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Responsibility and Organization Science: Integrating Micro and Macro Perspectives

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Abstract. Responsibility is an important issue in organizations and society. Employees, managers, and owners can behave responsibly in the workplace and beyond. In addition, these individuals can be influenced by the propensity of the organization to behave responsibly. Organizations can pursue strategies that take into account responsibility at the product, firm, industry, and societal levels. This virtual special issue examines 19 articles published in *Organization Science* that consider responsibility at multiple levels of analysis. An important theme that emerges is that although some studies have crossed levels of analysis, future research would benefit from cross-level or more meso-based approaches.

Keywords: social responsibility • ethics • sustainability/corporate environmentalism

In this virtual issue for *Organization Science*, we assess theoretical and empirical research on themes relating to responsibility. Responsibility can pertain to individuals, for example, how individuals engage in responsible behavior toward others in organizational settings. At the individual level, responsibility involves actions that reflect a sense of obligation to serve the interests of one or more other individuals, stakeholder groups, or larger entities (e.g., an organization, profession, or society). Responsibility can also pertain to organizations as a whole, for example, how organizations formulate and implement strategies that appear to serve the interests of stakeholder groups or society as a whole, beyond the financial interests of the firm (Aguilera et al. 2007, McWilliams and Siegel 2001).

The flip side of responsibility is irresponsibility, which can also be relevant to individuals and organizations. Although the factors leading to irresponsibility are not necessarily the opposite factors that lead to responsibility. Similarly, both individuals and organizations can be simultaneously responsible and irresponsible. For example, a firm can engage in philanthropic endeavors (i.e., donating to charities), and thus be considered responsible to the greater society. However, the same firm might produce products that cause harm to consumers, and thus be irresponsible to those consumers. Alternatively, some actions might be considered responsible by some actors (i.e., to shareholders, the managerial pursual of shareholder value maximization), whereas to other actors (i.e., employees) it is irresponsible not to share organizational value with nonshareholder stakeholders. Moreover, for some actions (e.g., philanthropy), a lack of engagement might not be considered irresponsible, but simply lacking responsibility. Issues involving responsibility or irresponsibility can cross levels of analysis; for example, how the social responsibility of organizations affects worker productivity and motivation to work. The goal of this virtual issue is to understand how articles in *Organization Science* have contributed to the study of responsibility or, conversely, irresponsibility, at multiple levels of analysis.

In order to identify key articles that have addressed this issue, we searched the abstracts of all articles published in *Organization Science* since its inception (the journal was established in 1990). We identified 48 articles that have the word "responsible" or "responsibility" in the title, abstract, or list of keywords. These 48 articles were sorted to identify which ones considered responsibility as characterized above (i.e., serving the interests of others) at the individual or organizational level. This left us with 19 articles. Eight of these articles appeared to focus primarily on a micro level of analysis (i.e., individuals or groups), whereas the other 11 articles were more macro in nature (i.e., organizational, institutional, or societal levels). These 19 articles use a variety of empirical methods, including surveys, experiments, and ethnography. In addition, some of the articles develop conceptual pieces that can help guide future empirical research. As described in more detail later, the micro articles tend to view responsibility from a morality-based perspective. The theoretical basis of the macro articles was more diverse, although most are based on

a constructivist perspective, where often the organizational practices emanate from cultural and political construction processes.

We organize this virtual issue by reviewing micro articles first, followed by a similar review for the macro articles. Then we analyze the extent to which this body of work has attempted to cross levels of analysis in their consideration of themes that are relevant to responsibility. We conclude with a discussion of future research directions, especially the need for additional work that considers responsibility issues across levels.

Micro-Based Research on Responsibility

Umphress and Bingham (2011, p. 622) outlined a theoretical model designed to explain unethical but, nevertheless, pro-organizational behavior, which they define as "actions that are intended to promote the effective functioning of the organization or its members (e.g., leaders) and violate core societal values, mores, laws, or standards of proper conduct." In other words, they argued that actions on the part of individuals in an organizational context could be both responsible to the organization as a whole and irresponsible toward other individuals (e.g., lying to customers) or society as a whole (e.g., producing an unsafe product).

Umphress and Bingham (2011) claimed that positive social exchange relationships and organizational identification can foster such behavior. Thus, employees may reciprocate positive social exchange with their employers by engaging in unethical pro-organizational behaviors, such as lying to customers or clients. Moreover, strong organizational identification could compel employees to engage in unethical or irresponsible acts for the sake of the organization, especially when they participate in cognitive rationalization known as neutralization that disassociates ethicality from unethical acts. In other words, when "the ethical implications of decisions are removed, unethical acts become business decisions, not ethical dilemmas" (Umphress and Bingham 2011, p. 626).

It is important to note that in considering the implications of their model, Umphress and Bingham (2011) point toward how managers can shape ethical climates and disciplinary/control systems to avoid unethical pro-organizational behavior on the part of lower-level employees. But interestingly, given the micro-focused nature of their model, they avoid consideration of such behavior on the part of top leaders who actually make strategic business decisions. For example, personal qualities of strategic leaders, as well as governance procedures (or inactions) on the part of boards of directors, could encourage unethical pro-organizational behavior on the part of chief executive officers (CEOs).

