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The Cognitive Side of Social Responsibility

Davide Secchi

ABSTRACT. Individuals sit on the board of directors and set organizational goals, individuals make the product, push new marketing campaigns, make tough decisions, create new products, and so on. What is the role of social responsibility (SR) in their thinking? Do individuals need to behave responsibly to live in a social environment? Could this be grounded in their cognition? Furthermore, is there room for SR in our cognitive processes? And then, how can this analysis help studies on socially responsible business? The article presents how the distributed cognition approach provides a viable explanation for SR in human thinking. The exploitation of external – both social and nonsocial – resources shapes cognitive processes such that the idea of the ''isolated brain'' is definitely abandoned. Our social cognition uses responsibility as a support mechanism that sustains or discharges distributive processes. The article uses the notion of docility to keep cognition and social behavior together. The conclusion is that SR is (1) a mechanism that allows individuals to maintain cognitive advantages and (2) it emerges when the same social channel is exploited for extended periods of time.

KEY WORDS: advice giving and taking, cognition, decision making, distributed cognition, docility, social responsibility

The study of social responsibility (SR) has involved corporations and other kinds of businesses (Garriga and Melé, 2004; Secchi, 2007a). Needless to say, the most important constituents of every organization are human beings. Individuals sit on the board of directors and set organizational goals; individuals furnish the products and services, push new marketing campaigns, make tough decisions, create innovations, and so on.

This article analyzes SR at the individual level; it follows the study of Boal and Peery (1985) and aims at integrating this contribution. These authors attempt to link SR with the ''cognitive structure underlying ethical analysis with the stakeholder perspective'' (p. 73); they present in that article an empirical analysis on individual cognition. The study is one of the few to directly address cognitive issues in relation to SR; however, it has two main limitations at least: (a) it overlooks perspectives other than that of the early stakeholder approach (Freeman, 1984) and (b) it does not present any general model of human cognition to support the framework proposed.

This article tries to overcome these limitations by analyzing individual cognitive structure on a broader basis. Research questions are defined as follows: Can we find a cognitive ground for people's socially responsible behavior? Do individuals need to behave responsibly to live in a social environment? How could this be explained through cognitive studies? And then, how can this kind of analysis aid studies on socially responsible business?

The first part of the article is dedicated to the view of cognition, if any, that one could find in the literature on corporate SR and it presents an interpretative pattern. The second section focuses on the analysis of works that connect SR to cognitive processes, and the third shows how these concepts may be considered as related to the inner prosocial tendencies in the cognition and behavior of

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Davide Secchi is Assistant Professor of Organizational Behavior at the University of Wisconsin, La Crosse. He studies theory and practice of social responsibility and is also interested in understanding distributed cognitive processes as they emerge in managerial settings. He wrote 25 articles on social responsibility, social reporting, altruism, docility, human cognition, and European small- and medium-sized enterprises. In 2004, he received his PhD in Business Administration from the University of Pavia, Alma Ticinensis Universitas 1361.

human beings. The last section is dedicated to the distributed cognition approach, in which social behavior is consistent with the way our brains process information and how cognition is shaped.

What is individual social responsibility?

How many articles start their first section with the question ''what is social responsibility?'' They are countless, and this one makes no exception. However, there is a significant difference between the many other articles on SR and this one. Traditionally, this concept has been linked to the term ''corporation'' or ''corporate'' (Secchi, 2007a) and scholars rarely match it directly to individuals. Far from an attempt to define *corporate* SR, this section presents views of SR that connect it to individual cognition.

The reason for abandoning studies at the individual level could be traced to the strong opposition of radical arguments, especially those of Milton Friedman (1962, 1970) on this topic. One of the main assumptions that Friedman uses to deny the legitimacy of SR is the following:

> What does it mean to say that ''business'' has responsibilities? Only people can have responsibilities. A corporation is an artificial person and in this sense may have artificial responsibilities, but ''business'' as a whole cannot be said to have responsibilities, even in this vague sense (Friedman, 1970).

The debate on reification/personification of organizational bodies is still vivid (Ashman and Winstanley, 2007), and it has shaped and still shapes many theories, models, and approaches of SR (Garriga and Melé, 2004; Preston, 1975; Secchi, 2007a). This article is related to these debates only to the extent to which they consider the individual. I do not attempt to discuss whether the corporation (or any organization) is a moral agent or not. The focus here is only on individuals. What I suggest is that the perspective of individuals shown by theories of SR needs some updating. If we do so, we also need to redefine organizational perspectives. Hence, the starting point is to briefly analyze which are the prevailing visions of the individual.

What follows is not a review of the literature; on the contrary, it is an attempt to understand how individual perspectives are considered in publications on SR. This article does not aim to substitute any of the existing theories, models, concepts, and approaches, but it means to integrate and develop them.

We need a framework to understand how the individual has been defined within CSR theories and Klonoski's (1991) conceptual framework is particularly helpful. He classifies theories of CSR in three main ''camps,'' (p. 9) – amoral, personal, and social – depending on the ''alternate views of the corporation'' (p. 16) stemming out from the research question: ''[a]re corporations social institutions?'' (p. 9). *Amoral* theories answer the question negatively; thus corporations have no social responsibilities and no morality. Scholars operating from the *personal* perspective attribute moral personhood to corporations, while those from the *social* perspective define it as a social institution.

Without losing consistency with Klonoski's approach, we can redefine the three perspectives as amoral, *moral*, and social. These three camps can also be used to study individual SR and, more specifically, the way CSR theories and approaches deal with amoral, moral, and social individuals. Since the dichotomy amoral–moral – when it refers to individuals – means that people's behavior and thinking is related to ethics (Etzioni, 1988), we consider only two classes: *social* and *ethical*. Therefore, our classification can be based on the fact that for scholars of SR individuals show a pre-eminent social or ethical character (Table 1).

