Institutional, stakeholder, and cultural influences on corporate social performance: an institution-based view

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Abstract: Although scholars are beginning to explore the institutional and stakeholder influences on corporate social performance (CSP), these influences have not been examined in isolation and as separate forces. Research on CSP also has not considered that institutions and stakeholders are embedded within distinct cultures, which are not homogeneous and can differ on key dimensions. To address these issues, we explore how institutional pressures from organisations’ external stakeholders can influence CSP and how these influences can, in turn, differ across cultures. Specifically, we theorise about the influence of coercive institutional pressures, stemming from pressures exerted on firms by organisations and institutions that firms depend on for tangible and intangible resources. Drawing from the institution-based view of firm strategy, we argue that in order to acquire tangible and intangible resources, firms often respond to stakeholders’ coercive pressures by engaging in activities to improve CSP. Thus, coercive institutional forces and CSP are positively related. Furthermore, we posit that the influence of stakeholders on CSP will differ across cultures. We focus on a particularly salient cultural dimension – power distance – and theorise that high power distance strengthens the coercive effects of government and weakens the effects of unions and interest groups on CSP.

Keywords: corporate social performance; CSP; corporate social responsibility; CSR, institution-based view; stakeholder perspective; cross-cultural comparison; comparative management.

Introduction

Corporate social performance (CSP) – the evaluation and outcomes of a firm’s social responsibility activities – is a phenomenon that has received scholarly attention since at least the 1930s (Carroll, 1999). However, the seminal book, Social Responsibilities of the Businessman (Bowen, 1953), is widely considered the beginning of the ‘modern era of social responsibility’ from both academic and practitioner perspectives [Carroll, (1979), p.497; Lockett et al., 2006]. In subsequent decades, researchers have made substantial progress in identifying the mechanisms, functions, and outcomes of CSP (cf., Aguinis and Glavas (2012), Margolis et al. (2007) and Moura-Leite and Padgett (2011) for detailed reviews).

An increasing number of scholars are beginning to draw from institutional (e.g., Ferri and Ferri, 2017; Moratis, 2016; Short et al., 2016) and stakeholder theories (e.g., Brower and Mahajan, 2013; Ditlev-Simonsen and Wenstop, 2013; Munilla and Miles, 2005) to explain why firms invest in CSP (Campbell, 2007; Delmas and Toffel, 2008; Hoffman, 2007; Husted and Allen, 2006). Both theories depart from prior work emphasising economic influences and focusing on intra-organisational-, and often individual-level, factors (e.g., Deckop et al., 2006). In contrast, institutional and stakeholder theories stress the importance of the supra-organisational environment and groups of external firm stakeholders (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983; Meyer and Rowan, 1977; Mitchell et al., 1997). Specifically, institutional theory contends that organisational forms, structures, and practices (including the norms, rules, schemas and routines that guide managers) are
adopted because, in addition to competitive- and efficiency-based forces, organisations are also driven, in part, by socially-constructed forces, such as institutions and the need for social legitimacy (Meyer and Rowan, 1977; Zucker, 1987). Stakeholder theory contends that there are a collection of groups – or ‘stakeholders’ – associated with every organisation that are influenced by the organisation and vital to its survival and success (Freeman, 1984). These two theories situate the firm within a complex ecosystem of institutional and stakeholder influences and shift CSP scholarship from a micro-oriented focus on individual managers’ personal preferences to macro-level, external pressures on organisations.

Research drawing from institutional and stakeholder approaches suggests that organisations may be pressured to engage in corporate social responsibility activities and to demonstrate superior CSP to gain legitimacy with external stakeholders (Weaver et al., 1999). A firm’s external stakeholders and its institutional environment can influence both its overall CSP and specific dimensions, such as environmental performance (Delmas and Toffel, 2008; Jalaludin et al., 2011; Johnson and Greening, 1999).

Although research examining CSP through the lenses of institutional and stakeholder theories have made strides in explaining why some firms outperform others in their social responsibility, most of this research has focused on organisations in Western markets and, specifically, on firms located in the USA. These studies have not examined how the determinants of CSP can differ across cultures and very few studies take a comparative approach or acknowledge cross-cultural differences in CSP (Famiola and Adiwoso, 2016; McWilliams et al., 2006; Zheng et al., 2015). However, trends towards increased globalisation, such as the growing prevalence of ‘born global’ firms (cf., Cavusgil and Knight, 2015) and international social entrepreneurship (cf., Marshall, 2011), suggest there is an increasing need to examine how CSP and its antecedents differ across cultures (Liou et al., 2017).

