

CORPORATE SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY IN SPORT: TOWARDS A CONTEXT-INTENSIVE AND SECTOR-SPECIFIC EMPIRICAL EXAMINATION

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Abstract

Introduction

The term corporate social responsibility (CSR) has been discussed in academic literature for decades, but lately it has become significantly more 'popular'. The sport field has not been immune to this development. Despite the proliferation of empirical research examining CSR in sport industry (e.g. Babiak and Wolfe, 2009; Sheth and Babiak, 2010; Walters and Tacon, 2010; Babiak, 2010), in most empirical CSR studies the social context of the organisations within which CSR is developed and implemented has not enjoyed sufficient attention. A notable exception is the work of Babiak and her colleagues (Wolfe, 2009 and Trendafilova, 2011) who explicitly incorporate social context in their analysis by drawing on the institutional perspective, albeit without explicitly acknowledging the limitations of this approach. The point of departure of this paper is that a critical assessment of organisation theory's perspectives is of paramount importance to better understanding the social context of sport organisations in relation to the development and implementation of CSR.

The paper draws on a research-in-progress that looks at CSR within a specific business sector, namely English top-tier football. It provides a critical assessment of organisation theory's perspectives on social context and, with this sector-specific research in mind, demonstrates that, in order for an empirical CSR-focussed research in the sport management field to be regarded as 'context-intensive', the social context surrounding it should be thoroughly and explicitly addressed at the outset.

The first approach to be scrutinised is the institutional perspective, where CSR engagement may be seen as the product of isomorphic behaviour within the English football industry. Although the pursuit of legitimacy as a driver behind CSR cannot be overlooked, the problem with this

perspective lies in its tendency to assume that managerial actions within football clubs make little difference to the social context, focussing instead on 'external' environment as the key to CSR development and implementation.

The population ecology perspective assumes that environmental constraints dominate organisational behaviour, thus putting emphasis on macro-issues while neglecting individual actors' roles (in this case too, the CSR managers in their respective football clubs) that may shape the organisational reality.

Unlike the abovementioned perspectives on context, through the cultural perspective organisational context can be defined based upon a set of individuals' (i.e. the CSR manager in each club) or groups' (i.e. the twenty Premier League's CSR managers collectively) perceptions of that context. A possible sticking point here is that this perspective does not adequately acknowledge other influences, particularly external ones (e.g. the English political landscape, pressures from football governing bodies legislation and so on).

Another, rather dynamic perspective from which the social context can be examined is the political perspective which recognises that individuals and groups have the ability to shape their social context. However, by explaining CSR development and implementation as primarily a product of power relationships, other important elements of CSR (e.g. ethics) run the risk of being sidelined.

The structural contingency perspective can provide a sound platform for the discussion of CSR development and implementation through its acknowledgment that football clubs adjust themselves to contextual changes, especially market dictates. The fact that this perspective stresses the role of leadership and power in shaping the organisational context is one of its key strengths. However, its failure to acknowledge any cultural variations renders attempts to utilise it for building CSR theory problematic.

Approaching CSR theorisation in football from the cognitive perspective moves the discussion away from managerial 'doing' and towards managerial 'interpreting'. The emphasis here is on the potential of personal cognition to shape organisational context and the recognition that formal and informal organisational structures co-exist. Given that this empirical research-in-progress departed from the assumption that managers' perceptions of CSR are key to understanding its development and implementation in English football, it seemed most suitable to adopt the cognitive approach to social context. However, while developing substantial theory on CSR in football it became clear that the aforementioned contextual approaches have no clear-cut boundaries and that a strong overlapping has frequently been observed between them. The paper at hand recognises, therefore, that the task of defining the social context within which CSR unfolds is complicated by delving into these various organisation theory perspectives. Such an exercise, however, is crucial – especially when discussions concerning CSR and sport are at their current embryonic stage. It is perhaps through more context-intensive and sector-specific research endeavours that scholarly discussions on CSR and sport can advance.

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