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Uncovering CSR meaning networks: A cross-national comparison of Turkey and Slovenia

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ABSTRACT

This study addressed an important question about the meaning of corporate social responsibility (CSR), and how it is measured. Based on a comparison of the meaning networks of CSR in two countries with fundamentally different cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds, we argue that there is a need for an institutional perspective when studying CSR associations and expectations in a particular society. Thus empirical study involved the use of three methods the word-association technique, social network analysis, and blockmodeling using Pajek software; to provide deep insight into the structure of CSR associations. The findings suggest that the two societies have diverse collective cognitive structures regarding CSR. In Turkey, the philanthropic understanding of CSR is highly dominant, while the Slovenian social meaning of CSR is multi-dimensional. The findings point to the social construction of the concept of CSR with implications both for academic research and practice.

1. Introduction

Corporate social responsibility (CSR) has risen up the research and practice agenda in recent decades. Given the variety of perspectives and views in the academic and professional literature, no single generally accepted definition of CSR exists, but the most general view is that CSR concerns the responsible role of business in society, assuming that in an interconnected world, no business can afford to operate in isolation from society and its constituencies (Moon, Murphy, & Gond, 2017).

Studies on the meaning of CSR have multiplied over the years, making it a fairly well-researched concept in many respects. However, scholars tend to agree that most salient approaches to CSR today may be regarded as Anglo-Saxon (e.g., Blowfield & Frynas, 2005; De Geer, Borglund, & Frostenson, 2009). Consequently, the main weaknesses of CSR studies are that (1) they impose certain assumptions about what CSR means based on theoretically developed measurement scales; (2) they often share the instrumental perspective on CSR as a business case; and (3) they do not consider that a particular understanding of CSR can come through a “local adaptation”, rooted in factors significant to a certain society. On this basis, Duarte, Mouro, & Gonçalves das Neves (2010) argue that a lack of evidence on CSR from other social and cultural environments tends to hinder the advancement of knowledge of CSR in response to specific situational challenges (p. 103). Although some studies discussing CSR in different national or cultural contexts can be found, most tend to be either conceptual, not based on uncovering the meaning of CSR specifically, or focused on CSR representations in one country (e.g., Duarte et al., 2010). To our knowledge, no study so far has mapped out individuals’ semantic

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content of CSR in a particular society using a network approach, and included a cross-country comparison. Therefore, one of the challenges that remains is to gain an understanding of “how CSR is socially constructed in a specific context” (Dahlsrud, 2008, p. 6), and what shared ideas and beliefs emerge around the concept.

To understand the social meaning of CSR in two countries, the present study focused on CSR associations in Turkey—a large transcontinental country in Eurasia with a diverse, but mainly Islamic, cultural heritage, and growing economy—and Slovenia—a small, central European ex-socialist country and a member of the European Union (EU). By choosing these two countries we aimed to move beyond the mainstream logic of research on CSR meanings, in which the views from the Western developed economies still dominate the CSR discourse (e.g., Li, 2016). The study of selected countries also addresses the gap in the comparative CSR work, in which CSR expressions are mostly examined either by benchmarking the developing countries against the developed world, or by single-country and neighboring countries studies (Jamali et al., 2017). This study acknowledges, institutional variables, such as the contexts of various national backgrounds that shape these associations (e.g., Jamali, 2014). A micro-level approach was adopted to investigate how individuals respond to their context by establishing associations of CSR; in other words, how the social meaning of CSR is formed via sense-making (Weber & Glynn, 2006). For this purpose, the study employed a social network analysis approach. CSR is “no longer the realm of isolated companies but has become part of a broader social and business movement” (Roome, Doove, & Postema, 2006, p. 78), and furthermore, interpretations of the CSR concept reflect the importance of country-specific political, cultural, and social elements (Freeman & Hasnaoui, 2011). Uncovering the CSR meaning networks among individuals can therefore shed light on how and why CSR is practiced and communicated in a certain manner, and provide country-specific CSR guidance for corporations.

