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Employee Sensemaking of CSR: On Micro-discourses of Corporate Social Responsibility

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Abstract

Purpose

Recently, scholars are pushing for an internal corporate social responsibility (CSR) view through employee perspectives regarding CSR efforts, particularly in considering how organizations can act responsibly toward internal stakeholders (May, 2011). Thus, research has begun taking a “micro-turn” in analyzing CSR (Aguinis and Glavas, 2012), focused on individual analysis of such practices within organizations. The purpose of this study is to uncover the organizational sensemaking of CSR by an important yet less understood stakeholder group, employees.

Design/methodology/approach

This study takes a primarily qualitative, micro-approach via interviews ($n = 42$) to understanding the internal sensemaking of various organizations' CSR efforts from the perspective of employees. Organizational discourse analysis is utilized.

Findings

At the individual level, findings from over 40 one-on-one interviews highlighted how this stakeholder group rationalizes, perceives and identifies with their employers' socially responsible efforts. Findings uncover both macro- and micro-level understandings of CSR, as well as the reality of CSR within particular organizations from an operational standpoint.

Research limitations/implications

This study provides important theoretical and methodological implications, particularly in its explicitly interpretive and qualitative approach. Specifically, this work contributes to the micro-foundations and limited internal view of CSR by interviewing over 40 employees.

Practical implications

This study provides important pragmatic implications, particularly when considering how CSR is communicated to (internal) stakeholders. Additionally, CSR must be seen as strategic and embedded in core business practices, rather than a one-off campaign.

Social implications

On a societal level, there is an expectation that corporations take care of their employees in terms of emotional and physical well-being, equity, work–life balance, among others. This study suggests a move to more inward-facing CSR practices—specifically those benefiting internal members.

Originality/value

This work contributes to research on the micro-foundations and limited internal view of CSR and provides important pragmatic implications. Specifically, the use of interviews of employees in gaining access to an important stakeholder group is a significant contribution to CSR scholarship.

Keywords

Corporate social responsibility (CSR), Employee sensemaking, Organizational communication, Micro-CSR

Introduction

In a time of increased challenges facing corporations due to the current social and political climate¹, internal processes regarding CSR are particularly pertinent in understanding how organizations, and their employees, are responding. While extant research has been largely external and macro in focus, there is an increasing call for a micro-turn in CSR focused on individual analysis of such efforts *within* organizations (Aguinis and Glavas, 2012). In other words, scholars are pushing for taking an “insider's view” (May, 2011; May and Roper, 2014) by gaining access to internal audiences to better understand CSR dynamics. Additionally, empirical research is needed to explore to whom organizations believe they are responsible (i.e. for whom or what CSR is designed)—and how they are acting on such beliefs. In considering CSR as a communicative and discursive construction in and around organizations, this study considers how corporations engage in CSR from the perspective of those inside.

Literature review

Corporate social responsibility (CSR)

The study of corporate social responsibility (CSR) has been approached from multiple areas including communication, management, business ethics, economics and so on. Various initiatives labeled under the CSR umbrella include corporate citizenship, sustainability and corporate governance. While many organizations are

continually implementing or changing some type of social responsibility effort, how they are conceptualized, operationalized and communicated differ. The variation is largely due to CSR's contextual, contested and dynamic nature (Rasche *et al.*, 2017).

It is difficult to define what CSR is and what it looks like because “what counts as responsible corporate conduct changes over time. What we consider to be responsible behavior not only depends on the relevant business context but also on temporal dynamics” (Rasche *et al.*, 2017, p. 12; see also Rivoli and Waddock, 2011). For the purpose of this study, I refer to Rasche *et al.* (2017) in defining CSR as ...

the integration of an enterprise's social, environmental, ethical, and philanthropic responsibilities towards society into its operations, processes, and core business strategy in cooperation with relevant stakeholders. (p. 6)

Additionally, I adapt Aguinis' (2011) definition in further considering CSR as an organizational construct. Here, CSR is defined as “*context-specific* organizational actions and policies that take into account stakeholders' expectations and triple-bottom line of economic, social and environmental performance” (p. 855, emphasis added).

