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The Relationship Between Corporate Social Responsibility And Public Relations: Evidence From a Scale Development Study*

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This paper reports evidence from a field study in Australia aimed at testing a theoretical model of corporate social responsiveness that describes organizations enacting stakeholder relationships through their social responsibility orientation and their public relations orientation. The study demonstrates how an organizational orientation to social responsibility contributes to performance by using public relations, it its broadest sense, to reduce conflict with stakeholders.

The corporate public relations function is central to the implementation of corporate social responsiveness, yet few studies have explicitly explored the processes by which public relations or related corporate functions contribute to social performance (notable exceptions include Bhambri & Sonnenfeld, 1988 and Miles, 1987).

The term public relations is used in this study to describe the corporate function that manages relationships with strategic constituencies (Hutton, 1999), a function that goes by many names in a business setting, including corporate affairs, external affairs, community relations, public affairs, investor relations, corporate communications, and so on. Our use of the term public relations as an umbrella term to describe the organizational function that adjusts business to society and society to business is consonant with the emerging behavioral paradigm in public relations theory and practice. The behavioral paradigm rejects the "engineering of consent" approach that underpinned mass communication approaches to public relations that dominated most of the twentieth century. It embraces the view that markets are attracted to organizations that create mutually beneficial relationships and that stakeholders are less likely to punish or withdraw legitimacy from organizations that establish mutually beneficial relationships with them (Heath, 2001).

We adopt the term public relations in this study as it denotes a more holistic understanding of the stakeholder relationship management function than, for example, is denoted by the term public affairs with its traditional emphasis on non-market external stakeholders (Fleisher & Blair, 1999). The term public relations is also preferred over the generic term stakeholder relations because it specifically incorporates a communicative, symbolic relationship dimension. We use the term public relations in this study to refer to the relationships with all salient stakeholders or publics, be they internal or external, market or non-market, that enhance or impede corporate success or legitimacy.

This paper describes a survey study of 205 Australian public affairs, investor relations and public relations managers on the relationship between corporate social responsibility (CSR) and public relations (PR). The study applies the methodological recommendations for scale development outlined by Nunnally and Bernstein (1994) to develop measures of PR and CSR. This paper contributes to the development of a theory of corporate social responsiveness by (a) advancing a model that explains how organizations enact relationships with stakeholders through their CSR and PR orientations, and by (b) reporting on the results of field research aimed at demonstrating the independence of the public relations orientation (PRO) and corporate social responsibility orientation (CSRO) constructs and the proposed relationships between them.

The Concept of Orientation

Original measures were required for this study since commonly used proxy measures of CSR such as the KLD ratings are not available in Australia. Further, the well-tested measure of corporate social responsibility orientation developed by Aupperle (1984) was considered unsuitable because of its emphasis on discretionary behavior such as philanthropy as the peak expression of social responsibility, a notion not generally supported in Australian business (CCPA, 2000). In addition, commonly agreed measures of public relations are lacking.

The concept of orientation as an organization-level behavioral response pattern was used to operationalize measures of PR and CSR. The decision to focus on orientation as a set of inter-related goals and behaviors, rather than as a set of attitudes (eg Aupperle, 1984) follows the conceptualization of market orientation as the ability to behaviorally respond to market information (Baker & Sinkula, 1999) and the conceptualization of strategic orientation as an alignment of strategy, structure and process (Miles, Snow, Meyer, & Coleman Jr., 1978). Thus, orientation is understood in this study to comprise a firm's goals, behaviors and stakeholder transactions as they pertain to its CSR and PR.