In contrast, the effect of organizational control systems on ethical behavior was examined directly by Robertson and Anderson (1993). Using a vignette methodology, they studied the effect of organizational control systems on ethical behavior on the part of industrial salespeople. Robertson and Anderson (1993) suggested that such salespeople could potentially act irresponsibly (i.e., unethically) by, for example, overstating a customer's needs, offering kickbacks to purchasing agents, and so forth. They proposed and found that outcome-based control systems (i.e., whereby employees operate based on independence and outcomes) would lead to more unethical behavior, as compared with input-based, behavior control systems (e.g., characterized by tight supervision). Their reasoning was that under an outcome control system, "employees may become opportunistic at the expense of the organization" (Robertson and Anderson 1993, p. 620). In addition to the contextual effect of organizational control systems, Robertson and Anderson (1993) uncover some individual-level factors to be predictive of unethical behavior, including low seniority and the extent to which individuals perceive a highly competitive market.

An issue that was largely ignored by Robertson and Anderson (1993) is how control systems designed to maintain ethical behavior (i.e., input-based systems) could have negative side effects in terms of thwarting the type of initiative and creativity that might be associated with an outcome-based control system. In other words, while preventing certain aspects of unethical behavior in the short term, input-based control systems might nevertheless run counter to behavior that could benefit the organization in the long term. Again, what might seem highly responsible could simultaneously have elements of irresponsibility. Perhaps the answer is some paradoxical blend of both input- and outcome-based control systems (Smith and Lewis 2011).

In a somewhat similar manner, Arnaud and Schminke (2012) considered how other aspects of context could affect ethical behavior. However, instead of focusing on control systems, Arnaud and Schminke (2012) directed their attention to ethical climate. Their research included climate as just one aspect of the ethical context that would be relevant to ethical behavior in units of organizations. They defined climate in cognitive terms reflecting to "shared perceptions employees hold regarding the policies, practices, and procedures that an organization rewards, supports and expects" (Arnaud and Schminke 2012, p. 1768). Furthermore, they delineated climate in terms of self-versus other-oriented reasoning.

Based on an analysis of 117 departments at 103 organizations in the public, private, and nonprofit sectors, the authors found that such cognition interacts with collective moral or empathetic reasoning (i.e., another aspect of ethical context) in the prediction of ethical behavior within departments, but only for

other-focused reasoning. Furthermore, self-focused reasoning interacts with collective ethical efficacy (i.e., yet another aspect of ethical context) in the prediction of ethical behavior. In sum, three aspects of ethical context—reasoning climate, moral emotion, and collective efficacy—come together in the prediction of ethical behavior. Arnaud and Schminke (2012, p. 1775) concluded that "organizational members may agree on the right thing to do, but unless they also care about the targets of their behavior (collective empathy) and believe they have the capacity to carry out their desired actions (collective ethical efficacy), ethical behavior is unlikely to occur."

Individuals' responsibility for engaging in ethical behavior was addressed as well by Jones and Ryan (1997). They argued that individuals attempt to cognitively make sense of several factors when considering their own or another person's level of *moral responsibility* for a given act. These factors include the severity of the act's consequences, whether it is certain that the occurrence is actually moral or immoral, whether the actor is complicit in the act, and the degree to which the actor feels pressure to behave unethically. Jones and Ryan (1997) suggested that individuals will make sense of these factors in light of their need for moral approbation, which involves a desire for moral approval from oneself, from others (e.g., referent groups), or both. In other words, the individual considers the factors pertaining to moral responsibility in light of his or her desire for moral approbation. In turn, based on the perceived level of moral responsibility, the individual will plan a course of action to deal with a given situation in order to accomplish a level of moral approbation that he or she can tolerate (i.e., live with).

Like other *Organization Science* authors who have addressed responsibility, Jones and Ryan (1997) examined ambiguity surrounding both moral responsibility and moral approbation. For example, they note that "[m]any decisions can be seen as morally repugnant from the perspective of one ethical standard and morally acceptable from the perspective of another" (Jones and Ryan 1997, p. 671). For example, in line with the arguments of Umphress and Bingham (2011), executives could pursue actions that would benefit (i.e., be responsible to) shareholder interests, while simultaneously harming the interests of others (e.g., consumers). In the corporate context, such behavior might be considered morally appropriate.

Sensemaking in moral and ethical decision making was also addressed by Reinecke and Ansari (2015). These authors explored how stakeholders make sense of what is "fair" in ethically complex situations in which there are likely to be disagreements (e.g., among different stakeholders) regarding which norms and values should be given priority. They conducted an ethnographic study at Fairtrade, an organization involved in setting minimum fair-trade prices. A key finding in the research of Reinecke and Ansari (2015) was that cognitive processes alone are not exclusively responsible for what is ethical or fair. In addition, intuition and emotions come into play. Indeed, they argued that in moral reasoning processes, both cognitive and emotional facets of judgment are used to deal with particular aspects of situations. In this way, their conclusions are aligned with those of Arnaud and Schminke (2012, p. 1768) who noted that "reason and emotion each play important roles in the emergence of moral judgments and behaviors."