Beneficiaries and influencers, also known as “CSR actors” (Moon *et al.*, 2017), play a role in reflecting and shaping an organization's CSR agenda. These broadly include societal, business and governmental actors. Societal actors are often associated with the core of CSR, hence the word “social” in the term itself. Likewise, societies have various expectations and powers over business, and believe these entities have certain (ethical) obligations to those they impact. The individuals in these societies can range in terms of political or economic status, and in relation to the organization itself (i.e. stakeholders). In short, businesses continue to seek social legitimacy through “public acceptance, endorsement, and support” (Carroll *et al.*, 2012, p. 1). Additionally, while CSR has economic and performance benefits, particularly in legitimizing an organization's activities (Palazzo and Richter, 2005), corporations are increasingly seeking *moral* legitimacy (i.e. if and how an organization's actions promote social welfare and positively contribute to the greater good) through these efforts as well (Abdulrazak and Amran, 2018).

While Moon *et al.* (2017) described society as the primary context for CSR, the authors argue that business is the primary actor—for the responsibility of business is the very basis of CSR. While the main point of a for-profit business is to sell goods and services, the social objectives and further purpose or role of business in society is continually debated in both theory and practice. In other words, what and whom companies are responsible for, and how such entities enact these responsibilities through various efforts or policies, is contested based on various perspectives. I argue that scholars should also consider relevant *internal* stakeholders who undoubtedly affect CSR policies in terms of execution, communication and constitution.

CSR in organizational communication research. May (2011) and May and Roper (2014) situated the topic of CSR in the traditional four strands of organizational communication research as originally conceptualized by Deetz (2001): dialogic, critical, interpretive and normative. This study seeks to combine an interpretive and dialogic approach. A dialogic take on CSR is what May (2011) expected to become more common in future work. May (2011) stated that, “similar to critical research on CSR, this approach is concerned with asymmetry and power in organizations, but there is a greater tendency to focus on micro-practices, as well as the fluid and dispersed (rather than centralized) nature of power” (p. 99). Thus, from the dialogic view, CSR is viewed as potentially contradictory and complex within organizational systems, so much that it “can become self-referential” or “self-explanatory and neutral” (May, 2011, p. 100).

From an interpretive perspective, researchers “seek to understand the sensemaking activities of the persons they study as a kind of translation of participants' interests (May and Roper, 2014, p. 775). The interpretive

sphere largely includes studies that have been external in focus—examining the practices corporations present openly and publicly, such as reports, websites and press releases. Thus, the internal vantage point in terms of interpretive CSR research is lacking, particularly as related to employees working on such efforts. Therefore, this study seeks to address employee sensemaking and perceptions of CSR.

The internal side of CSR.

The employee perspective and sensemaking around such issues, also known as the “insider’s view” (May and Roper, 2014), has been scarce in CSR studies and, as a result internal stakeholders’ role in facilitating, communicating, defining and implementing these efforts has been largely overlooked. This is concerning given that this particular group is one of the most critical voices in constituting an organization (Morsing and Schultz, 2006).

CSR as contextual.

I conceptualize the consideration of the role and importance of context for corporate responsibility in two ways. First, CSR is contextual, and also contested (Rasche *et al.*, 2017) in that it is both defined and applied by different groups of people, organizations, industries and countries. The seminal piece by Matten and Moon (2008) suggested CSR issues, modes, framing mechanisms and communication approaches differ across cultures. Therefore, CSR is not a one-size-fits-all approach, as various (contextual) factors (e.g. political ideologies, social climate, cultural understandings, historical economic context) influence CSR foci or agenda and reporting (Tilt, 2016). As Tilt (2016) argued, it is important to consider the broader, external context in which research of CSR takes place.

