Corporate Philanthropy Research: On the value of the recipient actor and narrative analysis

Introduction

Ostensibly, modern corporate philanthropy involves a business corporation’s commitment to humanity and as such represents a broad philosophy of business social engagement. Definitions of corporate philanthropy, while seldom acknowledged (Gautier and Pache 2013), often rely on quite vague and contestable features such as the desire to promote the wellbeing of humankind (Saiia, 2001), to give for defined beneficial social purposes (Leisinger, 2007), to support a non-profit cause or organization (Wymer, 2006), or simply to help others (Adamonienë & Astromskienë, 2010). In general there is a common ground that is broadly understood as a corporation’s desire to “... share their largesse with the larger society around them” (Burlingame & Young, 1996, p.xi).

While these definitions are usefully unrestrained for exploratory studies, they are symptomatic of research that is ‘giver-centric’ and ‘un-balanced’ in orientation, maintaining the problematic perception that corporate philanthropy is, and should continue to be, less about collaboration, relationship, and partnership than about business intent and strategy. Understandably, qualitative methods for such investigations have received little attention. Intended to be a Discussion Idea, this paper requests feedback from the IABS community on the value of the recipient actor and narrative analysis to corporate philanthropy research.

The Recipient and Partnership

A small number of research investigations and researchers have sought to address the issue of the marginalization of recipients and the prospect of partnership as a research object. As one of the first, Yankey (1996) encouraged us to think about the impact of the corporate philanthropic partnership on the non-profit organization’s mission highlighting the idea that corporate philanthropy is plurivocal – a theme that has since gained prominence through the work of several researchers (e.g. Cooke, 2008; Saiia, 2001; Smith, 2005). Saiia (2001) was one of the first accessible1 studies to consider non-profit organizations as the subjects of research investigation into strategic corporate philanthropy, using semi-structured interviews with corporate giving managers and group interviews with non-profit leaders to claim that “while corporate donors find strategic philanthropy appealing, some non-profit organizations (NPOs) are disturbed by this ongoing shift toward a more strategic practice of corporate philanthropy” (p.59). The prospect of uncovering competing/alternative voices would seem in my view to be a fairly urgent issue.

---

1 An article by Carroll and Horton (1994) has proven difficult to access. Saiia (2001) acknowledges the publication as an important one which reports on the relationship between corporations and non-profits.
In apparent recognition of the knowledge deficit regarding the recipient perspective, Rumsey and White (2009) recently examined, using a qualitative interview method, how managers of non-profit organizations perceive the benefits and motives of strategic philanthropic relationships with corporate partners. The researchers find that if corporations do not have clear motives, this is a barrier to in-depth strategic ‘partnerships’, further revealing that satisfaction arises from partnerships whereby both giver and receiver realize mutual and equivalent benefits. Their acknowledgement of the recipient’s voice is to be commended.

But it is anthropology and sociology are the disciplines that have theorized giving and receiving in the form of traditional gift-giving as social relationships in a much more comprehensive way (Mauss, 1924; Liebersohn, 2011; Vandevelde, 2000). We learn from these disciplines that giving and receiving are acts that include progressions over ‘time’ – to give is to then receive. This establishes an enduring system of reciprocity where the receivers are then compelled to give back in some form (Mauss, 1924). The suggestion that, “getting is important, too, but giving comes first” (Bremner, 1996, p.xi) highlights the order of events carried out under the banner of giving.

As such, a system of gift/counter-gift can be envisaged whereby recipient becomes donor in a re-occurring continuous spiral of giving activity motivating the economy of gift exchange (Godbout cited in Beatty, 2006). This notion has been developed in a consumer context by Sherry (1983) who proposed a typology demonstrating how patterns of exchange integrate formal relationships between consumers and receivers of their gifts. Sherry explained how both donors and recipients are driven to give, receive and reciprocate in a process of exchange where social relationships are formed, maintained, developed and severed over time. While the time dimension appears to be a crucial component for understanding giving behavior, it also appears to be a taken-for-granted notion in corporate philanthropy research and is worthy of consideration; I’ll come back to this point later in the abstract.

For now, my assertion is that we are right to consider, and take seriously, the voices of non-profit managers in our theorizations. So doing reflects a commitment to the idea that corporate philanthropy is a complex web of intentional social relationships involving both givers and receivers (Saia, 1999), that givers can only exist in relationship to receivers, and that the origins and foundations of givers and receivers are social and inter-subjective (Buchholz & Rosenthal, 2006). Below I note the importance to this commitment to corporate philanthropy research of recognizing the value of narrative methods.

**A Qualitative Narrative Approach**

Understanding human language constructions of managers’ (both giving and receiving) experiences is closely aligned with qualitative methods (Carroll, 1979; Fioravante, 2011). Qualitative methods allow researchers to explore culturally located vocabularies (qualities) (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2007; Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2000). For some qualitative researchers
(particularly social constructionists), the publicly available social institutions that precede us, and that we inhabit and are inhabited by, are the source from which we make meaning (Crotty, 1998; Fish, 1990). Meaning is thus constructed through the inherent engagement between humans within a shared experiential social world (Lock & Strong, 2010).

Narrative approaches for collecting data in interviews offer the tools to encourage managers (participants) to craft their own stories about their working-lives and the incidents that interest them revolving around corporate philanthropy (see Bruner, 1991; Bryman & Bell, 2003; Schreyögg & Koch, 2005). Such questioning does not force managers to explain current states of matter, but rather to present reflections on their giving/receiving roles and partnerships; data is thus likely to be rich in participants’ crafting of their experiences (Bamberg, 2007). A narrative approach demands that the researcher is an attentive listener (Flick, von Kardoff & Steinke, 2004), inviting stories (Myers, 2009) and providing “a facilitating context in the research interview” (Riessman, 1993, p.54).