The social individual

The way many authors look at individuals through lenses of SR is related to their role within the organization (Zenisek, 1979). Their position and role is one of the most important attributes, so they are described in terms of managers, executives, CEOs, members of the board of directors, financial officers, and owners (Burke and Logsdon, 1996; De George, 2000; Donaldson, 1989; Sethi, 2002).

Many authors define individuals as they use their roles while they face problems related to their specific tasks in the organization. Here is an example:

> Executives face enormous challenges today because the demands and expectations of corporate stakeholders are increasing while the range of discretion to achieve many objectives is narrowing. Shareholders want

TABLE I

View of the individual in SR theories

Klonoski's classification	A twofold classification	Major focus	SR theories, models, and approaches[a]
Amoral Personal	Ethical	Individual values, beliefs, and overall morality	Kantian approach, Aristotelian approach, utilitarianism, functionalist theories, etc.
Social	Social	The individual is considered because of a meaningful social context	Stakeholder approach, social contract theory, global citizenship, etc.

[a]The list includes but is not limited to these theories, models, and approaches.

> better performance, employees want more job security and compensation, customers expect higher quality products, communities vie for greater economic development, and this just indicates what traditional stakeholders expect of corporate leadership (Logsdon and Wood, 2005, p. 55).

Corporate codes of conduct, as a first step of the Global Business Citizenship (GBC), offer to executives "a theoretical prescription to deal with these challenges more effectively" (Logsdon and Wood, 2005, p. 55). In fact, corporate SR and its tools are promoted because they help managers (executives) to solve problems. Again, we have a socialized view of the individual.

Another example, consistent with the social perspective, is that of Donaldson (1996). He writes his "guidelines for ethical leadership" (1996, p. 60) with the same aim as the above-mentioned authors, i.e., to help managers when dealing with ethical issues in a global environment.

At this point, one may argue that, when at work, there is nothing more appropriate than to characterize an individual through the role she or he plays within the organization. However, I should add that this is not the only way an individual can be characterized; moreover, I do not know if this is the most appropriate way when analyzing, understanding, and modeling SR. Together with being "executive" one may also be defined through his or her culture, gender, age, political thoughts, environmental attitudes, religious beliefs, and so on.

Those who use broader definitions refer to these agents as shareholders, employees, workers, or, at large, stakeholders (Freeman, 1984; Mitchell et al., 1997).

All of these roles are socially defined. For example, consider the sentence "stakeholders are individuals or groups that are affected or affect organizational behavior," which is a rephrasing of the famous definition written by Freeman (1984, p. 46). These groups or individuals are defined because of the role they play in relation to the organization. It is this relationship that makes the difference; it is the position that defines what the expectations are in terms of socially responsible behavior. It is the manager, for example (as well as the shareholder, the CEO, etc.), who needs to solve ethical and social problems. Stakeholder theorists never refer to individuals without a definition of their social position. In this way, we define a set of responsibilities, values, powers, and expectations that come together with the definition of the individual. Mitchell et al. (1997) add to Freeman's view (1984) a three-category-based framework to classify stakeholders. The three attributes are (a) urgency, (b) power, and (c) legitimacy, and they define the relationship each category of stakeholder shows when confronted with corporate interests (Mitchell et al., 1997, pp. 875–879). It is apparent that we do not move far from the social characterization of stakeholders since power and legitimacy are usually defined through social relations (Pfeffer, 1981; Salancik and Pfeffer, 1974; Suchman, 1995). For example, power is "a relationship among social actors in which one social actor, A, can get another social actor, B, to do something that B would not otherwise have done" (Pfeffer, 1981, p. 3). The influence plays a great role in this relationship where A exercises power to B. As

Pfeffer puts it, A can do that because of the ''social'' role they play. A more sophisticated view of power invites us to consider ''when A devotes his energies to creating or reinforcing social and political values and institutional practices that limit the scope of the political process to public consideration of only those issues which are comparatively innocuous to A. To the extent that A succeeds in doing this, B is prevented, for all practical purposes, from bringing to the fore any issues that might in their resolution be seriously detrimental to A's set of preferences'' (Bachrach and Baratz, 1962, p. 941). This way power includes impairment or *nondecision making*.

Legitimacy also leans on social relationships. Although legitimacy can be characterized as *pragmatic*, *moral*, or *cognitive* (Suchman, 1995, p. 577f), ''all three types involve a generalized perception or assumption that organizational activities are desirable, proper, or appropriate within some socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs, and definitions'' (p. 577). It seems that we are stuck in the *social* perspective.

Something different happens when the Freeman and Liedtka (1991) approach is considered. They present three propositions: the *stakeholder* proposition considers the firm as an interconnected web of different interests, the *caring* proposition states that individuals behave altruistically, and the *pragmatic* proposition describes the enterprises as a means for expressing creativity and personality (Freeman and Liedtka, 1991, pp. 96–97). The second – the caring proposition – raises issues significant to the purposes of this article. Altruism is a social construct (Khalil, 2004) since it is absurd to think of Robinson Crusoe acting altruistically when alone on the island. The point is to understand if altruism derives from a cognitive construct that is to say if it is the outcome of the way individuals process information. Even if Freeman and Liedtka do not address this point at all, some authors argue that this connection is worth analyzing in human behavior (Simon, 1993). Altruism may also emerge from affectivity. For example, you may feel that you must donate money to the American Cancer Society or to the National Multiple Sclerosis Society since you or somebody close to you suffers or suffered of that illness. Antonio Damasio writes that ''[b]ecause the feeling is about the body, I gave the phenomenon the technical term *somatic* state (''soma'' is Greek for body); and because it ''marks'' an image, I called it a marker. […] What does the somatic marker achieve? It forces the attention on the […] outcome to which a given action may lead, and functions as an automated alarm signal which say: Beware of the danger ahead if you choose the option which leads to this outcome'' (1994, p. 173). As he points out, the connections with cognition are apparent to the reader (1994, p. 175); the debate on the primacy of cognition or affectivity (see, for example, Lazarus, 1984; Zajonc, 1984) received a new interesting impulse. Whether altruism comes out from a rational ''cold'' process or from affectivity, it involves cognitive activities. Is altruism a ''bridge concept'' from the socialized to the cognitive perspective in understanding the SR of the individual?