Second, in considering CSR to be a social construct constituted through and by communicative practices, these efforts are unique to the organizational contexts they both create and in which they are created. CSR as ambiguous—with no clear or definitive meaning or operationalization—affirms that the concept is indeed a social construct. Therefore, embracing the discursively open-endedness of CSR, and other related efforts (e.g. sustainability), can be an advantage to corporate stakeholders—inviting these individuals to partake in dialogue, critique, sensemaking and contribution of CSR (Christensen *et al.*, 2015). As an ongoing organizational phenomenon, corporate responsibility “can be understood as a set of guiding values that continuously evolves through input and challenges from managers, employees, and citizens” (p. 141). Therefore, CSR is contextual insofar as it is socially constructed in a localized organizational environment.

Exploring the micro-processes of CSR.

I take a micro- or individual-level approach to examining the underlying, communicative mechanisms of corporate responsibility. Prior CSR work has primarily taken a macro-, or organizational-level approach (see review by Aguinis and Glavas, 2012), while largely neglecting individuals in the exploration of (psychological) micro-foundations of CSR (or micro-CSR), but are now beginning to grow in human resource management (HRM) and organizational behavior disciplines (e.g. Gond *et al.*, 2017).

More specifically, engaging in micro-CSR is “the study of the effects of the experience (however it is defined) on individuals (in any stakeholder group) as examined at the individual level” (Rupp and Mallory, 2015, p. 216). Thus, this area of research often examines individuals’ psychological experience, understanding and feelings regarding an organization’s CSR initiatives. However, to date, most research taking a micro and individual approach to CSR, while still rather limited, has focused on how a firm’s external CSR efforts impact or affect employees (Rupp and Mallory, 2015). To further unpack CSR evaluation processes by individuals, Gond *et al.* (2017) called for empirical examination to consider “CSR perceptions, attributions and sensemaking processes” (p. 233; see also Basu and Palazzo, 2008).

In the past several years, an individual- or micro-level analysis of CSR has received both theoretical and empirical attention (Gond *et al.*, 2017). While focused primarily on drivers, reactions and evaluations, research is needed that explores the underlying mechanisms, interactions and dynamic connections between these areas. This study attempts to fill the interpretive process of sensemaking through a communicative approach.

CSR and employees.

CSR from a *communicative* standpoint has historically taken an external (May, 2011; May and Roper, 2014) and macro perspective in extant scholarship. Work over the last two decades has begun to utilize an internal view—connecting CSR and employees. Many of these topics include employee motivation connected to: CSR engagement (Brammer *et al.*, 2007; Collier and Esteban, 2007; Rupp *et al.*, 2006), employee-organizational identification due to CSR (Kim *et al.*, 2010; see also Bhattacharya *et al.*, 2008), employee reaction or consideration (Dawkins and Lewis, 2003), employee attitudes or perception regarding/toward CSR (Rodrigo and Arenas, 2008) and how CSR is communicated to these internal audiences (Crane and Glozer, 2016; Nielsen and Thomsen, 2007). In the past several years, however, scholarship has begun looking more at employee perceptions of their organization's socially responsible behavior (Farooq *et al.*, 2014; Kucharska and Kowalczyk, 2019; Koch *et al.*, 2019; Lee, 2020; Lee *et al.*, 2012; Schaefer *et al.*, 2020; Shen and Zhang, 2019), although largely quantitative in nature.

Largely from a performance and engagement or commitment standpoint, research confirms that CSR influences internal stakeholders (i.e. employees) (Collier and Esteban, 2007; Kim *et al.*, 2010). Additionally, as Kim *et al.* (2010) pointed out, while previous research has in fact explored employees' perceptions or feelings about CSR, what is missing is these individuals' role in constituting, communicating or implementing an organization's social responsibility agenda, and further considering their sensemaking and identification with such efforts.