The social issues in management literature and the public relations literature were used to derive a model of the dimensions of CSRO and PRO. The goal dimension of CSRO comprises stakeholder engagement, which is the involvement or participation of stakeholders in the firm's operations or the act of bringing stakeholder interests to bear on the operations of the firm. The behavior dimension of CSRO comprises ethical business behavior and value attunement, that is, the extent to which values are consciously incorporated into business decision making (Swanson, 1999). The behavior dimension of CSRO comprises accountability, or the extent to which social performance is measured and reported. Thus, our concept of CSRO emerges from the social responsiveness stream of the business and society literature. It builds on the stakeholder management component of Wood's three-part model of corporate social performance (Wood, 1991) and answers Frederick's call (Frederick, 1994) for new techniques for managing social responsiveness (which he termed CSR_2).

The goal dimension of PRO comprises the pursuit of both behavioral and symbolic stakeholder relationships (Grunig, 1993). The behavior dimension of PRO comprises interfunctional co-ordination of information about the stakeholder environment, including the integration of the public relations function with line management (Miles, 1987), a strategic role for public relations, and adequate resources for the function. The behavior dimension of PRO is dialogue with stakeholders. Our concept of PRO emerges from the behavioral paradigm for public relations. In our concept, organizations with high PRO place impression management activities in the service of substantive behavioral relationships with stakeholders.

Theory and hypotheses

The behavioral paradigm for public relations is explicit in its incorporation of social responsibility as a requirement for effective and ethical public relations. Public relations "becomes" the practice of social responsibility when practitioners incorporate moral reasoning into their personal and professional decision processes and when the organizations they act for incorporate values and moral reasoning into their management processes (Grunig & Grunig, 1996). Dialogue is considered a "focal concept" for ethical public relations because "dialogue is a precondition for any legitimate corporate conduct that affects a public of that organization" (Pearson, 1989: 128). Therefore, we hypothesise that public relations orientation would be high in organizations where CSR orientation is high.

Stakeholder theory suggests social responsiveness might contribute to business performance, since firms with effective stakeholder management processes are more likely to ward off the negative effects of stakeholder actions (Wood & Jones, 1998: 344). Such effects might include strikes, boycotts, the passage of undesirable legislation or costly disputes with stakeholders. Indeed, a three-nation study of public relations effects found that conflict avoidance with stakeholders is an outcome of bestpractice public relations (Dozier, Grunig, & Grunig, 1995). Thus, our second hypothesis is that firms with high CSR orientation and high PR orientation will contribute to business performance by reducing conflict with stakeholders.

Firms are responsive to their stakeholders because they require legitimacy for long-term survival (Dowling & Pfeffer, 1975). Legitimacy results from organizational actions and communications (such as the pursuit of behavioral and symbolic relationships), but is conferred by the organizations' publics. It can be achieved by behaving in a manner congruent with social values, and by communication that identifies the organization with legitimated symbols and institutions (ibid). Further, cognitive legitimacy, the most powerful type of legitimacy (Suchman, 1995), requires organizations to be comprehensible (Aldrich & Fiol, 1994), suggesting the centrality of public relations communications to organizations' establishment and maintenance of legitimacy. Studies have also confirmed a role for external affairs in the delivery of social performance (eg Miles, 1987; Bhambri & Sonnenfeld, 1988). Our third hypothesis is therefore that the contribution of CSRO to business performance would be mediated by PRO.

Organizational legitimacy is also achieved by using public affairs strategies that either buffer an organization from the negativities in its socio-political environment, or by using public affairs strategies that bridge with or adapt to, the environment (Meznar & Nigh, 1995). Legitimacy is established and maintained when organizations are well understood and taken for granted (Suchman, 1995), a scenario that suggests harmony in stakeholder-organization relationships. In the alternative scenario, legitimacy gaps result in social conflict (Sethi, 1979). Therefore, our fourth hypothesis is that the use of public affairs buffering and bridging strategies will be positively associated with conflict avoidance effects. However, social responsiveness requires a reduction in business defensiveness (Frederick, 1994); thus our fifth hypothesis predicts that bridging strategies will be more strongly associated with PRO and CSRO than buffering strategies.