There are other studies that could be mentioned to define the social vision of the individual (e.g., the social contract theory, Donaldson and Dunfee, 1999), but I think that the above-mentioned suffice to convey the idea. In summary, within this framework SR is defined as somehow behavioral, and individuals make decisions on the basis of their values, beliefs, and assumptions typical of their social role.

Although the real ''social side'' of decision making is often overlooked, the sociological perspective is well represented and analyzed (Zenisek, 1979). This makes the individual a social human being. Implications of this statement are yet to come, along with cognitive maps of individuals in their social roles.

The ethical individual

We can use different approaches to explain how behavior comes out: utilitarian, Kantian, or virtues based (Donaldson et al., 2002), for example. The ethical perspective adds morality to human beings. In this way, not only there are roles to cover and expectations to fulfill, but also responsibility becomes a matter of what is good or bad for personal, organizational, and social life (Frederick, 1986). Problems of absolutism and relativism arise, and individuals face decision-making challenges in terms of what is the right value to apply or what is the degree to which that value could be modified in relation to the problems or dilemmas they face, depending on the situation. De George (2000) follows this path and suggests that

> [t]he only possible answer to the question ''Whose ethics?'' is ''Your ethics.'' Your ethical values aren't like a coat that you put on in certain seasons and certain places and chuck off elsewhere. You can't leave your ethics behind as you venture around the globe. If you think you can, or if you have no ethics, then of course the question is beside the point. You will simply do what you can get away with, and we needn't bother with talk of ethics at all. We are then back to the pre-1970s mind set we saw as naïve and out-of-step with the times (De George, 2000, p. 50).

This view of the individual clearly presents ethics as something embedded in one's way of thinking or in his or her behavior. SR is closely related to (or it is the outcome of) individual ethical values, beliefs, and assumptions.

The Aristotelian perspective on business ethics and corporate SR offers interesting assumptions on business and individual roles in society:

> But if it is just this schism between business and the rest of life that so infuriated Aristotle, for whom life was supposed to fit together in a coherent whole, it is the same holistic idea – that business people and corporations are first of all part of a larger community – that drives business ethics today. We can no longer accept the amoral idea that ''business is business'' (not really a tautology but an excuse for being socially irresponsible and personally insensitive) (Solomon, 2004, p. 1022).

The individual is part of the community (better, of more than one community) and pursues happiness through integrity and virtue (Solomon, 2004, pp. 1024–1026).

> Happiness (for us as well as for Aristotle) is an all-inclusive, holistic concept. It is ultimately one's character, one's integrity, that determines happiness, not the bottom line. And this is just as true, I want to insist, of giant corporations as it is of the individuals who work for them (Solomon, 2004, p. 1024).

It is apparent that Aristotle provides us with a conceptual framework to interpret and analyze individual SR. It is an ethical viewpoint indeed since it is based on typical values such as virtue and integrity. Furthermore, it is clear that there is something more than the social human here, and this is ethics; it helps individuals to be part of their social world and to understand what is right and wrong for them and society.

There are other models of business ethics and SR that could help in understanding what the *ethical* individual is – like Kantian theory (Bowie, 1999) or utilitarian theory (Porter and Kramer, 2002; see utilitarian theories of CSR in Secchi, 2007a, p. 351) – however, those related to decision making are particularly helpful.

It is worth noting that decision making has been reframed to include ethical perspectives in its processes (Fritzsche and Oz, 2007). There are a growing number of studies focusing on how, for instance, thinking styles (Groves et al., 2008), socio-cultural differences (Kracher et al., 2002; Thorne and Saunders, 2002), and education (Kracher et al., 2002) affect ethical decision making.

One of the most promising fields of study connected to decision making is ''ethical imagination''; this is something that Werhane (1999) considers to be one of the most important characteristics that decision makers need when solving ethical dilemmas.

The core of this perspective for socially responsible individuals is that their social role is considered in relation to values, beliefs, and assumptions. Although approaches to moral imagination (Werhane, 1999) determine a breakthrough in the study of SR and business ethics, in general, and although they are well grounded in philosophical literature, they overlook the cognitive and psychological side of human behavior.

This article attempts to start filling this gap in the analytical approach to the socially responsible individual.

A comprehensive definition of social responsibility

Neither of the previous two perspectives considers SR as something that could be related to both individuals and corporations on the same basis.

Davis and Blomstrom (1966) find their way to the individual, when stating that SR is ''a person's obligation to consider the effects of his decisions and actions on the whole social system. […] SR, therefore, broadens a person's view to the total social system'' (Davis and Blomstrom, 1966, p. 167). They suggest that SR has at least three levels of analysis the: (a) individual, (b) organization (since the word ''person'' may refer to it also), and (c) social system.

However, it is apparent that the core is the individual: they make decisions and these decisions affect other individuals, organizations, and the social system overall. Is this something that derives from social roles or from their morality? In other words, can we link this definition to the two perspectives described above?

Both perspectives – the social and the ethical – consider the individual as embedded in the social environment in which he or she thinks and behaves. This emphasis on the social and ethical elements of organizational life results from overlooking the inner core of humans: their cognitive processes. The tough question is: Why do we think of SR the way we do?

Since cognition is about every reasoning process that involves the human mind-brain (Selten, 1998, p. 414), we need to find a theory of social interactions that deals with socially-oriented behavior. To be more precise, we do not need to look for this only. We need to understand whether this tendency to extend one's view "to the total social system" is something uncommon or if it is embedded in usual cognitive activities.

The docile attitude

Pro-social behavior is something we can use to define one's awareness that his/her behavior could affect other society members (O'Connor and Cuevas, 1982). However, is pro-social behavior related to SR? Moreover, how can we match pro-social behavior to cognitive processes?