Reinecke and Ansari (2015) stressed how participants in a moral sensemaking process go back and forth between universalistic and particularistic modes of moral reasoning. In so doing, Reinecke and Ansari (2015, p. 885) "suggest the need to revisit some of the ideals of deliberative democracy elaborated in more recent debates on political corporate responsibility." Specifically, the authors noted that deliberative dialogue, although intended to find common ground among stakeholders. could have unintended consequences in contexts marked by extreme social inequalities, such as the agricultural environment of South Africa, where much of their research was based. The result could mean extreme disparities and unfair treatment (e.g., in terms of pricing) of marginalized stakeholders.

Collins (1997) pursued an interesting theme pertaining to the contradiction of how society as a whole has trended toward democratic and participative institutions, whereas organizations have persisted in taking a generally more authoritarian tack with regard to workplace participation. In other words, whereas society has stressed democracy and participation, the opposite can generally be said regarding many organizations within society. Ironically, Collins (1997, p. 497) stated that "proponents of authoritarianism are not welcomed to debates in the public arena and are ridiculed for supporting an ethically undesirable [and irresponsible] political philosophy." However, Collins (1997) summarized evidence that elite individuals in high positions in organizations routinely practice authoritarianism toward those who are lower in the hierarchy. Examples include the withholding of information and a lack of involvement in key decision making. Collins (1997) attributes such trends to economic efficiency and agency-based arguments to ensure productivity. Indeed, starting in business schools, these arguments largely supersede the notion of participation, which is a more ethical, humane, responsible, and fair means of managing.

Similarly to Umphress and Bingham (2011), Collins (1997) would argue that authoritarian tendencies on the part of managers are actually pursued for pro-organizational purposes, that is, to control the

behavior of lower-level employees who might otherwise not be trusted to engage in actions that serve the greater good of the organization. In other words, without authoritarian policies and associated managerial behavior, employees will not show responsibility toward the greater organization, and instead only engage in self-serving or irresponsible behavior. Collins (1997) noted an obvious inconsistency between how democracy is pursued in society, that is, allowing liberty and democratic government, and the lack of liberty and democracy in organizations.

Nevertheless, Collins (1997) stressed that a communitarian paradigm in organizations is more consistent with society's approach to liberty and democracy. Moreover, this paradigm is both ethically superior and, in the long run, more effective at accomplishing organizational goals. A communitarian approach includes such tactics as employee representatives on boards of directors, Scanlon-type gainsharing plans, employee attitude surveys, job enrichment, and employee stock ownership plans.

Whereas Collins (1997) stressed employee involvement in the overall decision making in organizations, Bode et al. (2015) considered the motivational potential of employee involvement in corporate social initiatives (CSIs) at a large consulting firm. As such, they attempted to integrate literatures on corporate social responsibility (CSR) and strategic human capital. CSI projects involved employees using their skills and efforts on initiatives that could benefit less fortunate clients (i.e., as compared with the standard commercial projects of the firm), such as foundations, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), and development agencies—all of whom could not typically afford the retail prices of services of the firm. However, the fees for these less fortunate clients were significantly reduced. Bode et al. (2015) found that allowing employees to engage in CSI projects to help these clients had a positive effect on employee retention. They reasoned that allowing employees to be involved in such endeavors improved their perceptions of the firm and fostered a sense of more meaningful work, thus leading to stronger identification with the firm, and ultimately stronger retention.

In the Bode et al. (2015) study, better performing employees were more likely to pursue CSI projects, and moreover, they accepted a significant reduction in their salaries for the duration of those projects. Remarkably, similar findings were obtained by Burbano (2016), who used experimental methodology to show how prospective employees are willing to accept reduced wages for the possibility of working with a socially responsible firm. And in line with the findings of Bode et al. (2015), the effect was strongest for higher performers. Burbano (2016) shows that social responsibility messaging on the part of firms provides a signal to employees, perhaps especially better performers, that the firm is trustworthy and treats workers fairly. Furthermore, such signaling is important for "even purely self-interested, non-prosocially oriented individuals [because] everybody prefers to be treated better" (Burbano 2016, p. 1011).

In sum, three themes emerge from the micro-based articles in *Organization Science* on responsibility. First, the term "responsibility" is not consistently used, and, instead, ethics and morality are often equated with responsibility. Second, acts of responsibility are not always "clean" in the sense of having no downside. Instead, responsibility may go hand in hand with acts of irresponsibility. Third, social responsibility exhibited at the firm level can have positive effects on individuals within the firm. We now turn our attention to selected articles in *Organization Science* on responsibility that have a clear macro focus.

Macro-Based Research on Responsibility

McDonnell (2016) has shown that some companies participate in proactive responsible strategies to alleviate threats posed by social activists (e.g., Greenpeace). These targeted firms establish partnerships with social activists and NGOs, which they use to engage in corporate-sponsored activism. Based on a comprehensive, longitudinal database of 300 large firms, McDonnell (2016) demonstrates that companies are more likely to take part in corporate-sponsored social activism when they face a reputational deficit. More importantly, she finds that adoption of corporate-sponsored activism is associated with a significant decrease in the number of challengers targeting a firm (McDonnell 2016). It appears that co-opting activists, and thus becoming allies with them, may be an effective way to engage in strategic social responsibility.

