



Review

Toward a taxonomy and unified construct of responsibility

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ABSTRACT

The academic literature provides diverse approaches to the study of the responsibility construct. We conducted a brief review of the literature from various disciplines of responsibility: morality, leadership, work design, extrarole behaviors, and education. We then proposed a taxonomy of the different conceptualizations of responsibility and conducted a lexical analysis to identify its manifestations. We next focused on individual responsibility and conducted a series of forty qualitative interviews with leaders. From the literature review and the semi-structured interviews, we propose that responsibility is a multidimensional construct with six manifestations: accountability, commitment, concern for others, dependability, initiative, and receptivity. We put forth an integrative model of the construct, along with 16 propositions that describe the relationships in the model and offer avenues for future research.

1. Introduction

The Merriam-Webster (n.d.) simple definition of responsibility is 1) “the state of being the person who caused something to happen,” 2) “a duty or task that you are required or expected to do,” and 3) “something that you should do because it is morally right, legally required, etc.” Its full definition adds “the quality or state of being responsible” encompassing being morally, legally, or mentally accountable and as having the qualities of reliability and trustworthiness. Respectively, researchers across diverse disciplines (e.g., morality, leadership, work design, extrarole behaviors, and education) have shown interest in individual responsibility. For example, moral responsibility theory views responsibility as attributability, accountability, and liability (Ricoeur, 1992; Robinson, 2009; Shoemaker, 2011; Twiss, 1977). Leadership theory ties responsibility to traits of effective leaders (Barnard, 1938; Fayol, 1949/2013; Stogdill, 1948). Work design theory includes felt responsibility as a critical link between the characteristics of a job and work outcomes (Fuller, Marler, & Hester, 2006; Hackman & Oldham, 1976). Additional research examines responsibility and extrarole behaviors (Morrison & Phelps, 1999; Pearce & Gregersen, 1991). Lastly, there are numerous models on the determinants and outcomes of teacher and student responsibility (Fishman, 2014; Lauermaun, 2014).

Existing research has offered diverse definitions, descriptions, and measures of responsibility (see Hackman & Oldham, 1976; Lauermaun & Karabenick, 2011; Morrison & Phelps, 1999; Ricoeur, 1992; Winter, 1992), various insights into its determinants and outcomes as well as the roles that responsibility plays as a mediator between other variables

(see Hackman & Oldham, 1976; Lauermaun & Karabenick, 2011; Morrison & Phelps, 1999; Pearce & Gregersen, 1991; Winter, 1992). However, a generalizable model and theory of responsibility that transcends and unifies disciplines is absent from the literature. We believe this is an important gap to fill because the accumulation of scientific knowledge is limited if the same construct is studied, conceptualized, and measured in different ways across disciplines.

There are conceptual ambiguities of the responsibility construct that need resolution (Lauermaun, 2014). Unification is important to advance scientific knowledge through the use of shared definitions, descriptions, and measures of responsibility. It reduces duplication of scholarly effort, provides a base for scholars interested in responsibility to build upon, and facilitates increased rigor of the conceptualization and measurement of responsibility. In the academic literature, responsible people are described in ways such as those who “do what is right” (Winter, 1992) and those who lead constructive change (Fuller et al., 2006). Such behaviors are extremely important in today's environment described by the U.S. Military as “volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous” (Ployhart, Schmitt, & Tippins, 2017, p. 300). In such an environment, individuals may be more likely to skirt instead of embrace responsibility. Thus, this study is academically relevant to establish a unified body of scientific knowledge from which to build upon, and practically relevant to spur future research which may provide recommendations to select, identify, and nurture responsibility in others.

Our study has four purposes. The first is to conduct a brief literature review across the disciplines with the aim of identifying the themes,

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meanings, and definitions of responsibility. The second is to develop and propose a taxonomy of the conceptualizations of responsibility. The third is to discern the manifestations of individual responsibility using a lexical analysis. The fourth is to extend the theoretical development of responsibility to organizational context and application by conducting a series of qualitative interviews with organizational leaders.

2. Theoretical development

Our brief review spans across five responsibility disciplines that we identified from the literature (morality, leadership, work design, extrarole behaviors, and education).

2.1. Moral responsibility

Moral responsibility considers responsibility as attributing actions to an agent, holding the agent accountable for those actions, and being liable for something or someone (Ricoeur, 1992; Robinson, 2009; Shoemaker, 2011; Twiss, 1977). The dominant themes are having a sense of obligation or duty, being accountable to others in fulfilling obligations, and having a concern for others (Ricoeur, 1992; Robinson, 2009; Shoemaker, 2011; Twiss, 1977). Twiss (1977) proposed two pairs of elements to responsibility. The first is accountability/liability. Responsibility is assigned to a person, and one is liable for the consequences or outcomes associated with that responsibility. The second is rationality/absence of neglect. A responsible person is expected to act rationally, to have forethought and to exercise judgment in the evaluation of consequences when deciding on actions or inactions to take. He also distinguished descriptive, normative, and role responsibility. Descriptive responsibility is associated with attributions of past actions and causal outcomes while normative responsibility is associated with expectations for the future fulfillment of obligations. Role responsibility assumes aspects of both descriptive (liability for past actions) and normative (expectations for the fulfillment of obligations connected with a given role) responsibility. Twiss (1977) emphasized that duties of a role are “strongly other-regarding”.