O'Connor *et al.* (2016) paved the way for the explicit examination of employee CSR perceptions through a case study approach, exploring how employees talk about their expectations of organizational CSR efforts. Findings suggested “that workers fuse together economic and ethical responsibilities to develop a portrait of their employer's CSR” (p. 40), as employees are arguably the beneficiaries of such efforts. From this stakeholder view, “CSR can be conceptualized as an explicit and implicit contract that outlines the responsibilities an organization has to its workforce” (p. 41; see also Preuss, 2008). Thus, scholarship confirms that organizations do target employees in their CSR efforts and that employees have, to some extent, certain perceptions or attitudes toward such activities. However, it is evident that further research is needed in exploring the internal perspective, particularly in terms of sensemaking.

Organizational sensemaking

Weick's theory of Organizational Sensemaking² is appropriate for exploring internal knowledge construction of CSR because it helps explore how individuals make sense and draw meaning out of such practices. Weick *et al.* (2005) defined communication as “an ongoing process of making sense of the circumstances in which people collectively find ourselves and of the events affecting them” (p. 413). Thus, according to sensemaking, it is through communication “in which things, situations and even entities come into existence” as individuals make sense of uncertainties and search for meaning in organizational contexts (Golob *et al.*, 2013, p. 366). In defining sensemaking as a process, Weick *et al.* (2005) argued that “sensemaking involves the ongoing retrospective development of plausible³ images that rationalize what people are doing” (p. 409). Weick (1995) presents seven properties of sensemaking: (1) grounded in identity construction, (2) retrospective, (3) enactive of sensible environments, (4) social, (5) ongoing, (6) focused on and by extracted cues and (7) driven by plausibility rather than accuracy (p. 17).

In viewing CSR as communicatively and socially constituted, sensemaking around such initiatives is an ongoing, constant and reflexive process whereby organizational members individually and then collectively make sense of their realities through interaction. Thus, sensemaking is inherently social. For Weick, organizations are complex, equivocal environments in which there exist multiple interpretations of the same event. Due to the ambiguous and contextual nature of CSR, equivocality⁴ undoubtedly exists in interpreting⁵ and determining what CSR is, what efforts “count”, and who they are meant to benefit. In terms of knowledge construction, I view the understanding of CSR by organizational members as a sensemaking and communicative process.

Golob *et al.* (2013) presented “a process-oriented understanding of sensemaking as a construction of shared meanings (Calton and Payne, 2003)” (p. 365). Drawing on past work (Golob and Podnar, 2011; Morsing and Schultz, 2006; Pater and van Lierop, 2006), the authors pointed to the fact that both sensemaking and dialogical communication specifically are becoming important to the study of CSR as it is through dialogue that stakeholders search for meaning and consensus as it relates to corporate responsibility. Similarly, Basu and Palazzo (2008) presented this process as an alternative way to study CSR without only studying CSR messages or content, but instead through analyzing the sensemaking and decision-making processes of organizational managers specifically. In other words, the authors viewed “CSR as derived from organizational sensemaking” (p. 124).

Aguinis and Glavas (2019) presented a conceptual framework for connecting employee sensemaking around CSR in the search for meaningful work—via analyzing “how individuals experience CSR by taking an active role in searching for and finding meaningfulness” (p. 1059). This work sought to fill the knowledge gap in individual-level CSR scholarship. They presented a multilevel analysis of CSR sensemaking: “intraindividual (i.e. within individuals), organizational (i.e. organizational level), and extra-organizational (i.e. outside of the organization and the interplay between internal and external stakeholders)” (p. 1064). The goal was to analyze sensemaking and perceptions across different levels, particularly shedding light “on why and how individuals experience differently” (p. 1064). As Aguinis and Glavas (2019) confirmed, “CSR is fertile ground for sensemaking” (p. 1064). This project takes a person-centric approach to CSR (see Aguinis and Glavas, 2019; Rupp *et al.*, 2013), which “considers employees, at various levels of the organizational hierarchy, who witness acts of CSR, who implement CSR, as well as leaders who have the power to initiate CSR on a more strategic level” (Rupp *et al.*, 2013, p. 362). In adapting this view, I used interviews to explore how employees experience and make sense of CSR in their organizations and beyond—specifically giving attention to how individuals come to define or describe CSR in their own words. Given the ambiguous and often unclear nature of CSR, taking a sensemaking approach is particularly useful in further understanding how employees come to understand, interpret, generate opinions and legitimize their employer's CSR activities.

