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Indirect reciprocity and reputation management: Interdisciplinary findings from evolutionary biology and economics

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ABSTRACT

The concept of indirect reciprocity provides a scientific basis for the strategic value of corporate social responsibility within public relations. In contrast to direct reciprocity, indirect reciprocity occurs when an entity other than the recipient rewards a benevolent actor. Drawing primarily upon research from evolutionary biology and economics, this article builds an interdisciplinary case for the reality and efficacy of indirect reciprocity as a strategic means of building reputation and, consequently, establishing relationships that lead to resource acquisition. It concludes with a call for additional, related explorations of disciplines such as psychology, primatology, and neuroscience.

1. Introduction

The Call for Papers for BledCom 2017: CSR in Hypermodern Times asked “to whom” we owe social responsibility in a time when “individuals are becoming ever more self-centric and ... we are probably becoming less interested in other humans and humanity as a whole.” The Call asked, “Could human spirituality and religion bring us together again?” To those questions, this article offers an unusual answer from multidisciplinary sources: Compelling evidence from evolutionary biology and economics – evidence bolstered by conclusions in psychology, primatology, neuroscience, philosophy, and rhetoric – assures us that public relations practitioners seeking long-term material success owe social assistance to those who may well do nothing for them in return. Harkening back to the early 21st-century calls of McKie (2001) to import new scientific discoveries into public relations, the purpose of this article is to present detailed findings from studies in evolutionary biology and economics showing that the concept of indirect reciprocity strongly endorses the resource-securing effectiveness of publicly visible enactments of social responsibility: Scholars from Larissa Grunig to Robert Heath to Jordi Xifra to Maureen Taylor have noted the centrality of resource acquisition to understandings of public relations (Marsh, 2017). Indirect reciprocity holds significant implications for the effective practice of CSR and, by extension, implications for frameworks of public relations such as fully functioning society theory and the contingency theory of conflict management.

2. Indirect reciprocity

Biologist Richard Alexander, in *The Biology of Moral Systems* (1987), coined the term *indirect reciprocity* (Nowak & Highfield, 2011; Wubben, De Cremer, & van Dijk, 2011), in part to contrast the process with the more-familiar concept of direct reciprocity inherent in “the norm of reciprocity” (Grunig & White, 1992). In direct reciprocity, B assists/punishes A because A had previously assisted/punished B – a basic *quid pro quo* relationship. In terms of assistance, in fact, A originally assisted B to encourage such positive reciprocity (Gouldner, 1960). In indirect reciprocity, however, A assists B with no expectation that B will assist A in return. In fact,

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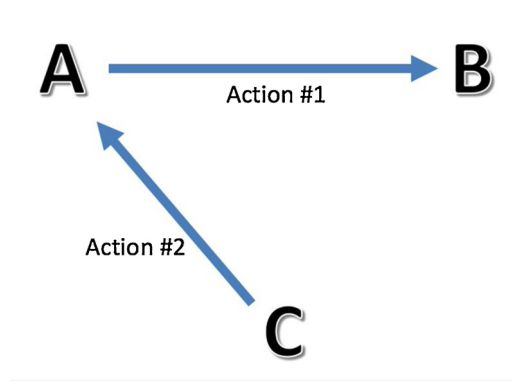


Fig. 1. Indirect Reciprocity.

indirect reciprocity can be enhanced if B is unable to reciprocate: [Nowak and Highfield \(2011\)](#), [Tullberg \(2004\)](#), and others ([Rollston, 2004](#)) link indirect reciprocity to the story, in the Christian Bible, of the Good Samaritan, in which a passerby aids the abused and impoverished victim of robbers without expectation of reimbursement or reward from the victim. According to [Alexander \(1987\)](#):

In *indirect reciprocity* ... the return is expected from someone other than the recipient of the beneficence.... This return may come from essentially any individual or collection of individuals.... Indirect reciprocity involves reputation and status, and results in everyone in a social group continually being assessed and reassessed by interactants, past and potential, on the basis of their interactions with others.... Indirect reciprocity develops because interactions are repeated, or flow among a society's members, and because information about subsequent interactions can be gleaned from observing the reciprocal interactions of others. (pp. 85, 77)

In *Economics Bulletin*, [Ho \(2013\)](#) concisely explains that “indirect reciprocity occurs when a beneficial act is repaid from someone other than the act’s recipient” (p. 798). In its simplest form – a form continually shown to exist in research conducted by evolutionary biologists and economists – indirect reciprocity is triangular, with A representing the giver, B representing the recipient(s), and C representing one or more entities who learn of A’s treatment of B. Action #1 is A’s transfer of resources to (or mistreatment of) B; Action #2 is C’s transfer of resources to (or retaliation toward) A ([Fig. 1](#)):

“Thanks to the power of reputation,” evolutionary biologist Martin Nowak declares, “we help others without the expectation of immediate return.... If I [A] scratch your [B] back, my good example will [lead others (C)] to scratch mine [A]” ([Nowak & Highfield, 2011, p. 54](#)).

Scientific evidence for the reality, pervasiveness, and effectiveness of indirect reciprocity, particularly from evolutionary biology and economics, is relatively new – but the concept itself, with its reliance on building reputation, dates at least to Isocratean rhetoric, which both [Heath \(2000\)](#) and [Marsh \(2013\)](#) posit as an influential antecedent of modern public relations. In his essay [Nicoles \(1928/1991\)](#) Isocrates (436–338 BCE) writes (with the simple lexicon of indirect reciprocity added), “You [A] should be such in your dealings with others [B] as you expect me [C] to be in my dealings with you [A]” (49). Such acts of indirect reciprocity, he maintains, create a reputation for virtue, and “nothing in the world can contribute so powerfully to material gain, to good repute, to right action, in a word, to happiness, as ... the qualities of virtue” ([On the Peace, 1929/1992, 32](#)). Visible selfless acts of benevolence, Isocrates concludes, “cause many to desire your friendship” ([Plataicus, 1945/1986, 42](#)).

Centuries later, Scottish philosopher [David Hume \(1739/1968\)](#) also noted the linkage of indirect reciprocity to a positive reputation that led to productive relationships. In a section of his *Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals* titled “Of Qualities Useful to Ourselves,” [Hume \(1751/1983\)](#) repeatedly cites “disinterested benevolence” (p. 57) toward others as one of those essential “qualities” and as a builder of reputation and social capital that can lead to success. Earlier in that work, he writes:

Nothing can bestow more merit on any human creature than the sentiment of benevolence in an eminent degree; and *that a part*, at least, of its merit arises from its tendency to promote the interests of our species, and bestow happiness on human society. (1751/1983, p. 20)

A dozen years earlier, in *A Treatise of Human Nature* (1739/1968), Hume began developing his thoughts on the importance of reputation, declaring, “There is nothing, which touches us more nearly than our reputation, and nothing on which our reputation depends more than our conduct” (p. 501). In short, scientific proof, derived primarily from experiments, for the power of indirect reciprocity may now be at hand, but recognition of the empirical evidence for that concept dates back centuries and even millennia.

3. Literature review, methods, and theory

Much of this article – indeed, most of it – is literature review, seeking to import recent research primarily from evolutionary biology and economics into public relations and the concept of CSR. As noted above, within evolutionary biology, indirect reciprocity was first named by [Alexander](#) in 1987, though [Trivers \(1971\)](#) and others had earlier described the basic concept ([Berger, 2011](#);

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