Social responsibility as a cognitive map

Boal and Peery (1985) are probably the first to study the cognitive structure of SR. They use SR concepts, taken from the literature available at that time, to infer cognitive maps from a sample of undergraduate students (p. 74). They show that SR is not unidimensional, and must be modeled differently, according to individuals' cognitive maps. For Boal and Peery, the analysis "suggests that the construct is multidimensional, with dimensions that are independent and differ in importance" (p. 79). Most importantly, they isolate three cognitive dimensions of SR: (a) "economic/market values as opposed to noneconomic/human values, (b) the ethics of nonmalefice contrasted with the ethics of benefice, and (c) a stakeholder interest dimension" (p. 76). As they underline in the article, these dimensions overlap many ethical theories and models of SR. This is something individuals frame, and they can use it to make actual decisions; evidence from the study shows how SR is connected to cognitive processes.

The main strengths of this analysis are related to the (1) definition of the cognitive dimensions of SR, (2) connection between responsible behaviors as it emerges from these dimensions, and (3) attempt to validate the stakeholder approach. Notwithstanding its importance, this study lacks psychological and substantial cognitive content. Boal and Peery analyze the way individuals understand SR as the idea of SR becomes less "objective" and more "particular." This is probably the first step; however, the core of cognitive studies is about processes, the point being *why* individuals have maps of SR and, most relevantly, if these are uncommon or if they are part of the usual way individuals process information.

Psychology is also lacking in the article since the authors overlook what connects mindsets to behavior. Once again, they isolate cognitive maps but do not provide reasons why people actually develop these maps. In modern science, psychology and cognition need to be considered together. Paul Thagard (2007) states this very clearly when articulating the multidisciplinary nature of cognitive science: "Psychology is now part of cognitive science, the interdisciplinary study of mind and intelligence, which also embraces the fields of neuroscience, artificial intelligence, linguistics, anthropology, and philosophy" (p. ix).

The purpose of this article is to integrate this neglected tradition of study. In the following pages, I present a selection of studies that vary from psychology to cognitive science to move farther in the direction of Boal and Peery. Propositions are also offered to the reader as an easier way to clarify concepts.

Social responsibility and pro-social behavior

In a pioneering study, the two psychologists O'Connor and Cuevas (1982) specifically analyze the three areas of (a) "personality traits (affective), (b)

internalization of the norm of social responsibility (value), and (c) understanding of motivations associated with pro-social acts (cognitive)'' (p. 34). The way they consider SR is somewhat naïve – ''people should help others in need'' (1982, p. 34) – and they use the Harris Scale (1957) to grade socially responsible behavior. The aim of that article predicts children's pro-social behavior using personality, SR, and cognitive capabilities. In the study, there is evidence that there is a positive direct correlation between SR and pro-social attitudes in children's behavior (p. 42). When referring to motivation (cognition), the authors write that ''choice of internal motivations related to behavior but to a lesser degree'' (p. 42).

Proposition 1: Social responsibility is related to individual pro-social attitudes.

These findings suggest that pro-social tendencies have been connected to our behavior since childhood and probably since the earliest days of our lives. The analysis of SR among children has limited meaning for what can be found and discussed in relation to adults. Nevertheless, we have evidence that pro-social behavior is also well alive among adults (Fehr and Schmidt, 2003; Frey and Meier, 2004). There are many different ways to define pro-social attitudes and behaviors (Brief and Motowidlo, 1986). The way it is intended here is related to the fact that individuals care about their and other people's interests (Frey and Meier, 2004, p. 66). Moreover, the findings of O'Connor and Cuevas seem to gain evidence from other studies too. In one of his studies, Humphrey argues that

> the life of the great apes and man may not require much in the way of practical invention, but it does depend critically on the possession of wide factual knowledge of practical technique and the nature of the habitat. Such knowledge can only be acquired in the context of a *social community* – a community which provides both a medium for the cultural transmission of information and a protective environment in which individual learning can occur. I propose that the chief role of creative intellect is to hold society together (Humphrey, 1976, p. 307, italics added).

This passage states that fundamental knowledge that serves to develop core cognitive abilities is not possible without a *social* environment. This also means that individual behavior must be directed toward these social bounds. Learning is possible only when individuals feel ''protected'' by a community, i.e., when a social environment exists. Hence, we can add that pro-social behavior is the key to the creative functions of our intellect.

Proposition 1.1: Individuals are mere social beings since the function of their intellect depends on the community in which they live.

Humphrey's (1976) emphasis on individuals as social beings lies at the core of modern assumptions in both economics (Etzioni, 1988; Frank, 2004) and management (Jones and George, 2006). Frey and Meier conducted a study based on a set of 136,000 observations where it emerged that individuals pro-social behavior is related to the environment and the ''identification with an organization'' (2004, p. 78). However, within this perspective, how data are shared and information transmitted remains obscure. We still need to find a theoretical perspective that helps us to connect SR to cognition on a sound basis.

The fact that individuals lean on social channels in their ordinary decision-making activity, and that ''to think social'' is quite common emerge in one of Simon's last writings (1993).

Docility

According to Herbert Simon, individuals tend ''to depend on suggestions, recommendations, persuasion, and information obtained through social channels as a major basis for choice'' (Simon, 1993, p. 156). He refers to this tendency with the word ''docility.'' It is clear that ''suggestions,'' ''recommendations,'' ''persuasion,'' and ''information gathering'' are all human activities. Although Simon does not specify what a social channel is, this definition captures a process that is pretty familiar to individuals and describes what Humphrey means (see above). The times we look for data coming from other individuals are countless (Bonaccio and Dalal, 2006; Harvey and Fischer, 1997; Van Swol and Sniezek, 2005). If we take a closer look at this process, we find that we cannot think or behave the way we do without access to social channels and sources of information. Other people form the basis for how we understand the surrounding world. In

our lives, the first source of aid usually comes from family members, our parents, and other close relatives. Secondary sources are mass media and education, for example. The process of disenchancement every child passes through is nothing more than the acquisition of an ability to filter (or ''mediate,'' as shown below) information from different sources.