Research questions

In line with an interpretive and dialogical approach to CSR in the organizational communication discipline, this study focuses on internal (i.e. employee) sensemaking via interviews. To address the aforementioned gaps in literature, primarily regarding the internal and micro-processes of CSR, I pose the following research questions:

RQ1. What are employees' general understanding of CSR?

In an effort to explore employee sensemaking, I begin by asking how these individuals understand the concept of CSR in general. I then move into my second set of research questions to examine the localized nature of CSR through employee perceptions of this phenomenon within their own organization and industry.

RQ2. How do employees make sense of CSR efforts within their organizations?

RQ2a. What do employees know and perceive about CSR?

RQ2b. How does CSR affect employees' daily lives, both at work and in their personal lives?

RQ2c. How do employees perceive their employer's CSR affects their relationship with the organization?

Methodology

Interviews

I present CSR as a socially constructed, localized (i.e. contextual) and situated phenomenon. As, Samy and Robertson (2017) advocated, CSR research should continue to move from a relatively dominated (post)positivist approach to that of social constructionism/constructivism. For these authors, “future research in CSR would arguably have an impact on society if researchers undertaking in-depth analysis” (p. 458) and investigate individual corporations. To uncover how employees feel, make sense of and understand CSR on a personal level, interviews were invaluable in attaining these particular data. I conducted 42 one-on-one, semi-structured interviews with employees via video conferencing (e.g. Skype, FaceTime), phone or in-person (see Table 1). These participants were recruited via convenience snowball sampling, as well as through the website LinkedIn. Due to their time constraints or scheduling conflicts, some participants requested conducting the interview via e-mail correspondence. Participants for interviews were recruited using convenience snowball sampling, as well as the professional networking platform LinkedIn™. These employees range greatly in terms of role, industry, organizational size, tenure and authority. The majority of participants ranged from entry-level to mid-level positions, with about 10 of the 42 in leadership roles such as a manager, director, vice president or C-suite executive. Only a few, particularly those in philanthropic and communication-dominant roles, worked on CSR-related activities specifically within their day-to-day responsibility.

Organizational discourse analysis

I took a “language in use” approach via discourse analysis in order to “provide a detailed examination of talk and texts as instances of social practice” (Grant *et al.*, 2004, p. 9). In short, organizational discourse analysis can be understood as a methodology, method and data analysis technique (Fairhurst and Putnam, 2018). ODA aids in understanding “how the socially produced ideas and objects that comprise organizations, institutions, and the social world in general are created and maintained through the relationships among discourse, text, and action” (Phillips *et al.*, 2004, pp. 636–637). In this study, I presented it as an approach to analysis in order to investigate written and spoken language in an organizational setting as told by employees. Unique to the study of CSR, ODA can be particularly useful in uncovering tensions, contradictions or paradoxes in organizations (Fairhurst and Putnam, 2018). The use of ODA aligned with my view of CSR as a communicative and socially constructed phenomenon within organizations, and allowed me to be open to the complexities accompanying or surrounding the organizations' CSR.

Analysis procedures

I coded full transcriptions of interviews, and then conducted open coding of interviews as they chronologically occurred and/or were received using QSR's NVivo™ software. The open nature is the technique of coding data without a codebook created prior to analysis or the application of external criteria to the data. Coding was completed in two phases: initial/open and focused coding. I engaged in line-by-line coding in order to group data into themed categories as a result of what is in and emerged from the data. Through this process, I relied on the constant comparison method (Glaser and Strauss, 1967).