To address this critical omission in prior research of CSP, this conceptual paper explores how institutional pressures from an organisation’s external stakeholders can influence CSP and how these influences can, in turn, differ across cultures. Specifically, we build on the institution-based view of firm strategy (e.g., Peng, 2002, 2003), which theorises that, in addition to industry- and organisation-level influences, firms are also influenced by the formal and informal ‘rules of the game’ produced by institutions. These institutional forces can be the basis for a ‘third leg’ of firm strategies (Peng et al., 2009). The institution-based view can be used to draw attention to the important influences institutional pressures can have on firm strategy, particularly across cultures (Peng et al., 2008).

In this paper, we draw from the institution-based view and focus on the influence of coercive institutional pressures on CSP. Coercive pressures stem from pressures exerted on firms by stakeholders that firms depend on for tangible (e.g., financial investment) and intangible (e.g., legitimacy) resources (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983). We identify three stakeholder groups – government, unions, and interest groups – as sources of coercive institutional forces and theorise about how a dominant cross-cultural difference – power distance (Hofstede, 1980) – serves as a boundary condition that influences the relationship between coercive institutional forces and CSP.

The remainder of the paper is structured as follows. First, we provide a brief review of the literature examining CSP. We then review the pertinent macro-oriented CSP literature. In doing so, we emphasise the opportunities that remain unexplored and particularly the opportunities that introducing a cross-cultural, institution-based view can
address. Second, a framework and set of propositions are proposed. Finally, we conclude by discussing the implications of our theorising, the limitations of our conceptual approach, and the future research directions.

2 Literature review

2.1 What is CSP?

We adopt Wood’s (1991) conception of CSP, which was built on previous work (e.g., Carroll, 1979; Wartick and Cochran, 1985) and conceptualises CSP as consisting of actions and outcomes and as neither inherently ‘good’ nor ‘bad’. Since performance can be either positive or negative, Wood (1991, p.693) extended Wartick and Cochran’s (1985) model to define CSP as “a business organization’s configuration of principles of social responsibility, processes of social responsiveness, and policies, programs, and observable outcomes as they relate to the firm’s social relationships”. Thus, CSP is an evaluation of the effectiveness and outcomes of a firm’s corporate social responsibility (CSR) activities. Corporations engaging in charitable giving to local communities or taking actions to preserve the natural environment are examples of positive CSP. Firms violating human rights or engaging in actions that degrade the environment are examples of negative CSP.

2.2 An institution-based view of CSP

Institutional theory has been used by a stream of research seeking to explain how an organisation’s institutional environment influences firm behaviours. Institutions are “supraorganizational pattern[s] of human activity which constrain both the ends and means of organizational behavior” and “provide vocabularies of meaning and rules determining what is to be valued” [Friedland and Alford (1991), pp.243]. In describing institutional influences, Meyer and Rowan (1977, p.340) state that “institutional rules function as myths which organisations incorporate, gaining legitimacy, resource stability, and enhanced survival prospective”. Organisations are influenced by their institutional environment and, to gain legitimacy and other resources, they incorporate elements from the institutional structures that surround them. Further, it has been suggested that institutional pressures from different sources may influence the isomorphic-behaviour of institutional fields and corporate strategies in different ways (Xu and Shenkar, 2002). Thus, navigating and conforming to institutional rules and pressures can be critical to a firm’s performance and a source of performance-variance among firms (Zucker, 1987).