Meznar and Johnson's (1996) public affairs buffering and bridging strategies were used in this study to help demonstrate the validity of our constructs with respect to corporate responsiveness to social and political non-market stakeholders. However, as noted, our conception of CSRO and PRO addresses market stakeholders as well. Our final hypothesis is therefore that customer orientation, which has been empirically demonstrated to contribute to business performance (eg Narver & Slater, 1990) will be positively correlated with CSRO and PRO. The hypothesised relationships are depicted in Model 1. In sum, our theoretical model describes two new constructs, corporate social responsibility orientation and public relations orientation, which contribute to business performance by using public affairs buffering and bridging strategies which reduce conflict with stakeholders.

Method and Results

Operationalization of variables

The theoretical model tested used PRO, CSRO and market orientation as independent variables, business performance as the dependent variable, and public affairs strategies and conflict avoidance effects as intervening variables (see Model 1). Following the methodology recommended by Nunnally for the construction of psychometric scales (Nunnally et al., 1994), initial item pools were generated resulting in 56 items for CSRO and 60 items for PRO. A seven-point Likert scale format was used where 1 = "strongly disagree" and 7 = "strongly agree". Following compilation, the items were reviewed by three academic experts and three industry experts for content and face validity, and then subjected to two pilot tests. Exploratory factor analysis and reliability tests supported the existence of two factors, CSRO and PRO, and the hypothesized sub-dimensions. Areas where psychometric soundness of the measures could be improved were identified, resulting in a refined CSRO scale comprised of 24 items and a refined PRO scale comprised of 30 items. We attempted to minimize social desirability bias by negatively wording about half the items, and by assuring respondents of anonymity.

Customer orientation was measured using the Narver and Slater (1990) measure of market orientation, which comprises three factors of customer orientation, competitor orientation and interfunctional co-ordination. This scale was selected because it has been shown in Australia to have better cross-group and cross-industry equivalence than the alternative instrument (Mavondo & Farrell, 2000).

Public affairs buffering and bridging strategies were measured using the Meznar & Johnson scales. A scale for self-reported conflict avoidance effects was constructed based on conflict avoidance effects reported in a qualitative study by Dozier, Grunig and Grunig (1995). Business performance was measured using the self-report scales developed by Saimee and Roth (Saimee & Roth, 1992). Several studies support the reliability of self-reported performance measures (eg Dess & Robinson, 1984).

Method and demographics

Next, the full theoretical model was assessed in a self-report mail survey using a list provided by the Centre for Corporate Public Affairs in Melbourne. This list is the most comprehensive list of senior in-house public affairs (and related functions) in Australia. Of the 602 deliverable surveys, 205 useable questionnaires were returned, giving a response rate of 34%. Respondents came from 160 organizations in every state of Australia. The responding organizations comprised foreign owned multinational corporations (n=52), Australian owned multinational corporations (n=27), Australian domestic corporations (n=23), government owned or controlled businesses (n=40), and other organizations such as professional associations and government departments (n=18). Demographic data collected from 20 executives at non-responding organizations (10% of non-responding organizations) revealed no significant differences between respondents and nonrespondents. There were also no differences between managers with the title of public affairs and managers with the title of public relations. The respondents comprised 42% who reported directly to their chief executive officer or top manager and a further 44% who reported one level below that. This is comparable with results of other surveys of public affairs managers in Australia (Post & ACPA, 1993). Approximately 40% of the sample was women.

Results

Rigorous criteria were applied to further purification of the scales using principal components analysis with Varimax rotation and calculation of co-efficient alpha. First, the factors extracted needed to relate meaningfully to the theorized dimensions and sub-dimensions of CSRO and PRO. Second, items needed to load on one factor only. A cut-off item-to-total correlation of .3 was employed for this purpose and only factors with eigenvalues of more than .1 were retained. Third, parsimony in scale length was an objective, since the scales are designed with management use in mind. Therefore, items were assessed for their contribution to co-efficient alpha and any underperforming items were dropped.