Proposition 2: Individuals lean on social channels to make decisions, i.e., they are docile.

The connection that O'Connor and Cuevas (1982) find between cognitive capabilities and pro-social behavior could be explained with the concept of docility. For Humphrey (1976), the more individuals lean on social sources of information, the more they are likely to develop core cognitive capabilities. In other words, the simple fact of leaning on social channels expands cognitive capabilities. This learning process (Simon, 1990) is what makes children willing to show comfortable social behavior. Motivation is, of course, the basis for any kind of behavior and it seems to be so for cognition too. How are cognition and docility related to behavior? Is docility a behavioral part of cognitive activities? And if so, what cognition? I will return to these important points after the following specifications.

These cognitive processes are also related to creativity. Since docility describes a learning activity that involves pro-social behavior (Secchi, 2007b), it might be interesting to see if it relates to creativity too. A recent study on human behavior in organizations suggests that individuals showing the highest levels of docility cover the most creative roles in the organization and show good attitudes toward leadership (Secchi and Bardone, 2009).

Proposition 2.1: The more one leans on social channels (i.e., the more one is docile) the more he or she expands his or her cognitive capabilities.

The caveat on this proposition is that the organization or the social system in which one works, studies, or lives has the tendency to foster and accept docility. However, effects of organizational culture on docility have not yet been studied.

Studies on this topic tend to follow Simon's approach and define docility only in relation to the attitude toward taking advice, comments, suggestions, and information from other individuals (Knudsen, 2003; Secchi, 2007b). This can be defined as the *passive* side of the process (Secchi and Bardone, 2009) since it is important to recognize that there is also an *active* role played in the learning process and, thus, in docile behavior. This is apparent when individuals argue with their advisors or provide their own suggestions, comments, and advice to other people. In other words, together with the *taking* one must consider the *giving* of the advice (Bonaccio and Dalal, 2006). This means that information transfer is a mix of active and passive attitudes, especially when it comes from social settings. Simon overlooked this *active* side, although I argue it is one of the most important variables that help to define human thinking and behavior.

Proposition 2.2: Levels of cognitive development and docility remain in the balance between active and passive tendencies, i.e., to take and provide information through social channels.

I argue that the level of docility may change depending on many factors, among which there are: (a) the way the organization's social structure promotes exchanges of information between individuals (both formally and informally) and (b) individual cognitive capabilities and abilities to cope with that structure (Secchi and Bardone, 2009).

The word *docile* comes from the Latin *docilis*. This term shares its roots with another word, *docere*, that means to *teach*. *Docilis* is an adjective that indicates the willingness to be taught; therefore, the docile individual (a) shows willingness and (b) learns from somebody else. The way docility is defined in this article – the act of giving and taking advice, comments, and suggestions from social channels – is thus connected to the learning process. Studies on the judge–advisor relation show that trust is a fundamental component of this process (Bonaccio and Dalal, 2006, p. 131). Since selfishness has never been related to trust or to learning activities but more often to opposite characters (Frank, 2004), this disposition toward other human beings is more likely to be ''social,'' or ''pro-social,'' and it well relates to altruism (Secchi, 2007b; Simon, 1990, 1993).

If we can prove that our cognitive system leans on social as well as other external resources as a major

basis for choice, i.e., if this external–internal interchange is what shapes individual cognition, then we can find support for the argument that socially oriented thinking and behavior are not exceptional. Finally we can point out what "responsibility" means when associated with the word "social."

In the following pages, I present the so-called distributed cognition approach and then move to analyze how SR relates to this.

A cognitive approach to socially responsible behavior

Advancements in cognitive science support the fact that the human cognitive system is *distributed* (Hutchins, 1995) in the sense that it is shaped by external resources (Clark and Chalmers, 1998). In this section, I consider the main assumptions of this perspective and then outline how it could be helpful in relation to SR.

The concept that what happens inside the brain can be studied in isolation is, by far, one of the least challenged in all of the history of decision making and artificial intelligence (Solomon, 2007). The first models of the brain were based on a reproduction of mechanisms that take place inside the human brain (for example, see Newell and Simon, 1972), and this idea of the isolated brain is one of the most powerful within western philosophy and science (Solomon, 2007). Nevertheless, scholars from different disciplinary backgrounds recently began asking: "Where does the mind stop and the rest of the world begin?" (Clark and Chalmers, 1998, p. 7). Students of the distributed cognition approach answer this question in a very peculiar way, as I show in the following pages.

The environment

The environment, defined as everything that is outside the brain, relates to it in the sense that individuals retain information taken from it. This is the common pattern when considering cognition and rationality (Simon, 1955); the external environment is full of information that the individual uses to solve problems. This information is usually classified in terms of richness, related also to the medium carrying the message (Daft et al., 1987). Hence, the distinction between what is inside and what stays outside the brain is apparent. However, what if the individual's ability to solve a problem depends on the medium and on the quality of information he or she uses? This is what usually happens: when confronted with a problem, individuals face a huge array of different situations or alternatives. Think, for example, of the reaction two individuals might have when asked to analyze a set of data. Imagine that the first individual has access to computer software for statistical analysis, and the second is provided with statistical tables, paper, and pencil. How do the two cognitive processes vary?

This is but a simple example out of thousands we can make, but it is clear that environmental variables play a pivotal role in cognition processes. The external role played by resources such as paper, pencil, book, or computer software is not merely that of helping cognitive processes. It is actually that of shaping these processes and defining how individuals process information (Magnani, 2006, 2007; Wilson, 1994, 2004).

