, as new initiatives sprang up that lacked an instrumental impetus.

Thus, whereas instrumental CSR (e.g., “greenwashing”) may be seen by some as inauthentic and manipulative (Ellen, Webb, & Mohr, 2006; Frankenthal, 2001), it may be a necessary first step in a developmental process where individuals and groups of individuals come to internalize CSR values as something beyond self-interest to something self-determined and psychologically embedded. Only a dynamic approach to the study of CSR will allow us to uncover such phenomena.

**Individual Differences (Including Culture) Matter**

Individual differences also offer important insights in accounting for when and why employees react favorably toward CSR. As proposed in Aguinis and Glavas, organizations with embedded CSR (e.g., GE) are inclined to hire employees who share similar values, contributing to their organizational identification process. It is plausible that those employees who share similar values are likely to react more strongly to CSR (mis)deeds. Moral identity, defined as the extent to which being a moral person is central to one’s self-definition (Aquino & Reed, 2002), is an individual difference variable that appears to moderate individuals’ responses to CSR. We have found that both job applicants and internal employees with high (versus low) moral identity are more likely to react favorably toward CSR in terms of job pursuit intentions and OCB, respectively (Rupp et al., in press). Similarly, Ormiston and Wong (in press), who found that often acts of CSR are followed by socially irresponsible acts due to the social credits accumulated, revealed that such a phenomenon is less prominent among leaders high in moral identity.

Indeed, individual difference constructs that are related to individuals’ concerns for justice, ethics, and the welfare of people and the environment should not only moderate the extent to which individuals react to corporate acts of socially responsible and irresponsible behavior; they might also be relevant for recruiting and selecting individuals held responsible for carrying out socially responsible initiatives, as well as those carrying out humanitarian work. Constructs such as moral identity (Aquino &
Reed, 2002), justice orientation (Liao & Rupp, 2005), humane orientation (Schlosser et al., 2013), among others, all seem like likely candidates for such research.

Finally, cultural values are also relevant here as business continues to globalize. Individuals from different cultural backgrounds differ in the extent to which they care about others’ received treatment (e.g., individualism vs. collectivism; Hofstede & Hofstede, 2005; House, Hanges, Javidan, Dorfman, & Gupta, 2004). Although we expect that CSR matters among employees across different cultural settings (Rupp et al., 2013), it is likely that the effect of CSR on employees’ subsequent reactions varies across cultures. To our knowledge, little research has explored how cultural values qualify CSR effects. We believe this line of inquiry can contribute further to a person-centric approach to study CSR.

Conclusion

Aguinis and Glavas have provided an opportune venue for discussing the role of I–O psychology in the science and practice of CSR. They offer a framework for classifying the way in which CSR initiatives are incorporated into an organizations’ operational portfolio, from periphery to embedded—positing that embedded practices are more comprehensive and therefore more likely to be accepted and appreciated by a broader number of stakeholders (see also Lim & Phillips, 2008; Sun, Stewart, & Pollard, 2010). In our commentary, we have sought to argue for the fundamental relevance of employees’ (and leaders’) moral reasoning with regard to organizational actions and decisions, taking the view that our field is well positioned to study CSR and would greatly benefit from more research on perception formation, motivational processes, and decision-making research within a CSR context (that also considers individual differences, culture, and dynamic/developmental processes). We point to the rich literature on justice and self-determination, as well as a person-centric perspective, as potentially fruitful launching points for such explorations.

References