Although there have been many studies of strategy formulation, in the context of social responsibility and nonmarket strategy, there have been few rigorous analyses of implementation. The article by Sonenshein (2009) is a rare exception. Based on qualitative data from a Fortune 500 company undergoing a strategic change and a sensemaking framework, he identifies three ethical issues that arise in the aftermath of this change. The first relates to how to allocate resources for the change. Next is what he calls "homogenization" of the organization, specifically, to create a more standardized and homogenous set of routines, aesthetics, and processes in the aftermath of the strategic change. The third issue involves how to market the strategic change to customers.

Sonenshein (2009) uses these stylized facts and the ethical dimensions of each of them to develop a theory to explain why these issues have emerged. Based on a

sensemaking framework, he reports that workers tend to turn strategic issues into ethical issues, due to the existence of trigger points, ambiguity, and the use of an available employee welfare frame. The practical implications are clear: organizations that implement strategic changes need to fully consider the ethical implications of such changes and how employees will respond to them. On the theory side, research on business ethics and sensemaking need to take full account of the roles of trigger points, ambiguity, and the use of an available employee welfare frame. Chandler (2014) also discusses these critical events, taking an institutional analysis within the industry and within the firm to examine the difference between the adoption and the implementation of ethics and compliance officers.

Another popular mechanism for individuals and organizations to behave in a socially responsible manner is to engage in social entrepreneurship, which has emerged as an important research topic in recent years. It has also become widespread in practice globally, due to foundations such as Ashoka, the Skoll Foundation, and the Schwab Foundation, which actively fund and promote the achievements of social entrepreneurs. In addition, governments have been actively supporting this activity by creating new organizational frameworks for social entrepreneurship initiatives and by offering funding to these initiatives. There has also been a rapid rise in the number of social entrepreneurship centers at universities; new journals devoted to social entrepreneurship, social enterprise, and social innovation; and numerous research conferences on this topic.

Against this backdrop, Dacin et al. (2011) critique research on social entrepreneurship and identify new areas of research on this topic. Their first critique centers on the role of the social entrepreneur as a "romantic hero," noting that "there tends to be an underlying assumption that these heroic social entrepreneurs will somehow save the world" (Dacin et al. 2011, p. 1205). The authors argue that researchers should take the word "social" seriously, by exploring the role of institutions, culture, social movements, and social networks in advancing entrepreneurship. Despite their "macro" orientation, they also argue for the importance of "micro" factors, including image, identity, sensemaking, and cognitive perspectives on social entrepreneurship. In sum, Dacin et al. (2011) effectively outline a case for interdisciplinary, multilevel theory building in social entrepreneurship.

Although there is literature on the connection between various indicators of a firm's propensity to be social responsible and firm financial performance, conclusive evidence is lacking on the link between one form of corporate social responsibility, corporate philanthropy, and firm financial performance. The article by Wang et al. (2008) aims to fill this gap by analyzing a rich, longitudinal data set on corporate philanthropy, which we define as a form of corporate responsibility. The authors provide a theoretical rationale and present empirical evidence supporting the notion that the relationship between corporate philanthropy and financial performance is best characterized as following an inverse U shape and varies the level of dynamism in the firm's operational environment. That is, according to the authors, the benefits to corporate philanthropy rise initially and then gradually fall. This U-shaped pattern is consistent with economic theories of CSR suggesting that all forms of social responsibility can be viewed as a form of investment, which are ultimately subject to diminishing returns. This approach to calculating the costs and benefits of corporate philanthropy is consistent with rational assessment of the "returns" to engaging in this activity. The authors view that environmental dynamism has a moderating effect on this inverse U-shaped corporate philanthropy–firm financial performance relationship is also consistent with an economic/strategic perspective on social responsibility.

In terms of calculating of costs of unethical behavior on the part of firms, which we may conceive of as social irresponsibility, it may be useful to explore the consequences of such behavior on a firm's social capital. This social capital can be vital to the firm's survival and an important source of competitive advantage. The article by Sullivan et al. (2007) was the first major study of the impact of unethical acts by a firm on changes in American corporate networks.

The authors hypothesize that unethical acts have negative consequences for network partner quality and network structure. They also assert that this decline in partner quality in the aftermath of an unethical act is mainly the result of higher-quality firms leaving the network, with the focal firm in the network being forced to replace higher-quality firms with lower-quality ones. This suggests that unethical acts result in a decline in social capital, which could have dire consequences for firm performance.

Vasudeva (2013) takes the macro perspective on corporate responsibility to the country level. She examines the normative role of government in influencing firms' behaviors and choices. Her empirical analysis is based on the Norwegian sovereign wealth fund (Government Pension Fund Global), which at the time of the study (2010) was valued at $500 billion, owning equity shares in over 8,000 listed firms and in 58 countries around the world. (At end of 2019, its value was $1.1 trillion, invested in over 9,000 firms and 93 countries.) She asks two main questions: (1) why responsible investment became such a central feature of this fund's strategy and (2) to what extent the fund served as an instrument of Norwegian state policy to

influence subsequent Norwegian firms' investment policies.