In the end, I had a total of 78 thematic categories as part of my final coding scheme, including various hierarchical codes (Tracy, 2013) which included “systematically grouping together various codes under a hierarchical ‘umbrella’ category that makes conceptual sense” (p. 195). These hierarchical codes formed when I distinguished between different types of communication (e.g. internal, external, formal, informal), external vs

internal CSR (i.e. targeted stakeholder group), definitional learning or experience of CSR (e.g. via work, school, the media) and general understanding of CSR (e.g. rationales, future, generational differences).

Findings

Findings revealed varying D/discourses of CSR as made sense of and reported by employees of varying organization, industry, tenure of employment and role. To clarify, d/Discourse has been distinguished and presented as the study of talk or text in social practices (i.e. little “d” discourse) or broader, general, enduring systems of thought (i.e. big “D” discourse) (Fairhurst and Putnam, 2004, p. 7). While this paper focuses primarily on the micro-discourses of CSR as experienced, understood and operationalized by employees in their respective workplaces, it is important to present grander Discourses and general perceptions of how corporate responsibility is conceptualized. In this section, I present the findings under the corresponding research question.

RQ1. What are employees' general understanding of CSR?

Macro-discourses and general perceptions of CSR

From the employee perspective, general conceptualizations and understandings of CSR largely centered around the external, social and voluntary nature of such efforts. Initial definitions emphasized the externality of CSR efforts. Discourses of “Consciousness”, “Accountability” and “Ethicality” were prominent in interview responses when asked what CSR means to them. Where perceptions diverged were in thinking about who or what were, or were not, included in the definition, and to what extent or in what capacity. Almost all participants included “society” or “surrounding communities” in their definition—really emphasizing the social nature of CSR from an external outreach standpoint. Broad definitions included: “it's the organization's responsibility to give back to the surrounding communities for the better and the greater good” (Penny); “how good of a neighbor and citizen a company is ... to its community” (Viola); “How a company is interacting with the community that it's in or that it serves, and how concerned they are with the footprint that they're having within society in different way” (Winona); and “when a company goes above and beyond what is expected of them to make a positive impact on the community and environment” (Halle).

The contextual and changing nature of CSR, resulting in organizational variance, makes sensemaking around the term difficult, as many participants began to use terms like “CSR” and “sustainability” interchangeably (see Scandellius and Cohen, 2016). In fact, many employees interviewed had never heard of CSR or were confused on how to even begin to define it. For example, Fresia gave various definitions of what CSR might be throughout the interview. She eventually made a comment saying, “I don't even know if that's really a definition, if that's a thing, and then that's kind of where I get confused of what it actually means”. This expression of confusion and/or ambiguity was a common occurrence in conversing with employees. In fact, many felt forced or intimidated to even give a response when asked to explain what CSR might be or how it would be operationalized within their organization or across others more generally. However, the ambiguous nature of CSR can also be seen as opportunistic and strategic (see Eisenberg, 1984; Guthey and Morsing, 2013), given that scholars call for exploring the potential of such ambiguity (Christensen *et al.*, 2015). In taking this perspective, we can understand CSR “not as a clear or consistent agenda, but rather as a forum for sensemaking, diversity of opinion, and debate over the conflicting social norms and expectations attached to corporate activity” (Christensen *et al.*, 2015, p. 555). Familiarity with CSR did vary by company, role, division and level. For example, those in leadership positions seemed to have more experience, knowledge and opinion regarding their companies' specific CSR initiatives. Additionally, those working in communication-centric roles or having any kind of philanthropic or sustainability tie had an increased sense of familiarity.

