

# CONFERENCE NOTES AND REPORTS

## Symposium Notes on Ethics and Social Responsibility, 14th and 15th of April 2011

### ISCTE – Lisbon University Institute

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This much awaited symposium brought together practitioners and scholars involved in some aspect of the broad concept of social responsibility. Although not necessarily limited to, the symposium mainly focused on the individual and corporate responsibility in different organizational settings. The symposium was roughly divided in panel and poster sessions covering a wide range of topics, such as: corporate misconduct, individual ethics in organizations, ethical decision making, business ethics, ethics and organizational performance etc.

The symposium was opened and closed by two key note speakers, Prof. Daniel Arenas Vives and Prof. Jan Jonker respectively. Both professors delivered inspiring reflections on the need for a sustainable business practices. Overwhelming number of researchers coming from Portugal, UK, Turkey, Brasil, USA, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Italy, Belgium, Denmark, Netherlands, Spain, presented their findings at the symposium. We witnessed a lot of collaborative efforts among researchers with the aim of providing a large scale analysis of across sectoral and industry specific socially responsible initiatives.

The reappearing theme that deserves further explanation was Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR herein), understood in its widest terms. Originating from the business and management literature in the 1970s, the concept of CSR has recently gained impetus thanks to globalization. Although we lack a scientific consensus on the exact

definition of the concept of CSR, we can agree at least on three essential constituents that define the membership boundary of the CSR concept: (i) its voluntary nature, (ii) its multi-stakeholder participation, (iii) its objective to balance between profit orientation and social concerns. The symposium styled itself as a forum where both practitioners and researchers explore empirical and theoretical aspects of the CSR regime.

The numerous research projects presented at the symposium were significantly skewed in favor of eclectic case studies as opposed to theoretical exploration of the state of art or meta-CSR empirical analysis. Notwithstanding the variations, one could discern three major research streams at this symposium: one focused on consumer attitudes, another on corporate mis/conduct and employee's perception of it, and the third on the impact of the CSR strategies, be it internal or external. For the purpose of this report, I would have to single out presentations that captured my attention and would illustrate the diversity of case studies.

Within the first research stream Selin Türkel and Burcu Öksüz from Izmir University of Economics and Ana Patrícia Duarte and Carla Mouro from ISCTE presented innovative ways of measuring consumer attitudes towards CSR in Turkey and Portugal respectively. In their ongoing study, Türkel and Öksüz constructed experiments where they control for different communication platforms in order to explore their effects on the consumer attitudes. While the completed survey of Duarte and Mouro demonstrated that the external CSR initiatives have significantly greater effect on consumer behavior than the internal initiatives.

The second stream that emerged at the symposium was focusing on the corporate conduct and the perception of the employees. The joint effort of Ana Patrícia Duarte and José Conçalves des Naves explored the effects of employees' perception of the company's socially responsible behavior on the employees' commitment. Susana Leal, Arménio Rego and Arnaldo Coelho gave special contribution in that they provided a psychological twist to the research by looking at the way the employees' perceptions mediated through the psychological capital influence the Organizational Citizenship Behavior (OSB).<sup>1</sup> In similar lines, Raquel Matos and Eduardo Simões explored the effects of the ethical climate on the OCB. It is worthwhile mentioning the research of Chiara Mio and Alvise Favotto from University of Venice who looked at the differences in perceptions along the hierarchy line of a company.

The third stream of analysis was exploring the effects of the CSR initiatives. Particularly interesting was the study of Maria Vieira de Melo and Diego César de Vasconcelos

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<sup>1</sup> The employees conduct, apart from their specific job description that influences the operation within the company.

who explored the effects of the CSR practices in the construction industry on the industrialization and the environment in Brazil. Valuable conclusion was also reached by Ana Patrícia Duarte and Sónia Conçalves who controlled for the internal and the external CSR strategies. In turn, they detected a positive impact of the internal CSR strategies on the employees' conduct.

It was especially rewarding seeing how the concept of CSR has left its European hearthland and gained sufficient impetus in other regions. Mohammed Sait Dinc and Teoman Duman study on the employees' perception of the marketing strategies in Bosnia and Herzegovina was a case in point from the Balkans. Pelin Baytekin and Deniz Maden analysis of the nexus of CSR and education where they investigated Turkcell's CSR initiative was yet another promising example. It has been rewarding to learn that many companies have realized the need to reassert their competitive position by improving their Corporate Citizenship role within the communities.

One presentation that deserves mention in this report was that of Robson Sø Rocha who challenged some of the tenets of Varieties of Capitalism scholarship. In his study, Rocha was exploring the survival strategies of liberal market economic actors that operate within a coordinated market economy setting. Namely, his case study of an equity firm that bought the Danish TDC represents a valuable contribution to the neo-institutional theories.

To the great pleasure of those who put more emphasis on theory, myself included, the symposium offered a theoretical panel where Rosa Slegers and me provided Aristotelian and constructivist twist to the debate. Slegers put forward the idea of a virtue-based approach to business ethics by using insights from evolutionary biology. Myself, I tried to provide a critical reading of the existing theoretical interpretations of CRS and argued for a constructivist understanding of the CSR potential to foster good corporate behavior.

This report, by singling out papers, cannot do justice to the tremendous effort put by all the scholars whose attendance was highly appreciated. The vast number of undertaken studies is indicative of the importance that both the academic and the practitioner communities place in the concept of social responsibility. Although we lack a meta-CSR analysis and the jury is still out there to judge the impact of the CSR regime, the symposium brought us a step further in our understanding of the CSR regime. One can only hope that the critical theorists would be proven wrong in their assessment of CSR as an oxymoronic concept that cannot replace the good old regulations' approach.