The fund's scope for responsible investment includes issues related to human rights, health and safety standards, environmental protection, corruption, and the right to collective bargaining. The author describes how the fund's development of "responsible investment principles" was mostly driven by legitimacy considerations and claims that this fund was the first in 2004 to formally introduce responsible investment principles in its guidelines for cross-border investment. The government's normative pressures are executed in two ways, through the management investment group (NBIM), which acts as an active investor exercising shareholder rights in their investee firms, and through the Council on Ethics, which "screens and censors current and potential targets based on systematic and rigorous evaluations conducted by in-house professionals" (Vasudeva 2013, p. 1664) and publicly discloses their resolutions. The overall argument for the fund's interest in responsible investment is explained by the belief that "the country's wealth should be invested responsibly because target firms that perform better on social, environmental, and corporate governance issues are likely to be better managed and should therefore generate higher returns on the government investments" (Vasudeva 2013, p. 1664).

The most interesting part of the article by Vasudeva (2013) is that it shows that governments can adopt alternatives to regulatory and monitoring mechanisms based on mandatory enforcement, and instead rely on more normative approaches based on voluntary standards. The article shows that the Norwegian government defined with normative tools what legitimate and effective responsible investments look like.

Zhang and Luo's (2013) article is framed in the context of weak market institutions and underdeveloped regulations and norms of corporate social responsibility. Specifically, they examine how online campaigns generated corporate donations made by subsidiaries of multinational corporations (MNCs) in China following the catastrophic earthquake in Sichuan Province on May 12, 2008. The departure point is that although there was not a tradition of corporate giving in China, domestic firms' donations were quick and large compared with those of MNCs, who reacted relatively slowly and gave less. They draw on the social movement perspective on corporate change to argue that "online campaign elicited corporate response both through targeted shaming and by creating more diffuse pressure to mold public opinion and evoke social comparisons among firms" (Zhang and Luo 2013, p. 1743).

The article builds on the social movement concept of "political opportunities" for activists to either approach vulnerable firms that might be at risk for credible threats or resort to the institutional logics of the MNC's home country. Regarding the former, the authors show that firms that are specific shaming targets, experience a high diffuse pressure from the online campaign, use CSR as part of their identity, and have a high reputation in China will respond sooner to the demands of an activist campaign. Most interestingly, the study also focuses on the heterogeneity of corporate responses toward corporate giving—which is extended to firms' CSR—contingent on a dual legitimacy context to which MNC subsidiaries in China are embedded, that is, the host country pressures for CSR are weak and the home country pressures can be strong or weak. The study finds that MNCs headquartered in the United States, which they associate as an institutional logic where corporate giving is a prevailing practice, will respond more quickly to the campaign's demands than when the home is based in Europe or Asia (no more granularity there). The cross-national level is interesting and also the tactics, that is, emergence of internet users in China demanding corporate contributions via online communities, blogs, and bulletin board systems. The article stresses that idea that in China, typically, the responsibility of corporations is in the hands of the state.

Marquis and Qian (2014) present a political perspective on corporate responsibility/nonmarket strategy. Specifically, they examine how and why firms respond strategically to Chinese government signals to issue CSR reports—it exemplifies a constructivist approach. It appears that they issue such reports in an attempt to gain political legitimacy, which enables them to in turn gain greater access to government resources. The authors focus on two key factors that shape firms' responses to government signals: (1) political dependence and (2) government monitoring. The interest is on how firms respond to government in an emerging market context, where government is a large owner of many firms (approximately 60% at the time of the study, 2008). The authors are able to differentiate between government control and a firm's quest for greater legitimation. In terms of CSR report issuance (which can be symbolic), they uncover that factors capturing firm dependence on the government, such as a firm CEO's membership in political councils, political legacy from socialist imprinting, and higher financial resources are more likely to issue CSR reports. The authors do not find any support that privately held firms are more likely than other types of firms to issue CSR reports. In terms of qualitative of CSR reports, they find that firms whose CEOs have experience as government officials are more likely to issue substantive CSR reports. CSR *substantiveness* is a rating of CSR activities from RKS (CSR rating agency Runling; also known by its English acronym, RKS;

http://www.rksratings.com), an independent social investment rating agency modeled after KLD (the U.S. social investment rating agency Kinder, Lydenberg, Domini & Co.).

Some of the interesting ideas related to corporate responsibility from this article are the description of how CSR became established in China around 2006 (as opposed to in the 1990s for global firms from advanced economies), very much guided by the government (i.e., the Hu Jiato administration) shifting "from a policy of economic development at all costs to one of economic growth and balanced with the need to tackle pressing social and environmental problems" (Marquis and Qian (2014, p. 129). Not surprisingly, the government is the most important external stakeholder toward which CSR is geared. Marquis and Qian (2014, p. 129) also introduce the concepts of "decoupling risk," by which different firms will be exposed to different qualities of CSR reporting (symbolic versus substantive), and "socialist imprinting" as a process whereby it is harder for older firms embedded in the socialist era to adopt new practices. Finally, they claim that CSR reports particularly among Chinese state-owned firms are intended to be global exemplars of legitimate Chinese business.