The narratives that managers produce are privileged forms of language, since they are socially produced interpretive devices through which managers represent themselves both to them-selves and other-selves (Feldman, Skölberg, Brown, & Horner, 2004). A narrative is a piece of language that consists of states of affairs plotted together into a meaningful whole through chronology/time and causality involving characters/actors (Czarniawska-Joerges, 1998; Lawler, 2002). Narratives are seen to circulate culturally, to provide a repertoire (though not an infinite one) from which people can produce their own stories or narratives (Lawler, 2002). The narratives managers experience and re-produce in the course of everyday organizational life are inherently related to culture, meaning, and language systems upon which they draw for substance and these narratives are constructed in interview situations allowing researchers to make sense (albeit partial, imperfect, temporary) of managerial experiences (Gabriel, 2000). As such, in the analysis of interview transcripts, narrative methods of analysis help researchers uncover how working-lives are constructed by managers as active subjects (Myers, 2009).

In particular, a narrative approach is useful for understanding the motivations of managers of corporate philanthropy because the narrative form of knowing is about organizing experience around the intentionality of human action (Czarniawska, 1999, p.14). It is plotted causality that is central to the narrative device distinguishing it from positivist forms of knowing (Ricoeur, 1991). Thus, the truth of a narrative/story lies in its meaning not its accuracy (Gabriel, 2000). Gabriel (2000) suggests that how people attribute motive to organizations and their actors (including themselves) can tell us much about the outcomes they hoped to achieve. Gabriel’s method also allows us to uncover and interpret how managers cast organizations and managers with responsibilities and human-qualities; additional components important to understanding corporate philanthropy.

Actors of philanthropy (chair-people, managers, administrators) have meanings bestowed upon (attributed to) them by themselves and other-selves through the production of narratives which
seek to develop and sustain environments in which corporate and non-profit interests thrive through philanthropic partnerships. Such partnerships are characterized – much like that in the tradition of gift-giving – by reciprocity, obligation, and perhaps manipulation (Love, 2012). Yet such statements can only be derived at, this paper argues, through a sustained commitment to understanding the narrative production of philanthropy as it uncovers how human motives, responsibilities, qualities, emotions and temporalities meld together through the active construction of causality to build meanings of corporate philanthropy where other – particularly positivist inspired – methods at times fall short.

Statistical analyses and research which make use of numbers to construct reality in the positivist tradition are important in the production of knowledge since they are used to enact and express the values and concerns of people in the form of hard data and, in the context of modernity, are assumed to establish facts and truths about reality through the application of the scientific method providing objectivity (Ainsworth and Hardy 2012). Yet, statistical analyses seem inadequate as vehicles for building knowledge and meaning from human experiences of corporate philanthropy, since human philanthropic experience is essentially a cultural territory of non-material thoughts that are not static but rather enlarged by new experiences that are continuously being configured and refigured through human reflection (see Polkinghorne, 1988).

I suggest an analytical guide based on Yiannis Gabriel’s (2000) work on poetic analysis. Gabriel (2000) argues that people use mechanisms to attribute meaning to characters/actors, incidents and events when they narrate their experiences as organizational actors. The attributions of motive, agency, unity, responsibility, character qualities, emotion, causal connection, and providential significance make up that framework and each mechanism represents a way of either giving meaning to specific parts in participants’ narratives or making connections between those parts (Gabriel, 2000).

Having used Gabriel’s (2000) method in a recent study, I have revised the method to 7 elements for the study of corporate philanthropic partnerships. The revision subsumes providential significance under agency, operationalizes time, and re-defines the temporal-causality of human performance as the narrative fabric. In the narration of corporate philanthropic partnerships, providential significance is already available through agency, the inclusion of time addresses a limitation in Gabriel’s analytical method and allows researchers to uncover deeper time structurations, and the temporal-causality of human performance weaves the 6 elements together in much the same way as Gabriel intended but makes temporality more salient. Thus, motive, responsibility, quality, emotion, time, and agency become 6 elements woven together through the temporal causality of human performances becoming 7 narrative mechanisms for uncovering how participants make sense of corporate philanthropic partnerships.

To illustrate the use of this analytical platform, researchers can reveal giving and receiving actors’ intentions to give, to accept, to reject, to give back (attribution of motive), whether actors are credited or blamed for those intentions (attribution of responsibility), the positive or negative
qualities those actors subsequently take on (attribution of quality), the love, hatred, anger invested in actors that work to exaggerate the aforementioned (attribution of emotion), and how managers use and experience objective/clock and subjective/durational notions of time to express partnerships (attribution of time). Researchers can also uncover whether it is one person, groups or organizations that are the actors attributed with such meanings (attribution of agency) and how those meanings are linked to one another – for example, that ‘a corporation gave $10,000 each year to a non-profit but then stopped leaving a massive hole’ links agency, motive, responsibility, quality and time through the attribution of temporal causality. Of course, this analytical platform is a starting point and must constantly be up for revision.

Given the analytical platform, what is required from this point is a theory building process and one that is not about creating a universal, single and lasting theory (see Charmaz, 2000) from managers’ narrativizations. But rather, a process that produces theoretical depictions of cultures which exist in historical time between human subjects whereby the theories produced cannot, and should not, attempt to speak finally and with definitive authority for those subjects; a process that treats theory as a contextual, partial, imperfect and selective exercise (Riessman, 1993). Narrative methods can help in the theory building exercise because they help build context by examining elements of managers’ lives as causally connected episodes of experience. This requires development and further ideas are also sought from the IABS community on building theory from the analysis of narrative material.
References