The institution-based view (Peng, 2002, 2003) draws specific attention to the fact that a firm’s behaviours and strategies are influenced not only by firm and industry-specific factors, which have received intense attention in strategic management, but also by institutional conditions and transitions. This view is built on two foundational Propositions, that “managers and firms rationally pursue their interests and makes strategic choices within the formal and informal constraints in a given institutional framework” and that “[…] in situations where formal constraints are unclear or fail, informal constraints will play a larger role in reducing uncertainty, providing guidance, and conferring legitimacy and rewards to managers and firms” [Peng et al., (2009) pp.67–68].
The institution-based view builds on work by DiMaggio and Powell (1983) who introduced three specific institutional, isomorphic (i.e., similarity-inducing) forces: mimetic, normative, and coercive institutional pressures. Scholars have found that all three institutional pressures have an influence on a firm’s behaviour (Martínez-Ferrero and García-Sánchez, 2017). Mimetic isomorphism is the result of firms modelling their characteristics, such as organisational structures and business models, after other firms (Haveman, 1993). Normative isomorphism is the result of firms complying with the norms determined by their professional fields. Finally, coercive isomorphism, which we argue is most closely tied to organisations’ CSP, is the result of the formal and informal pressures firms experience from other firms, from stakeholders, and from the expectations of society. Coercive forces can be particularly potent when considering cultural influences. For instance, King and Lenox (2000) argued that multinational companies in emerging markets are less likely to exhibit high CSP due to the lack of coercive pressures from the regulatory institutions in their home markets. Hence, organisations that acknowledge and adapt their strategies in accordance with institutional pressures are more likely to experience superior symbolic performance, reflected in positive social evaluations by stakeholders.

Although scholars have emphasised the values and other characteristics of individual manager (e.g., CEOs) as a driving motivation directing a firm’s CSP (Carroll, 1979; Waldman et al., 2006b), a growing number of researchers are turning to institutional theory for other explanations of CFP (e.g., Campbell, 2007). The tenets of institutional theory suggest that a firm may invest in corporate social responsibility initiatives, in part, in an attempt to gain legitimacy from stakeholders and fulfil societal expectations. Thus, components of a firm’s external environment, in addition to intra-organisational factors such as managerial characteristics, direct a firm’s CSP (Chiu and Sharfman, 2009). Hoffman (2007), for instance, examined the historical evolution of the CSR movement and found that societies created expectations for corporations, which in turn, led to demands on corporations to engage in activities such as CSR initiatives. However, as described in the next section, societal demands – and, thus, institutional pressures – will differ across cultural contexts, which suggests that need for a comparative approach.

2.3 Cultural perspectives on CSP

Hofstede’s (1980, 2001) cultural dimensions, derived from over 116,000 surveys from 72 countries, have been widely used in cross-cultural studies as a framework for how culture can differ across countries (Minkov, 2017; Minkov et al., 2017; Taras et al., 2010). The cultural dimensions include inter-cultural differences, such as power distance and uncertainty avoidance. Vitell et al. (1993) were some of the earliest scholars to apply Hofstede’s cultural dimensions in ethical decision-making. They proposed, for example, that a high score in power distance would lead decision-makers to have less emphasis on informal norms. Also focusing on cross-cultural effects, Waldman et al. (2006a) examined how culture and leadership affected managers’ corporate responsibility values in over 15 countries. They found that the extent to which “practices at the societal level encouraged and reward[ed] collective action”, had a positive association with CSR values, whereas power distance had a negative relationship with the CSR values (Waldman et al., 2006a, p.829). Their study marks one of the earliest empirical studies to compare CSR across different cultures. However, as described below, studies of cultural differences in corporate responsibility have been slow to adopt institutional
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approaches and to consider how these institutional pressures stem from groups of external stakeholders and can influence firms’ CFP.

2.4 The influence of institutional pressures on CSP

Scholars are largely in agreement that external stakeholders play a critical role in evaluating and monitoring a firm’s behaviour and performance (Clarkson, 1995; Donaldson and Preston, 1995; Famiola and Adiwoso, 2016; Mitchell et al., 1997). Clarkson (1995), for instance, reviewed more than 70 CSP studies from 1983 to 1993 and proposed that CSP is more accurately explained by examining the relationships between firms and their external stakeholders. Below we theorise that three specific groups of stakeholders – government, unions, and interest groups – exert unique institutional forces and represent three of the most salient coercive pressures (Christmann, 2004; Hoffman, 2007) on firms’ CSP. The effect of each of these stakeholder groups on CSP is theorised in turn. We then propose that there will be differences in these influences depending on the power distance of a culture.