Employees referred back to broader discourses of societal concern when predicting future CSR practices (e.g. climate change, political or social activism). As Willa stated, “CSR activities will change to reflect the issues facing society. The more issues are broadly publicized the more we will see companies launching initiatives to combat those issues”. However, perhaps due to the sensemaking process of the interview itself, considering the future of CSR is where many participants began to discuss internal and employee-directed CSR (e.g. diversity and inclusion, employee mental health). For example, Ally said, “I think this will look like organizations offering meaningful volunteer opportunities to their employees, increased transparency and diversity, offering professional development focused on social causes, and providing educational opportunities on social and environmental consciousness”. Similarly, several others mentioned future CSR as addressing social issues of discrimination, gender and sexuality equality, mental health, workplace inclusivity, and overall efforts surrounding employee satisfaction, retention, and well-being. Additionally, a few employees emphasized the need for CSR to be embedded in core business practices and decision-making processes, and the recurrent nature of CSR—a concept that will continue to be relevant and live on.

RQ2. How do employees make sense of CSR within their organizations?

Micro-discourses and operationalizations of CSR

Interestingly, the interview experience included instances of sensemaking for participants. It was common for participants to struggle when attempting to define CSR at both the micro and macro levels. Certain questions triggered reflection; and employees were forced to make sense of organizational practices (i.e. little “d” discourses) they encountered and how these were reinforced by or evident (to them) in broader societal or cultural discussions (i.e. big “D” Discourses). Through interactions with employees, I was able to observe their sensemaking around discourses of responsibility and, more specifically, around practices specific to their organization and whether or not they considered these to be CSR or responsible, and why.

This study suggests that CSR means very different things to different individuals and companies and can vary greatly depending on organizational role/position, seniority and even age. However, while this definitional variation may be perceived as a challenge, CSR's ambiguity and contextual nature can instead be seen as relatively normative and optimistic. In other words, employees did not view the variance of CSR practices as problematic, but rather as opportunities for organizations to decide what efforts are worth investing in, and for what reasons.

Communication of CSR.

Communication plays an essential role in the sensemaking process. The act of sensegiving on behalf of organizations for their members through formal communication, both internal and external, gives audiences ideas about a present vs future image to aid in interpretation (Weick *et al.*, 2005). Employees reported a combination of both informal and formal methods and a use of all three CSR communication strategies as presented in the seminal piece by Morsing and Schultz (2006) within their organizations. These include the stakeholder information strategy (i.e. public information, one-way communication), the stakeholder response strategy (i.e. two-way asymmetric communication) and the stakeholder involvement strategy (i.e. two-way symmetric communication). To summarize, CSR communication took various forms including: structural elements within the halls and walls of the organization (e.g. “green” or LEED certified buildings, increased water bottle filling stations, signage), word-of-mouth, e-mail or e-newsletter, (non)financial reporting, intranet and corporate website.

While some discussed internal CSR communication as being pretty inadequate and should be increased in terms of visibility and reach, others said there is a limit—that there is such a thing as “too much” communication. In short, several employees believed that going overboard in terms of awareness or external, public campaigning can take away from the assumed “good nature” of the effort itself, or could distract from other activities. So

while it was evident that an organization's physicality, texts and various verbal communication efforts worked together to constitute CSR into being and aid in sensemaking and sensegiving by employees, organizations must be cognizant of how to rhetorically navigate through the CSR noise. More recent scholarship has looked at the difference between an engagement and a responsiveness strategy when it comes to CSR communication—with employees, in addition to the broader community, as the primary and most crucial stakeholders and recipients of CSR messages (Lim and Greenwood, 2017). It is also important to consider the connection between CSR and PR, with scholars arguing that the latter move from a relationship management function to one of increased dialogue, engagement and change empowerment (Mundy, 2021).

Employees as Benefactors vs Beneficiaries of CSR.

When asked broadly about to whom or what organizations are responsible, followed by questions of what CSR is, employees noted the distinction between the *end* recipient, or target audience of such efforts, being either internal or external stakeholders. From an employee perspective, “internal CSR appears to be self-focused whereas perceived external CSR efforts appears to be others-focused” (Hameed *et al.*, 2016, p. 2). While the majority of participants defined or operationalized CSR from the others-focused perspective, their sensemaking around what is or could be considered internal CSR began to surface. In other words, are these initiatives employee-directed, or employee-driven? Or, both?