Again on the theme of nonmarket strategy, Zhang et al. (2016) examine corporate charitable donations by Chinese firms and use these data to determine whether political connections buffer firms from or bind firms to the government. They hypothesize that there are two types of political connections: (1) those established by prior working experience in government by business executives and (2) current executive appointments to prestigious state organs. The authors also analyze the degree of dependence based on the level of state monopolies in the firm's industry and the quality of market development in the firm's locality. Their basic argument is that "the level of resource dependence on the focal firm upon the government, in combination with the nature of political connections, determines whether political connections buffer the firm from, or bind the firm to, the government" (Zhang et al. 2016, p. 1308). They show that private firms whose chairpersons have government working experience are less likely to donate and will donate less than firms without those political connections, whereas firms with chairpersons with achieved political connections are more likely to donate and in greater amounts. In other words, they demonstrate that the type of political tie serves as a buffer against external impositions or instead creates a binding effect to meet government and societal expectations. They also uncover that this bidirectional effect is contingent on the institutional context.

The article equates corporate charitable donations to CSR and addresses the relationship between two important nonmarket strategies, CSR and corporate political activity (CPA). The authors state that having worked in the government before becoming a private firm chairman serves as a substitute for donations, whereas political connections act as a complement to donation. Again, they argue that this substitution or complementarity between CSR and CPA is contingent on the firms' level of dependence on the government, such as state-monopolized industries versus market success.

The article also makes it abundantly clear that the Chinese government still defines most firm strategies, particularly when it comes to firms' social responsibilities (Marquis and Qian 2014), where there are basically no NGOs, and instead corporate donations take the form of government "charity appropriation" or "forced donations" (also known as government-organized "nongovernmental organizations"). The link to corporate responsibility is the question of whether privately controlled firms' political connections will co-opt these firms to the government, creating an obligation and higher government expectations to donate.

The article by Marquis et al. (2016) is a theoretical and empirical analysis of a macro responsibility-related phenomenon known as greenwashing. Greenwashing refers to a situation when a firm intentionally misleads stakeholders with false claims or misreporting about its environmental actions and impact in order to enhance its reputation or shape a good public image regarding its environmental performance. Of course, such unsubstantiated claims are considered irresponsible, because they constitute an attempt to deceive consumers into believing that the firm has stellar environmental performance when it does not.

The authors draw on institutional theory, theories of strategic CSR, and information disclosure to identify circumstances under which companies are less likely to engage in greenwashing. The factors that are hypothesized to reduce the probability of greenwashing are the intensity of scrutiny, expectations of transparency, and adherence to global norms. These hypotheses are then tested and confirmed, based on a novel and rich panel data set of 4,750 public firms operating in 45 nations and in many diverse industries. This is an important study of symbolic (and some might say "strategic") CSR, as opposed to substantive CSR. In sum, these macro studies pay attention to how the environment influences organizational decisions toward responsibility.

Theoretical Bases of Micro and Macro Research on Responsibility

Ethics, morality, and responsibility appear to share a common conceptual space in the micro-based articles that we reviewed. For example, Jones et al. (2007)

characterized morally based actions on the part of both individuals and organizations in terms of the extent to which those actions serve the interests of multiple stakeholders, rather than an individual or a narrowly defined stakeholder group. Thus, in the conceptualization of Jones et al. (2007), to serve a wide range of stakeholders is to be both ethical and responsible in a universalist sense. The nine micro articles that we reviewed generally reflect this thinking.

In a more nuanced fashion, Reinecke and Ansari (2015) noted that ethical complexity involves situations where there might be tensions regarding which priorities or values, and thus, stakeholder interests, should be given priority. Reinecke and Ansari (2015, p. 884) stressed that the universalistic mode of moral reasoning that characterized the theory of Jones et al. (2007) might realistically give way to "a particularistic mode of contextual judgment as they [organizational actors] construct the meaning of what is ethical in practice." In other words, what may seem responsible to one set of stakeholders may be seen as irrelevant, or even irresponsible, to another group of stakeholders.

The macro articles we reviewed are based on a wide range of theories, including those based on both realism and constructivism. These include theories derived from economics (e.g., information asymmetry and other aspects of strategic CSR), sociology (e.g., institutional theory and various aspects of social entrepreneurship), and social psychology (e.g., sensemaking). Not surprisingly, articles that deal with both strategic CSR and nonmarket strategy focus on the instrumental benefits to the firm associated with engaging in responsible behavior or, alternatively, the costs to the firm associated with engaging in irresponsible behavior. For instance, McDonnell (2016) shows that when firms have a bad reputation, they have an incentive to co-opt social activists and NGOs, which they use to ultimately improve their reputation; that is, as predicted by economic theory, they use such partnerships to engage in strategic CSR more effectively.

Economic theories of information asymmetry also play an important role in the Marquis et al. (2016) study, because that article deals with information disclosure and transparency, as well as imperfect information regarding the firm's environmental responsibility. That article and several others in our macro set (e.g., Vasudeva 2013) also draw on institutional theory, because they examine the antecedents and consequences of firms and nations having different norms and standards surrounding social responsibility (e.g., environmental standards). Another macro theory that is relevant to several macro articles in the virtual special issue is the role of government in regulating organizational responsibility. In sum, there exists a wide set of conceptual approaches.

Assessing Responsibility at Multiple Levels of Analysis

In examining the micro-based articles, we can identify several studies that span levels of analysis. For example, both Umphress and Bingham (2011) and Robertson and Anderson (1993) consider how disciplinary control systems of organizations can affect the ethical behavior of individuals. Relatedly, Arnaud and Schminke (2012) analyzed various aspects of context (e.g., ethical climate) relating to the ethical behavior of individuals. Using a sensemaking approach, Jones and Ryan (1997) examined how individuals deal with moral responsibility, based at least in part on approval (i.e., moral approbation) from referent groups.