Government. DiMaggio and Powell (1983) described coercive institutional pressure as pressure from other organisations (or from institutional agents) that a focal firm depends on for resources. One of the most potent sources of coercive pressure are governments, which set and shape formal and informal standards and regulations and influence public opinion, and which can in turn influence an organisation’s procedures, rules, and structures. For instance, studies have explored how government mandates can be instrumental in determining CSP in certain industries (Christmann, 2004; Delmas and Toffel, 2008). Davis et al. (2006) analysed data from KLD, a database containing evaluations of corporations’ social, environmental, and governance performance, and found that industries with the highest overall CSP are often subject to extensive government regulation (Davis et al., 2006). They argued that financial institutions are consistently ranked high in the community engagement dimension of CSP, in part because of the mandates contained in the Community Reinvestment Act of 1977. As a result of these findings, Davis and colleagues suggested that “regulation may be a superior path to soulful corporate behaviour than good-hearted executives” [Davis et al., (2006), p.9]. Governmental pressures have also been identified as an important factor determining a firm’s environmental CSP (Christmann, 2004). For example, Christmann (2004) used survey data from firms in the chemical industry and found that multi-national companies perceived government pressure as being positively related to their internal global environmental performance standard. Therefore, we build on prior research and offer the following proposition as a baseline to our theorising.

Proposition 1a: There is a positive relationship between the strength of governmental pressures and a firm’s CSP.

As described earlier, an important difference across cultures is their degree of power distance (Bochner and Hesketh, 1994; Farh et al., 2007). High power distance often results in a pronounced hierarchy among the members of a culture (Hofstede, 1980). Members of such cultures are accustomed to large power differentials and, thus, are more accepting of authority and more likely to obey the decrees of figures of power. We posit that a high power distance will strengthen the effect of coercive governmental pressures on firms’ CSP. When a culture has a high power distance, firms are more likely to have centralised organisational structures and operate based on strict hierarchies of command
Proposition 1b: As a culture’s power distance increases, it will strengthen the positive relationship between the strength of governmental pressures and a firm’s CSP.

Unions. Another powerful group of stakeholders that can exert coercive pressure are unions, defined as associations of employees that negotiate work terms and conditions (Binderkrantz and Krøyer, 2012). Studies have begun to examine the influence of unions on firms’ corporate social responsibility (Hoffman, 2007). For instance, Davis et al. (2006) found that industries with the highest CSP in employee relations are those industries, such as airlines and transportation, which also have strong and active unions. Thus, building on prior research, the following proposition is proposed as a baseline.

Proposition 2a: There is a positive relationship between a firm’s union participation and CSP.

The power distance of a culture will have a moderating influence on the effects of union pressures. Unions are comprised of the employees of firms and generally represent the lower hierarchy of most organisational structures (i.e., non-top-management personnel). Unions are usually organised because employees want the power to collectively bargain for better benefits or pay, and top management may not offer this power voluntarily (Kalleberg et al., 2000). In this way, a union can organise the less powerful members of an organisation and, through collective action, can make them more powerful.

In high power distance cultures, managers are often less willing to listen to the demands and suggestions of their subordinates (Botero and Van Dyne, 2009). In such cultures, subordinates will be less likely to voice demands to managers of higher power. This suggests that in a high power distance culture, a strong union, which acts as the collective voice of subordinate employees, will not be able to exert as strong of institutional pressures on firms’ CSP. In contrast, union pressures will be more potent in a culture with low power distance because in such a culture power is distributed more evenly among top-level managers and subordinates, which means that managers are less able to leverage power differentials to ignore or deny employee requests. These arguments suggest the following proposition.

Proposition 2b: As a culture’s power distance increases, it will weaken the positive relationship between a firm’s union participation and CSP.

Interest groups. Interest groups and the public opinions they represent can shape a firm’s strategy towards CSP (Matten and Moon, 2008). Institutional theory stresses that firms are pressured by institutional forces to meet society’s expectations and interests (Weaver et al., 1999). Yet, institutional theory does not explain precisely how the public forms these sentiments. Indeed, as Baron (2001, p.10) argues, “rather than speak of a society’s expectations, it is better to speak of the interests of individuals and groups.” However, except for the information included in a firm’s marketing activities, or from publicly available sources (e.g., a firm’s website or press releases), private individuals and groups do not have access to detailed and impartial information about a firm’s CSP.
Baron (2001) theorises about the importance of interest groups, comprised of non-profits, nongovernmental organisations (NGOs), and activists, in remedying this form of information asymmetry. He proposes that when a firm is targeted by activists, it draws attention from the public, increases the amount of information that is available, and, ultimately, can pressure a firm to improve its CSP. Campbell (2007) proposed that firms are more likely to engage in socially responsible behaviours when interest groups and the media are in place to monitor firms. Similarly, Doh and Guay (2006) demonstrated the importance of NGO activism in shaping the preferences for CSR in Europe and the USA.