The role of external resources

Internal and external resources are intertwined. This does not mean that individual cognitive abilities are not important, but that the ways in which individuals process information vary depending on *how* external resources shape their cognition. We can also see the process from an evolutionary perspective, so that

> [i]t is becoming less and less appropriate to assume that our minds exist only in our heads: human beings have solved their problems of survival and reproduction by "distributing" cognitive functions to external nonbiological sources, props, and aids (Magnani, 2007, p. 54).

This "distribution" makes us fit the modern social context, where there is an ever-growing number of external resources.

Proposition 3: External resources shape individual cognitive processes.

Proposition 3.1: The more the individual exploits external resources the more the cognitive process develops.

Having said that, we understand the reasons why individuals lean on external resources. However, it is not clear if and how they tend to build their own world of resources. More than simply leaning on external artifacts or resources, individuals actively distribute their cognition. This is the process of *externalization* (Magnani, 2006). Individuals create external resources all the time; this is a basic function of our intellect. One of the most interesting examples is language

> which appears to be a central means by which cognitive processes are extended into the world. Think of a group of people brainstorming around a table, or a philosopher who thinks best by writing, developing her ideas as she goes. It may be that language evolved, in part, to enable such extensions of our cognitive resources within actively coupled systems (Clark and Chalmers, 1998, pp. 11–12).

This description of language as an external resource leads to two considerations. The first is that the process is *active* and goes on in a complex way. The second is that the externalization process can be described as a representation of something that has no room in our brain, or as something that individuals need to *re-project*. This outside–inside interplay is what defines the externalization process together with a re-projecting phase. It is a push–pull mechanism that seems extremely similar to the social cognitive processes described as docility above.

Proposition 3.2: Cognitive processes include different phases such as externalization and re-projecting activities.

In particular, Magnani argues that

> representations are external and internal. We can say that: (a) external representations are formed by external materials that express (through reification) concepts and problems that do not have a natural home in the brain; (b) internalized representations are internal re-projections, a kind of recapitulations (learning) of external representations in terms of neural patterns of activation in the brain. They can sometimes be ''internally'' manipulated like external objects and can originate new internal reconstructed representations through the neural activity of transformation and integration (Magnani, 2006, p. 346).

The last point is no less important that the previous ones. External resources are *mediators*, in the sense that they filter, enhance, boost, decrease, discount, or, broadly speaking, shape cognitive processes.

Social resources and behavioral templates

No classification of external resources exists among the distributed cognition literature as far as my knowledge is concerned. However, it is apparent that the social channels mentioned above are external and are resources too. Other people, as one of the main sources of information, are external resources. External social channels could be classified as one of these resources, so that individuals try not to misuse them or let them fade (Secchi and Bardone, 2009).

Within the framework of the distributed cognition approach, social channels allow the individual to enhance overall cognitive processes through, for example, the exploitation of available data, the access to covered mental processes, and the opening of faster, deeper, and more effective heuristics (Magnani, 2007).

Individuals find social resources to be widely available (Bonaccio and Dalal, 2006), and they usually exploit them in terms of the *epistemic* mediation, i.e., when they ''alter the world so as to aid and augment cognitive processes such as recognition and search'' (Clark and Chalmers, 1998, p. 8). Social channels help us remain acquainted with our cognitive limits and potentials.

Having defined social channels as external resources and mediators, what is the role of docility? This can be fairly described as a behavioral template (in the sense of Magnani, 2007, p. 187ff) that is a result of the way our cognitive system works.

Proposition 3.3: Social external resources are widely available so that they are exploited very often by human beings.

Proposition 3.4: Docility is a behavioral template that individuals use to exploit social external resources on a regular basis.

In summary (a) the way our brain works is through the exploitation of external resources, especially the ones defined as social channels, (b) these methods are embedded in the way cognitive processes evolve, and (c) individuals externalize and re-project concepts through the creation and manipulation (epistemic actions) of internal–external objects (active–passive processes); hence, docile behavior is the outcome of the way our cognitive system works.

Social responsibility and cognition

Solomon provides us with an effective and concise summary of the concepts exposed above. She states that distributed or

> [s]ituated cognition approaches have in common a rejection of the ideas that cognition is individualistic (accomplished by each human individually), general (true of all individual humans and applicable in all situations), abstract, symbolic, explicit, language based and located in the brain as mediator between sensory input and action output. […] Situated cognition marks a departure from one or more […] traditional assumptions, and acceptance of the view that cognition can be social, particular, concrete, implicit, nonlinguistic and distributed (Solomon, 2007, p. 413).

If we accept this perspective, we may ask what the role of SR is within a system like this. As mentioned above, SR means that a person feel obliged to consider the effects of his or her decisions as they impact the whole social system (Davis and Blomstrom, 1966). This is also suggested by O'Connor and Cuevas (1982) when they consider the tendency of children to behave pro-socially and show that they understand motivations associated with that behavior. Moreover, following Humphrey's concept (1976) we can argue that individuals need to be tied to their social community to develop and enhance their cognitive capabilities and behave like typical human beings. There is an emerging cognitive trait in these perspectives. My suggestion is that SR could be intended as the attitude/behavior that individuals use to maintain *cognitive advantages* from the social channels they exploit more frequently. I argue that SR is what makes people maintain a solid connection to these social channels.

Proposition 4: Social responsibility helps to maintain individual cognitive advantages and to preserve the possibility of channel (or resource) exploitation for extended periods of time.

Unlike other external resources, social channels are subjected to bounds and opportunities such as trust, obligations, rights, duties, culture, identity, and many others. If we agree with the distributed cognition theses, then many implications follow. Once individuals exploit external social resources, how could they preserve this cognitive advantage? In the following pages, I focus on the nature of responsibility first and then on the role that docility plays.

Responsibility

In order to make my argument clearer, a short digression on the nature of responsibility is needed. As a fundamental step in understanding SR, we need to make a distinction between external *social* and *nonsocial* external resources.