2. Theoretical framework

Scholars note that building a common CSR theory is challenging, as the boundaries of the concept are ever-changing. The meaning of CSR changes not only between national and industry contexts, but through time (Frynas & Stephens, 2015). One way to grasp the elusiveness of CSR is to adopt a multi-level perspective of drivers, evaluations and outcomes of CSR (Aguinis & Glavas, 2012). Drivers emerge both from institutional pressures, and organizational motives, and also from individuals’ values, needs and awareness regarding CSR. The latter are related to the process of making sense of CSR and ascribing such CSR attributions as credibility of CSR engagement. Finally, outcomes refer to such categories as reputation, consumer loyalty, commitment, identification, and increased trust (Aguinis & Glavas, 2012). Acknowledging this multilevel and multidimensional nature of the concept, CSR has been deciphered as “context-specific organizational actions and policies that take into account stakeholders’ expectations and the triple bottom line of economic, social, and environmental performance” (Aguinis, 2011, p. 855). This definition parallels the dimensions of CSR extracted from various definitions (Dahlsrud, 2008): stakeholder, economic and social obligations, voluntariness, and environmental concern. Dahlsrud (2008) dimensions can be also read as a reorganization of Carroll’s widely-accepted four-part definition of CSR, which in its latest version explains, “Corporate social responsibility encompasses the economic, legal, ethical, and discretionary (philanthropic) expectations that society has of organizations at a given time” (Carroll & Buchholtz, 2014, p. 32).

2.1. CSR as a social process

Since CSR policies and actions are influenced and implemented by institutional, organizational and individual actors, we follow Dahlsrud (2008) argument that CSR is inherently socially constructed. This notion accords with Okoye (2009) view that CSR is essentially contested, implying that one concept has various meanings and a common referent—that is, a core that “ties the disparate issues that arise from such conceptual contestation” (p. 619). For CSR, a common referent is related to the behavior embedding a variety of social obligations to other stakeholders or to society at large. However, rather than being universally defined, these obligations emerge through the complex relationships between constituencies in the society and in different social contexts (Okoye, 2009). Recently, institutional theories have often been employed as a basis for studying CSR (e.g., Furrer et al., 2010; Gjølborg, 2009; Jamali, 2014; Jamali et al., 2017) due to their cross-level perspectives (Weber & Glynn, 2006).

Institutional theories are based on systems and constructionist views both of which acknowledge the concept of the interdependence of societal actors. Individual and organizational behaviors are located in the social and institutional contexts of specific practices, assumptions, values, beliefs, and rules by which individuals and organizations provide meaning to their social reality, and are guided to (re)produce their material subsistence (Thornton & Ocasio, 1999, p. 804). By being embedded in different contexts, and organizations, their stakeholders engage in various social relations that influence their ability to make sense of CSR (Scott, 2008). As such, this can be considered a social process, whereby institutional logics are present in the micro-level sense-making processes of CSR “as suppliers of the substance” (Weber & Glynn, 2006, p. 1644) of CSR meanings.

A rather complex relationship exists between the “macro” institutional and “micro” sense-making perspectives, as institutions may both prime sense-making by providing social cues, and also edit the sense-making process (Weber & Glynn, 2006). The role of institutions in priming is related to how the meaning of CSR and expectations are formed by individuals, and in editing, is conducting a social evaluation of CSR actions. Thus, the mechanism of influence comprises “inputs” and “outputs.” The “inputs” are the CSR activities of companies and CSR expectations of stakeholders, with the latter also reflecting the CSR meanings that stakeholders create, while the “outputs” constitute individuals’ evaluations of CSR practices, and companies’ modifications to these practices (Weber & Glynn, 2006). From this perspective, CSR meanings in a society work as potential stimulators for companies’ CSR activities. However, these activities are then socially regulated through various processes of interaction, whereby one process is related to stakeholders checking their CSR expectations against their understanding, primed by the institutional context. This way, both

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