Building on this theoretical and empirical work, we propose the following proposition.

**Proposition 3a:** There is a positive relationship between the presence of interest groups and a firm’s CSP.

It is important to consider the impact of interest groups across types of cultures. Unlike unions, interest groups are usually composed of a firm’s *external* stakeholders. As such, they are unlikely to be perceived as having formal power within a firm (at least relative to the firms’ senior managers). Because of this perceived power differential, firms operating in high power distance countries are less likely to give credence to interest groups’ concerns. That is, such concerns will be more easily deemed irrelevant, inconsequential, or as having limited ramifications. In contrast, in low power distance countries, the power differential between groups is ‘minimised’. Organisational leaders will, thus, not perceive there to be as wide a gulf in power between their firms and interest groups. The low power differential will increase the willingness (and expectation) to give credence to the demands of such groups, which motivates the following proposition:

**Proposition 3b:** As a culture’s power distance increases, it will weaken the positive relationship between the presence of interest groups and a firm’s CSP.

Figure 1 summarises the proposed theoretical model.

**Figure 1** The influence of institutions, stakeholders, and culture on CSP
CSP continues to receive intense academic, practitioner, and policy-maker attention. The concept is, however, still contested and in development and its antecedents have not been fully explored (Liou et al., 2017). This suggests that, as a topic of study, it has not yet become a fully-developed paradigm (Kuhn, 1970). For example, a review of the CSP literature reveals that scholars continue to define CSP in different ways and that many times it is often used synonymously with CSR and corporate citizenship (Carroll, 1999). Most critically, there has been a shift, of late, in the level of analysis emphasised in CSP research. Early scholars stressed individual managers’ altruism, preferences, traits, and goals as the driving forces behind CSP and argued that an organisation’s internal factors were the primary mechanisms driving a firm’s superior CSP (Hemingway and Maclagan, 2004). However, empirical studies have produced mixed results in support of this view. The equivocality of findings has led scholars to investigate other possible explanations for CSP (Delmas and Toffel, 2008; Hoffman, 2007; Husted and Allen, 2006). One strand of research on CSP has begun to employ institutional theories (e.g., Chiu and Sharfman, 2009). Drawing from an institution-based view, this paper builds on these studies to propose that coercive institutional pressures stemming from an organisation’s external stakeholders represent a powerful set of forces outside the firm that will positively influence CSP.

Further, CSP research has not acknowledged that institutions and stakeholders are embedded in different cultures, which are not homogeneous and can differ on key dimensions. We focus on one of the most salient cultural dimensions, the degree to which a culture is characterised by a high power distance. We theorise that power distance will influence the potency of coercive pressures from several stakeholder groups. Specifically, we argue that when power distance is high, the coercive institutional effects of government on CSP will be strengthened, whereas high power distance will weaken the effects of unions and interest groups on CSP. In theorising about the forces operating at the intersection of culture, institutions, and stakeholders, our aim was to produce a more complete picture of the set of forces influencing CSP.

3.1 Implications for the comparative management

Our theorising emphasises the importance of adopting a comparative approach in studies of CSP. The crux of our theory is that the effects of institutional forces and a firm’s stakeholders will differ based on the type of culture in which the firm operates. Thus, scholars seeking to map, for instance, the antecedents of CSP should recognise that studies of single countries (or of firms operating in single countries) are likely to produce an incomplete picture of the forces that shape CSP. Instead, scholars would be well-served by using a comparative research design that explores variation in CSP and its antecedents in multiple countries.