Corporate responsibility scholars from micro and macro sides have weighed in on the importance of cross levels or mesoresearch to understand how CSR efforts, at an organizational level, impact individuals (Aguilera et al. 2007, Aguinis and Glavis 2012). The effects of CSR can be seen on numerous stakeholders, including job seekers, employees, and customers (Jones 2019). Moreover, effects can potentially be both positive and negative (Willness 2019). Two articles from in this *Organization Science* virtual issue are in line with this stream of research. Specifically, using different methodologies, both Bode et al. (2015) and Burbano (2016) found that firm-level CSR efforts had a positive effect on employee retention and acceptance of reduced salary levels.

Perhaps one of the more robust attempts to cross levels of analysis can be found in the work of Collins (1997). He considered participation in decision making as an indicator of responsibility at societal, organizational, and individual levels. His work is an example of how, by comparing different levels, such as societal versus organizational, we may be able to see inconsistencies in terms of how policies regarding responsibility (in this instance, policies pertaining to participation in decision making) are devised and implemented.

An interesting revelation of our virtual special issue is that the more macro-oriented articles that we reviewed tended to focus on one level of analysis (i.e., typically the organization level), rather than crossing levels. An exception is the article by Dacin et al. (2011), which considered multiple levels of analysis in their examination of social entrepreneurship, including institutions, societal culture, social networks, and individuals.

Future Research Directions

We see considerable potential for additional multilevel research on responsibility. Recent studies of "strategic" corporate and environmental social responsibility provided theoretical and empirical

evidence on how social responsibility can be matrixed into a firm's product, business, and corporate strategies (Siegel and Vitaliano 2007) and other "nonmarket" strategies (Mellahi et al. 2016). These studies focus on the role of asymmetric information and how information asymmetry might affect the reputation of the brand or firm. Although some socially responsible product features and corporate activities are easily observed, it is sometimes difficult for consumers and other stakeholders to assess the social responsibility of a brand, product, or organization.

Information asymmetry raises a host of interesting cross-level questions beyond strategy per se, such as, how should managers measure, evaluate, and promote or disseminate information regarding the social responsibility of a brand, product, or organization? Furthermore, how does information asymmetry come into play with regard to the effects of strategic CSR on customers and employees, such as brand loyalty and employee retention? Recent studies have assessed firm-level responsibility actions in relation to a variety of micro-based phenomena, such as motivation, identification, and leadership (Pless et al. 2012, Bode et al. 2015, Burbano 2016, Jones 2019). Perhaps a consideration of information asymmetry might help further such cross-level research.

It has been shown that this information asymmetry problem can be mitigated by the company or by outside activists. For instance, many Fortune 500 companies (e.g., Google, Microsoft, McDonalds, and Nike) publish annual reports on social responsibility. Although these reports may be valuable, some consumers may perceive this information as biased, because it is self-reported by senior management. Fedderson and Gilligan (2001) argue that social activists and NGOs can play an important role in reducing information asymmetry, by informing consumers and other stakeholders with information they can rely on to choose socially responsible firms. Of course, social activists and NGOs can also be potentially harmful to the firm, given that they can effectively target large companies.

Although studies such as McDonnell (2016), written from a macro perspective, have focused on how firms deal with information asymmetry and social activists, there have been few multilevel studies of this phenomenon. In that regard, it would be useful to further our understanding of how interactions with firms and managers affect social activists and NGOs. Thus, we can draw on economic theories of regulation, first outlined in a series of seminal papers by the Nobel Laureate George Stigler. Stigler's concept of regulatory capture is an economic theory that comes to mind when considering relationships between managers, firms, and institutions such as NGOs, which are supposed to monitor the behavior of managers and firms (Stigler 1971).

Regulatory capture occurs when a political institution, policy maker, or regulatory agency is co-opted to serve the commercial, ideological, or political interests of a minor constituency, such as a region, firm, industry, profession, or ideological group. We raise the concept of regulatory capture because it can be tied to the use of corporate responsibility to engage in preemptive strategies (e.g., raising rivals' costs or erecting higher regulatory entry barriers in an industry) to acquire or maintain an advantage over a firm's rivals or to upset industry balance (Siegel 2009). It would be interesting to determine whether NGOs are "corrupted" by their interactions with firms, much as regulators were deemed to have been corrupted by firms. Corruption is a phenomenon that can be studied at multiple levels, including societal, firm, and individual levels of analysis.

The notion of corruption raises questions regarding the dark side of responsibility, or what we referred to as irresponsibility earlier. The articles that we reviewed for this virtual issue of *Organization Science* did not specifically address issues of corruption, potential negative aspects of CSR (Willness 2019), and corporate social irresponsibility (Rotundo 2019). However, several articles that we reviewed (e.g., Jones and Ryan 1997, Umphress and Bingham 2011) noted the potential for responsibility to coincide with irresponsibility. Yet, numerous important questions, many of which cross levels of analysis, remain with regard to the dark side of responsibility. For example, could strategic CSR actions proposed by Siegel (2009) actually backfire in terms of perceptions of inauthenticity on the part of stakeholders such as employees and customers? How do socially responsible and irresponsible actions on the part of a firm interact in their effects on corporate performance, as well as individuals (e.g., customer loyalty)?

