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Exploring Corporate Philanthropy and CSR in the Context of Neo-liberalism: A Critical Sociology

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The advance of neo-liberal policy and management discourse in the Australian welfare setting has generated considerable interest from social scientific researchers. While the shifting relationships between government and third sector organisations has been studied in various ways, the somewhat more recent phenomenon of corporate philanthropy and corporate social responsibility (CSR) programs directed at 'community involvement' have received considerably less attention. While some have begun to explore the field to gain greater objective knowledge of this emerging phenomenon in Australia, research from a critical sociological standpoint appears to remain embryonic. This paper seeks to canvass the various avenues sociologists can explore corporate philanthropy and CSR from a uniquely *critical* standpoint. To do so, the relevance of various theoretical perspectives will be discussed and how they may shed new light on the placement and impact of corporate philanthropy within the broader context of neo-liberalism in Australia. Some findings from recent applied research (Roffey 2012) situated between two competing theoretical approaches (Foucaultian and Habermasian) is examined to further elucidate the relevance of undertaking critical studies within the field of corporate philanthropy and CSR.