We began by subjecting all items for both scales to exploratory principal components analysis with Varimax rotation. Three factors emerged, one containing items from the CSRO scale, one containing items from the PRO scale, and a third comprising items from both scales relating to a stakeholder engagement goal. In other words, data analysis indicated that CSRO and PRO share a common goal, stakeholder engagement. This factor comprised four items with a co-efficient alpha of .64.

We then separately subjected the items remaining in the CSRO and PRO scales to the same process. After purification as described above, we were left with two scales, each with good overall reliability (CSRO, n = 13, α = .74; PRO, n = 19, α = .87). Within-scale factor structures generally supported the proposed theoretical constructs. Factors and co-efficient alphas for the CSRO scale were ethical business behavior (.64), value attunement (.50), and accountability (.86). Factors and co-efficient alphas for the PRO scale were behavioral and symbolic relationships (.80), interfunctional co-ordination and strategy (. 77), resources (.83) and dialogue (. 64). These reliability co-efficients are considered satisfactory, especially since some of the sub-dimensions represent relatively broad constructs (such as stakeholder engagement, dialogue, ethical business behavior and value attunement), which can result in reduced item homogeneity and inter-item correlations but maximize breadth of measurement of a given construct (Boyle, 1991). A two-tailed Pearson correlation for the purified constructs revealed a significant relationship ($r = .513$, $n = 205$, $p < .01$), supporting our first hypothesis.

To test our second hypothesis, that high CSRO and high PRO would contribute to business performance by reducing stakeholder conflict, we performed a regression analysis that confirmed that conflict avoidance partially mediated the individual effects of PRO and CSRO on performance. CSRO was significantly correlated with conflict avoidance effects ($r = .291$, $n = 204$, $p < .01$), as was PRO ($r = .404$, n = 204, $p < .01$). The effect of PRO on business performance was partially mediated by conflict avoidance (F (1, 201) = 4.50, p = 0.0350, R^2 Adj = 0.02). The effect of CSRO on business performance was also partially mediated by conflict avoidance (F (1,201), = 7.62 p = 0.0063, $R^2 = 0.03$).

Our third hypothesis, that the contribution of CSRO to business performance would be mediated by PRO, was also confirmed. CSRO accounted for 6% of variance in business performance (F (1, 203) = 15.10, $p = 0.0001$, R^2 Adj = 0.064). When PRO was added to the equation, it partially mediated the relationship (F (1,202) = 9.2688, p = 0.0026, R^2 = 0.04).

Hypothesis four, that public affairs buffering and bridging strategies were positively associated with conflict avoidance effects, was supported (r = .276, $n = 204$, p = <0.001 for buffering and $r = .361$, $n = 204$, p = <0.001 for bridging). Bridging strategies were also more strongly correlated with PRO and CSRO than buffering strategies, although all were positive and significant ($r = .496$, $n = 205$, p = <0.001 for bridging and PRO, $r = .525$, $n = 205$, p = < 0.001 for bridging and CSRO, $r = .150$, $n = 205$, $p = 0.032$ for buffering and PRO, $r = .290$, $n = 205$, p = < 0.001 for buffering and CSRO). Thus hypothesis five was supported. Social bridging was the only one of the four public affairs strategies tested to be significantly correlated with business performance (R^2 Adj = 0.05), a relationship partially accounted for by conflict avoidance (F (1,201) = 4.50, p = 0.0350, R^2 Adj = 0.02).

Our sixth hypothesis, that customer orientation would be positively associated with CSRO and PRO, was supported ($r = .537$, $n = 171$, p = <0.001 for PRO and $r = .400$, $n = 171$, p = <0.001 for CSRO).

When all possible interactions between CSRO, PRO and market orientation were included in the analysis, the three factors together accounted for 12% of variance in business performance. Only CSRO had a significant unique contribution ($R^2 = 0.025$), an effect partially mediated by PRO.