While external *social* resources can be defined as everything that directly refers to other human beings, *nonsocial* resources are not directly connected to other individuals. The Mississippi River is a clear example of the latter while a newspaper article is an example of the former. Of course, our thinking of the Mississippi River could be highly influenced by socially construed images of it, but it still remains something different from artifacts or objects which are the product of human creative activities. This leads to the definition of a social channel, a mediator of socially based information, in which the sender *actively* gives that communication and the receiver *actively* takes it. That newspaper article becomes a social channel when and only when the reader uses it. The example of advice giving and taking is far more exhaustive (see above).

Responsibility is a reinforcement mechanism that is often used to exploit social channels. Think of the journalist who irresponsibly writes false news to gain visibility. She or he could be fired if someone discovers her or his misconduct. More than that she or he may face a more radical exclusion: becoming aware of this exploitation, readers might avoid reading subsequent articles. Under our perspective, irresponsible behavior drives social channels not to

be exploited anymore, or, in a softer take, repeated irresponsible behaviors can be compared to an invitation to other people not to exploit those channels anymore.

In this way, I suggest that responsibility is a reinforcement mechanism to distributed cognitive processes. Now it must be asked, what is ''responsibility''?

Taking responsibility for something means having a duty to deal with it. This dictionary-like definition does not explain the difference between internal and external responsibility. The former happens when someone takes personal responsibility for a specific behavior, thought, or action while the latter is equivalent to bad faith or self-deception. That is to say, ''self-deception, or bad faith, creates a situation in which human beings relinquish freedom and externalize responsibility'' (Magnani, 2007, p. 129). A person in a condition of bad faith deceives himself ''by constructing a limited reality that does not take into account the full range of choices available to him, and this, alas, is a condition in which many people live all their lives. It is from himself that he is hiding the truth; the deceiver and the deceived coalesce into a single consciousness in a way that must be distinguished from true mental illness or malfunction of consciousness'' (Magnani, 2007, p. 131). Following this text, SR means avoiding bad faith and keeping a good level of freedom in personal choices. It also means that people who externalize responsibility are not as free as they think they are: it is an illusion created by bad faith.

Proposition 4.1: Internal responsibility works as a reinforcement mechanism so that people exploit social channels that belong to individuals whose behavior is perceived as responsible.
Proposition 4.2: External responsibility (irresponsibility or bad faith) suggests to people that the cognitive social channels are exploitable ''at one's own risk.''

The example of Merck recalling Vioxx, an arthritis painkiller drug, because of heart disease following its prolonged consumption is worth studying (Cavusgil, 2007). The recall happened in 2004, after the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) approved the drug in 2001. According to *The Lancet* ''the short history of cyclooxygenase (COX)-2 inhibitors [Vioxx] has been plagued by persistent safety concerns'' since the first studies were published in 2000 (Editorial, 2004, p. 1287). Following these first findings, the FDA ''implemented labeling changes in 2002 [...]. However, even following these warnings, and in the face of mounting evidence for the cardiovascular side-effects of rofecoxib, aggressive direct-to-consumer marketing of this questionable drug continued unabated'' (Editorial, 2004, pp. 1287–1288). Only when new findings became available in 2004 the company withdrew the product. If we agree with statements from *The Lancet*, we can classify this as an example of bad faith where managers limited their ability to create alternatives for effective decision making, i.e., change the marketing strategy or withdraw the drug. It is apparent that they avoided taking responsibility when Vioxx was not yet ready for the market. Impacts of this lack of responsibility were significant in terms of costs, profit, credibility, trustworthiness, and loyalty. For many of its former customers, the company lost its function of being a good source of information, and they stopped taking advice (and products) from that source.

Recent and recurrent financial scandals may make it interesting for us to ask whether, in our societies, there is a tendency to encourage bad faith or not. Do business school curriculums and theories there taught encourage bad faith? Studies have been conducted on the way economics and business schools lead students to selfishness (Frank, 2004); we need to explore more closely the relationship between selfishness and bad faith (if any) and to explain how business theories affect, if they do, human tendencies toward bad faith.

Docility and social responsibility

Let us return briefly to the O'Connor and Cuevas (1982) study on children's socially responsible behavior. It is no surprise that children show a high correlation between SR and pro-social behavior. Now we know that this is a typical cognitive template that leads to consistent pro-social behavior. Docility is the behavioral mindset that leads adults – and children too – to lean on external social channels as major sources of information when making decisions. Docility is also consistent with pro-social behavior: it explains the reason why people behave the way they do (Simon, 1993).

According to these findings, we need to proceed with our inquiry: Is it possible to make the relationship inverse? Could it be true that pro-social behavior causes people to behave responsibly?

Proposition 4.3: Socially responsible behavior favors the way cognition is socially distributed and is a docility trait.

As a behavioral template of distributed cognition, docility can be used to explain many pro-social behaviors. While altruism and cooperation have been analyzed in other studies (Knudsen, 2003; Secchi, 2007b), this article appears to be the first to connect SR to docility.

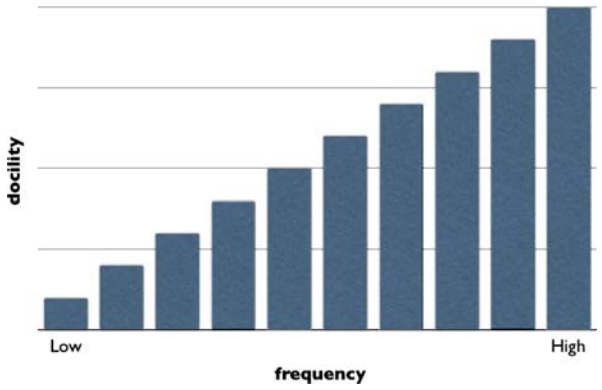

Figure 1. Docility and frequent relationships. For each social channel (or relationship), docility (*d*) increases depending on how many times (frequency, *f*) the same resource is exploited.