Ricoeur (1992) posited that responsibility is well understood in its juridical usage as an obligation to compensate those we have wronged by accepting punishment. Ricoeur observed that, outside its juridical usage, the concept of responsibility becomes vague. He attributed that vagueness to a “proliferation and dispersion of uses” (p. 11). Nevertheless, he noted that responsibility retains its association with obligation, “to fulfill certain duties” (p. 12). He emphasized attributing an action to its author and putting it on the person's account.

Robinson (2009) viewed responsibility as greater than the individual; as a shared relationship based on core virtues such as awareness and integrity determined by roles. He proposed that responsibility is three interconnected concepts: imputability, accountability, and liability. Imputability “demands” reflection and adjustment, a learning process based on moral awareness or character. Accountability is being answerable to someone, and is based on behaviors that build trust. Liability is the notion of shared, or even universal, responsibility, including the sense of caring for others and being responsible for something or someone.

Shoemaker (2011) argued that a comprehensive theory of moral responsibility accommodates attributability, answerability, and accountability. He suggested that a comprehensive theory should explicate the following two requirements: “(a) what is required in order to be responsible for one's actions and attitudes and (b) what is required in order for others to be justified in holding one responsible” (p. 604). He called for a comprehensive theory of moral responsibility, and acknowledged the lack of a single, unifying theory. He suggested that there can be cases where someone is not answerable for attributable actions. To be accountable is to be held to account for one's actions in fulfilling the expectations people make on one another in constituting their relationship, thus it is open to praise and blame.

In summary, moral responsibility encompasses attributing actions to an agent, holding the agent accountable, and being liable for something or someone. It is thus operationalized through judgments of one's attributability, answerability, and accountability.

2.2. Leadership responsibility

Leadership concerns influencing others and coordinating their actions toward some common goal (Stogdill, 1948). Leadership responsibility includes self-regulation in the exercise of power or authority (Fayol, 1949/2013; Winter, 1991), and adherence to moral codes and values (Barnard, 1938). Barnard (1938) described responsibility as one of two main components of leadership. The first component is technical skills (e.g., knowledge, skills, abilities, and technical expertise), the second is responsibility, which he described as dependability and quality of action linked to morals. Morals are our sense of right and wrong. Our capacity for self-regulation inhibits our desires and impulsive actions counter to our value system and facilitates consistency with our sense of what is right. He clarified that the process is not rational, but emotional and sentimental. “When the tendency is strong and stable there exists a condition of responsibility” (p. 261). He suggested that morals develop over time from different roles, education, and influences and become codes that govern behavior. Barnard (1938) acknowledged that a leader's level of responsibility will vary with respect to each developed moral code in a given domain. Thus, responsibility can have a state-like, situational quality, but he suggests that overall it is predominantly trait-like. Given that people acquire moral codes from multiple sources, he noted that some are widely held in the population (e.g., citizenship behaviors and obligations), while others are individual specific. When moral codes come into conflict, the dominant code will prevail. He suggested that the solidity of one's moral code is what ties responsibility to dependability.

Stogdill (1948) surveyed the leadership literature for studies that identified traits of leaders and identified five traits, one of which was responsibility. He grouped under responsibility: dependability, initiative, persistence, aggressiveness, self-confidence, and desire to excel. He included responsibility among the basic traits essential to our understanding of leadership qualities and leadership training.

Fayol, 1949/2013 included *authority and responsibility* as a compound principle. Authority is comprised of official and personal components and responsibility is “a corollary of authority”; more specifically, “authority is not to be conceived of apart from responsibility, that is apart from sanction—reward or penalty” (p. 57). Thus, responsibility is self-regulation in the exercise of authority. Fayol suggested that responsibility is manifested as personal integrity and high moral character, or the “safeguard against the abuse of authority” (p. 57). Those who accept responsibility are worthy of recognition for they have courage. He stated, “responsibility is feared as much as authority is sought after” (p. 57).

In summary, leadership responsibility concerns authority and the adherence to moral codes and effective self-regulation while in a position of power. Responsibility is mostly treated as a stable personality trait. A means of measurement of leadership responsibility used by Winter (1992) was thematic apperception tests to score stories for the presence and frequency of reference to moral standards, inner obligation to act, showing concern for others, having concern about consequences, and indications of self-judgment.

2.3. Work design responsibility

The work design literature includes felt responsibility as a central variable and identified its antecedents and outcomes (Fuller et al., 2006; Hackman & Oldham, 1976). Felt responsibility for work outcomes is one of three psychological states at the core of the model. It connotes being the cause of an outcome, defined as the degree people feel accountable for their work. Hackman and Oldham (1976) found

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