Validity

Construct and predictive validity were established through the theoretical model that was tested in the survey. Discriminant validity is usually established by comparing a new scale with an existing scale of the same construct, or by using different methods to examine the same variable. As noted, no previous measures existed for these constructs. Nor was it feasible in this study to obtain data through different methods such as interviews, although this will be done in the next test of these scales. We therefore elected to examine a correlation matrix of the eight separate factors (stakeholder engagement, three CSRO factors and four PRO factors) in the expectation that moderate, but not high, correlations would demonstrate their independence. All correlations were positive and mostly in the range of .2 to .5, with all but one significant to .01. However, the correlation between the stakeholder engagement factor and the behavioral-symbolic relationship factor in the PRO scale was extremely high (r = .68), suggesting that these two factors are not measuring different dimensions and that future versions of the instrument should treat stakeholder engagement as the single goal for both the PRO and CSRO constructs. Thus, the constructs of PRO and CSRO are independent in their behavior and transaction dimensions, but not in the goal dimension.

Discussion

Thus far this paper has described a study that examines the relationship between public relations and social responsiveness. It aimed first, to develop scales for measuring two new constructs called public relations orientation and corporate social responsibility orientation. Second, it aimed to test a theoretical model, which posited that the interaction of CSRO and PRO influences business performance through the choice of public affairs strategies and their subsequent impact on reducing conflict with stakeholders. The model recognizes the centrality of stakeholder cognition of the focal firm in achieving corporate legitimacy (that legitimacy being dependent on a firm's effective communication and behavior). Further, the value of the interaction between CSRO and PRO is suggested by stakeholder theory, which predicts that firms with effective stakeholder relationship management approaches are more successful. Both short term and long term benefits may therefore accrue to firms with high CSRO and high PRO.

With respect to the first objective, the findings supported the reliability and validity of the two new constructs for the Australian context. Nunnally (Nunnally et al., 1994) suggests that a reliability of .80 for constructs in group research is adequate, although other scholars suggest that .70 or even .60 is adequate in the early stages of scale development. On this basis, the reliability of the overall scales (PRO = .87, CSRO = .74) can be viewed as acceptable for a first study. Further work is required to improve the dimensionality of the scales, assess their cross-cultural applicability, as well as the interrelationships suggested by this study.

With respect to the second objective, the study results demonstrated that corporate social responsibility contributes to business performance when a firm's public relations function employs both dialogic and symbolic approaches to stakeholder relationships, which reduce conflict with stakeholders. While both buffering and bridging strategies may be used, the balance is towards greater use of social bridging strategies that help organizations adapt to their environment.

Social bridging strategies may be effective at reducing conflict with stakeholders because they help firms achieve congruence with stakeholder's values. Therefore, the use of social bridging strategies may moderate the progression of value attunement described by Swanson (1999) in which a firm's value selection, retention, and enactment processes contribute to its ability to achieve value attunement, an ideal type of social responsiveness.

Social bridging may also be understood as part of the reciprocal processes of organizational identity and impression management described by Dutton and Dukerich (1991). Social bridging activities may be designed to actively manage stakeholders' impressions or images of a firm, and may also be selected to confirm or express an aspect of organizational identity. A firm may see stakeholder engagement as an embedded aspect organizational identity, through a cognition that stakeholders matter.