Implications and conclusions

The approach presented in this article is an attempt to find a plausible theory to connect SR to cognitive science. It seems that socially responsible behavior plays a role in the way people process information and engage in cognitive activities. The first two propositions (1 and 1.1) maintain that SR is related to individual pro-social behavior; additionally, this claim is related to cognitive development as it emerges from the community in which people live. These basic assumptions are redefined in the last propositions (#4 and its sub-propositions) in the light of docility and distributed cognition. Four implications emerge from the analysis.

1. *A provocative perspective: Everybody is socially responsible*. We can no longer state that there are socially responsible or irresponsible persons since SR has to do with "social learning" (docility, as for Simon, 1990, p. 1666) and the way each one of us process information. Most of our cognitive processes are social, and responsibility is the way individuals preserve the use of the same social channel again and again. With the distributed cognition approach, we stress the fact that individuals tend to distribute their cognition to other people, if we accept to classify them as social external resources. Hence, it becomes hard to leave the established routine of a reliable and so often exploited external resource. Think of a working relationship and of the many times you decide to pick up the phone, ask somebody something, or surf the Internet for information. That is we (a) trust other people unless we find out that they are not reliable or that they are cheating on us and (b) expect other people to act responsibly with us. The simple point here is that we tend to reinforce these cognitive mechanisms for decision making through responsibility.

   Broadly speaking, SR is more likely to emerge when exploitation of the same social channel is more frequent (Figure 1).

2. *Social responsibility, cooperation, altruism, and all of the family*. The introduction of docility might help in relation to another important topic. SR has always been related to philanthropy and many scholars do not even draw any distinction between the two (Carroll, 1991; Friedman, 1970; Porter and Kramer, 2002). Although scholars of management and business ethics are in good company (see the Nobel laureate Gary Becker, 1976, 1981), these two concepts are indeed different. In a conceptual article on altruism, Khalil (2004, p. 111) considers philanthropy the same as parental care and distinguishes between these two and altruism. The conceptual and practical bases of these concepts are different where "love" is concerned (pp. 111–112). Is SR related to altruism and/or

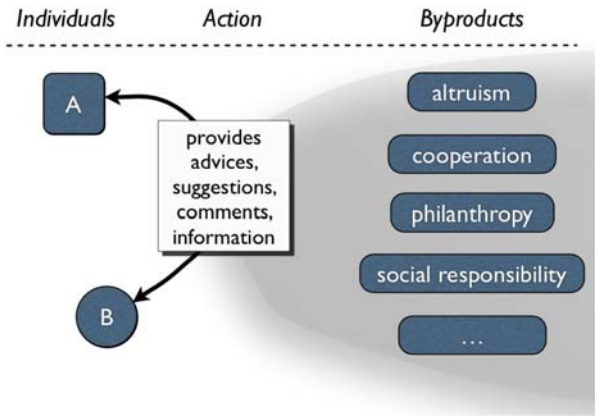

Figure 2. Byproducts of docility.

philanthropy? Is it different from these and other pro-social tendencies? Docility provides all of these tendencies with a theoretical basis because it is a basis for pro-social behavior. It is information sharing and advice giving and taking that rests at the basis of processes such as altruism, cooperation, and SR. So that we can re-define these tendencies as byproducts of docility (Figure 2).

In Figure 2, A provides B with information and, from this action, altruism, SR, cooperation, and other byproducts could arise. Of course, the intensity of these byproducts might vary depending on the individual we consider (A or B in this case) and of the docile attitudes at play (active–passive relation). These relations need to be developed further, but it seems that this approach gives an interesting perspective to the understanding of managerial behavior and sheds a new light on SR.

3. *Free to choose*. Another implication of the model emerges in relation to the basis for exploiting social channels. SR is a reinforcement mechanism (Propositions 4.1 and 4.2) in the sense that, when exercised, it works as a social tie between user and provider. I also introduce the difference between internal and external responsibility, the former being consistent with common definitions of SR and the latter being a synonym of irresponsibility or bad faith. However, there are conditions that need to be met. What happens if the individual lives in a community where bad faith is widespread? What if responsibility is not an option to reinforce cognitive mechanisms because there is only one channel? The example of the journalist also works well here. Imagine that the editor of the newspaper has strong ties with the state's government and sometimes the journalist is asked to write censored or distorted versions of particular news. He or she knows this is an act of bad faith and a betrayal of his or her professional duties. This "line of irresponsibility" that links the government to the journalist is not going to end. The journalist has no option but to write what he or she is asked or to quit the job. However, the second is not an option in states where the government directly controls the media industry and our journalist has a family. In this case the journalist acts responsibly in respect to the government; however, he or she behaves irresponsibly from a broader perspective. The example shows that responsibility always needs to be accompanied by the word *social*. It is important to understand for what community the individual feels responsible. From the cognitive perspective, the relationship between journalist–editor–government is responsible and accounts for the exploitation of the same channel again and again. In order to use a stronger and provocative image, Mr. Capone was responsible to his mafia community in Chicago and his cognition worked on the basis of ties that bound that organization. How many business cases can be analyzed and better understood through this cognitive perspective?
4. *Long-run exploitation of channels*. In Proposition 4, I suggest that the tendency to exploit the same social channel works if we take "long periods of time." In social contexts, and depending on social and organizational cultural variables, one fact does not make history. It is the reiteration of irresponsible behavior that may cause the end of a specific relationship. An interesting line of research could be to study what the break-even point is in relation to responsibility and the exploitation of social channels.

The concepts here introduced provide evidence for the fact that learning individuals are socially responsible, and I argue that the reason why human beings are so is connected to the way our cognition is organized. Although distributed cognition has recently entered the management scholarly debate (Michel, 2007) and sense making processes has been related to SR (Basu and Palazzo, 2008), this article remains the first to connect SR to distributed cognitive processes. Empirical validation is needed and will be the focus of future research.

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Department of Management,
University of Wisconsin, La Crosse,
1725 State Street, La Crosse, WI 54601, U.S.A.
E-mail: secchi.davi@uwlax.edu