Additional economic theories that could be applied to multilevel analysis of responsibility include applied industrial organization, productivity analysis, and externalities. For example, strategic theories of CSR could be used to assess the effects of a plant's or firm's responsibility on such variables as market share, entry and exit barriers, capital structure, and different aspects of human capital. The use of matched employer–employee data (Siegel and Simons 2010) can also be used to assess the effects of responsibility on worker, plant, firm, and industry productivity and performance and even the effects of a plant's or firm's responsibility on other plants or firms in the same industry.

Paradox theory offers much promise when considering trade-offs involving responsibility. Paradoxes refer to "contradictory yet interrelated elements that

exist simultaneously and persist over time" (Smith and Lewis 2011, p. 382). The seemingly contradictory aspect of paradoxes might suggest that trade-offs between the interests of various stakeholder groups are irreconcilable and inevitable, and thus responsibility needs to be prioritized. Indeed, strategic CSR tends to prioritize shareholder interests, such that the interests of other stakeholders (e.g., employees and customers) are taken into account only in an attempt to directly impact shareholder wealth. Andriopoulos and Lewis (2009) argued that such prioritization can ultimately be harmful to a firm by, for example, putting too much stress on responsibility toward one stakeholder group to the detriment of other stakeholders. Over time, the ironic result may be lower responsibility shown to all stakeholders, even shareholders.

In contrast, paradox theorists would argue that paradoxical tensions (e.g., tensions pertaining to responsibility toward various stakeholder groups) should be harmonized over time, which will lead to heightened responsibility shown to all stakeholder groups, including shareholders (Smith and Tushman 2005, Smith and Lewis 2011, Waldman et al. 2019). With that said, a question arises as to how individual-level qualities might enable such harmonization at the firm level. Miron-Spektor et al. (2018) characterized a paradox mindset on the part of individuals as the capacity to value, accept, and feel emotionally comfortable with paradoxical tensions. Individuals with paradox mindsets are not only able to embrace seeming contradictions, but are also emotionally energized by the tensions inherent in paradoxes. Reinecke and Ansari (2015) pointed out the emotional challenges associated with moral reasoning and the cognitive processing of potential trade-offs among stakeholder groups. To avoid these challenges, executives who lack a paradox mindset might revert to a unitary focus on a particular group, that is, engage in trade-offs. However, executives with a paradoxical mindset might find it to be emotionally easier, and even energizing, to consider the interests of all relevant stakeholders. As such, they are better equipped to avoid trade-offs. Cross-level research is needed to better understand how an individual quality like a paradox mindset might relate to firms' ability to maximize responsibility to a range of stakeholder groups, rather than engaging in trade-offs. Moreover, if firms do not engage in trade-offs, what is the long-term effect on performance?

We further note that the search for externalities associated with responsible behavior is fertile ground for multilevel theoretical and empirical research. For example, it would be useful to determine whether there is a divergence between private (plant or firm) and social (industry or society) returns to "investment" in responsibility. Three relatively new data sets could be explored to assess responsibility at multiple levels: the World Bank/European Bank for Reconstruction and Development Establishment Surveys; the World Management Survey, developed by Nick Bloom at Stanford University and several of his colleagues (http://worldmanagementsurvey.org/); and the U.S. Census Bureau's Management and Organizational Practices Survey (Bloom et al. 2012, Waldman et al. 2012). Furthermore, the search for externalities could have a geographic or spatial component, which is commonly considered in the search for technological, knowledge, and agglomeration externalities or spillovers (Bloom et al. 2013), as well as the emergence and growth of clusters of innovation and entrepreneurship (Delgado et al. 2010).

Finally, during the recent COVID-19 crisis and in its aftermath, issues of responsibility at multiple levels have been even more important to consider and could even play a critical role in the formation and implementation of public policy responses. In at least the early phase of the crisis, government officials appeared to have listened exclusively to epidemiologists, whose dire predictions of cases and deaths led to draconian shutdowns in many nations. As the astronomical economic and financial costs of the shutdowns mount, economists have weighed in by conducting cost/benefit analyses of trade-offs between jobs/livelihoods and lives (Bethune and Korinek 2020). Indeed, as shown by several of the *Organization Science* articles that we have reviewed (e.g., Jones and Ryan 1997, Umphress and Bingham 2011), issues pertaining to responsibility can be quite complex. For example, epidemiologists might put a focus on the effects of COVID-19 on public health, while responsibility toward other dimensions of public health (e.g., mental health, suicide, drug and alcohol addiction, food security, stress, domestic violence, and medical research unrelated to COVID-19) could get overlooked. Moreover, what may appear to be acts of responsibility regarding this one infectious disease can be viewed as acts of irresponsibility toward the unemployed and business owners who establishments were shut down, who lost their means of financial survival.

There is much work to be done around the concept of responsibility as it plays out at the different levels of analysis and it gets shaped by how we collectively define what responsibility is and how we can measure it in our empirical studies. Dramatic external shocks such as a financial crises or a health pandemic put in perspective the nested value of responsibility, not only as individuals but certainly as organizations and individuals managing organizations. We look forward to future studies on this complex concept at the intersection of multiple scholarly areas within organization science.

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