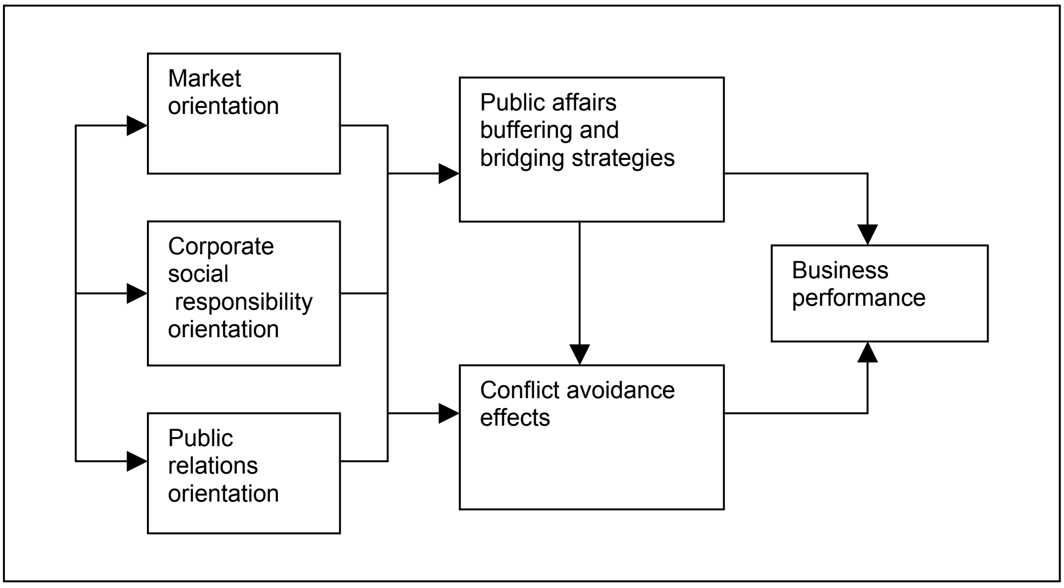
Firms in which stakeholder engagement is embedded as an aspect of organizational identity are likely to score highly on both CSRO and PRO, as suggested by our results. Such firms are likely to have a high capacity for managing the social responsibilities that attend their stakeholder relationships, and adopt strategies that confirm this aspect of identity. Impression management theory and organization identity theory thus offer additional explanations for the significant correlation between CSRO and PRO, and suggest why social bridging is more important than other strategies in the context of social responsiveness, even though both buffering and bridging may be important to firm performance in other contexts.

Indeed, our results linking social bridging and performance stand in contrast to the results reported by Meznar and Johnson (1996), who found a small, statistically insignificant negative correlation between social bridging and economic performance. The differences may be partially due to the respondent set: Meznar and Johnson used only US MNCs whereas this study engaged a wide range of organizations. The Meznar and Johnson research design also included a number of variables not tested in our study, and vice versa, and different measures of business or economic performance were used. Additionally, cultural differences between Australian and US public affairs managers may have influenced respondents' interpretation of the items measuring public affairs strategies. These factors may also explain the lower coefficient alphas obtained in our study, which was, to our knowledge, the first attempt to use Meznar and Johnson's buffering and bridging scales outside the USA.

Another variable intended to add evidence of construct validity was market orientation. Market orientation is generally a measure applied to marketing managers, not corporate affairs or other types of managers. This may explain why market orientation accounted for less variance in business performance in this study than in others. For example, in our study, market orientation accounted for around 9% of variance, compared to around 40% in the Narver and Slater study (1990). Our results may also be because our data was drawn from a range of organizations, which did not all have end-use customers and may therefore not be strongly market oriented. For example, retail organizations accounted for 1.5% of responders (with mean MO 6.07 out of possible 7), but resources comprised 31% (with mean MO of 4.88).

This study has demonstrated how an organizational orientation to social responsibility contributes to performance by using public relations, in its broadest sense, to reduce conflict with stakeholders. Variables related to external non-market social and political stakeholders, and market stakeholders (i.e. customers), were used to help demonstrate construct validity. Given that this paper has argued that PRO describes an organizational stance towards internal as well as external stakeholders, future studies should seek additional evidence of construct validity by theorizing about the relationship of these constructs to employees. This paper has also suggested that firms with high CSRO and PRO have developed a competency that may be an element of organizational identity and may contribute to legitimacy as conferred by its stakeholders. Case studies would be required to understand whether CSR management capacity could be understood in terms of organizational identity. Correlational studies of stakeholder attributes of performance or relationship quality would help establish whether firms with high CSR management capacity enjoy better reputations for social performance.

Model 1: A model to test the proposed constructs of CSRO and PRO



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