Furthermore, as our theorising and work on the institution-based view of the firm suggests, a comparative approach to CSP may be particularly important for understanding CSP in emerging markets (Peng et al., 2008). Specifically, many emerging markets have high power distance (Farh et al., 2007); which our theory suggests will have an impact on firms’ CSP. Our theorising also underscores the complexity of comparative management studies, and studies of CSP specifically, because researchers cannot explain firm
behaviours by studying isolated groups, institutions, or cultures. Thus, holistic approaches are both preferred and necessary.

3.2 Implications for practice

Our theorising about the inter-relationship between institutional, stakeholder, and cultural forces produces concrete implications for practitioners. First, our arguments suggest that multinational firms operating across cultural contexts should realise that not only will the presence of institutional and stakeholder forces differ across cultures (e.g., cultures with a greater prevalence of unions), but that the effects of these forces will differ based on dimensions of the culture being studied. That is, managers contemplating entering a new market should be mindful of not only the objective levels of governmental, union, or interest group pressures, but also how the potency of these coercive institutional forces can be intimately related to cultural factors, such as a country’s (or region’s) degree of power distance. Moreover, our theorising suggests that the extent to which managers will need to invest in CSP will differ depending on if cultural values reinforce or undermine the effects of institutional and stakeholders influences. Managers who only consider these forces in isolation risk making strategic decisions related to corporate social responsibility activities without a full understanding of what drives CSP. More fundamentally, managers that only consider their own, personal desires to improve CSP, and that do not consider the external pressures on their organisations, may struggle to understand why they do not have the necessary discretion to influence their organisations’ CSP. Thus, it is important for managers to understand that institutional and stakeholder influences will both augment and limit their sphere of influence on their firms’ CSP.

3.3 Limitations and future directions

By adopting institutional and stakeholder perspectives, we focused primarily on forces external to firms. We acknowledge, however, that managers oftentimes make values-directed decisions irrespective of environmental forces. Therefore, we may not be able to explain why some firms take actions to improve their CSP even when there is no pressure imposed on them from institutional forces. This suggests that considering the role of individual, managerial agency in firms CFP-related responses to institutional and cultural pressures is an important avenue for future research. For instance, it may be the case that while coercive institutional forces, such as from unions and government, can pressure organisations into making investments to improve their CSP, such forces stifle managers’ individual efforts towards social responsibility. That is, increases in firms’ overall CSP may increase as they respond to institutional pressures; however, these effects may be coupled with decreases in managers’ abilities and desires to be personally responsible for their firm’s CSP. If so, then this suggests that future research is needed to understand the complex interactions among individual, organisational, and supra-organisational (e.g., institutional) influences on CSP.

A related direction for future research is to examine the influence on CSP of so-called ‘organisational elites’, that is organisations with the power to establish institutions (Meyer and Rowan, 1977). Even though organisational elites can create new ‘rules of games’ (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983), institutional theorists have largely ignored such
organisational actors and have focused primarily on isomorphic processes operating among organisations (Heugens and Lander, 2009). However, organisational elites may actually be able to exert their influence on institutional agents, such as governments. For example, historically, large and powerful firms have used CSP to influence government regulations. For example, large British textile mills collectively worked together to lobby for the first child labour laws (Marvel, 1977). Thus, organisational elites can collectively define the institutional norm and use political strategies to influence institutions. Organisational elites engage in CSP, which helps to establish an institutional norm (e.g., ‘it is not appropriate to hire child labour’) (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983; Heugens and Lander, 2009; Meyer and Rowan, 1977). Firms then begin to adopt the organisational norm because of its implications for their legitimacy and symbolic performance. Other firms in the industry or institutional field may then feel pressured to adopt the same CSP-related practice. Thus, research is needed to examine how organisational forces can shape institutional pressures towards CSP and to explore how, in some cases, positive and negative feedback loops may exist between organisations, industries, and institutions.

In sum, although work is beginning to explore how institutions, stakeholders, and culture can shape firms’ CSP, research has rarely examined these influences in consort. In theorising about a comparative, institution-based view of CSP, we hope to have shed further light on the complex set of factors influencing why firms invest in CSP and the consequences of doing so.

References


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Notes

1 Organisations engaging in corporate social responsibility can be traced much further back in history. For instance, it is reported that Pliny the Elder, in his role as a Roman official, learned that workers in salt mines under Roman control were suffering negative health consequences and subsequently created precautionary measures to protect miners (Johnston, 2008).