Participants typically deferred to discussing their own involvement or opportunity to be involved in CSR activities, such as volunteer work or other charitable acts. As Bhattacharya *et al.* (2007) explained, CSR is most effective when the organization is the “enabler”, but employees are the “actual enactors” (p. 23). Thus, employee participation in CSR is vital (Chen and Hung-Baesecke, 2014). Winona said that CSR, like through charitable giving, “starts with employees”, and Brenda called these individuals “champions” of CSR. For her, “Employees keep it going, if that makes sense. They sustain it ... sure our company could write a check, but it wouldn't have the impact of thousands of our employees getting out there ...” Schaefer *et al.* (2020) studied the various domains of CSR, with one being employee-oriented. This type of CSR aligns with company practices dedicated to employee well-being—supporting the argument that these efforts can, in fact, be directed toward benefiting internal members. Interviewees discussed expectations of their employers to not only benefit society at large and outside the organization but also take care of members within.

Rationalization for CSR.

The business and sustainability argument was most in line with views held by those participants in leadership or managerial positions. Specifically, these employees viewed CSR as a way to gain competitive advantage, fulfill consumer and client expectations, and ensure a sense of long-term sustainability. For them, CSR provides opportunities from a strictly business perspective. For example, Tony said CSR “is very important for our shareholders to understand what we're doing in this realm ... and be able to have confidence in our ability to succeed as an organization”. Viola, a director of corporate communication, simply said “It's a business imperative. It's [got] to be competitive”. Additionally, employees were upfront in aligning the business case with positive effects on recruitment and retention.

Internally, CSR can benefit overall employee morale and motivation (i.e. Kim and Scullion, 2013; Weber, 2008) but can also impact the attractiveness of the organization from a recruitment standpoint (Greening and Turban, 2000). In all, nearly half of the employees I interviewed discussed and rationalized CSR from a recruitment perspective. For example, Viola said that her company's investment in CSR has “a lot of do with employee engagement and employee morale, retention and recruitment of employees”. Those who took a more optimistic view of CSR came from a perspective grounded in the moral imperative of business. Several used the phrase “to do the right thing” when I asked why their company engages in CSR. For example, Harry's initial response was, “I mean, I think first and foremost it's about a good conscience”. In addition to providing a

competitive advantage and fulfilling a moral obligation, employees saw the benefits of their company's engagement in CSR from a PR perspective.

Other specific rationalizations employees noted included the idea of good press or PR for the company through CSR—particularly in terms of reputation and legitimacy among local communities and broader society. In fact, for some, public and outward visibility around CSR even reflected internally in terms of employee pride. Finally, a few employees would credit the company's engagement in CSR to its very mission and foundation. For Matilda, the organization does it “I think it had to do with the foundation of the company and it went back to [founder's name] and how he founded the company. It was always his vision ... it was embedded in the basis ... because it's been embedded in the company since the beginning”. Thus, CSR can be seen as more than an “invention of PR” (Frankental, 2001, p. 18) as participants, like Matilda, rationalized for her company's CSR because of how it has been ingrained internally and foundationally. This highlights the importance of employee buy-in to CSR becoming embedded in an organization's culture and business practices, particularly as these individuals play a role in “championing CSR” (Jenkins, 2006).

Impact on personal life, professional life and organizational identification

In general, there was an overwhelming sense of pride, satisfaction and identification associated with CSR as felt by participants. While the majority of employees interviewed did not have any professional connection to CSR in terms of their specific role and day-to-day tasks, many still felt impacted by these efforts on a professional level. If they did, it was often in a volunteering/community outreach capacity, or engaging in more internal functions. For example, Freddy, an accountant at a large automation group, is actively involved in one of his organization's employee resource groups focused on engagement and inclusion.

Organizational pride was immensely evident throughout interviews when it came to employee perceptions of CSR. For instance, Zelda's company “takes a personal responsibility in promoting sustainability in projects and that makes me very proud as an employee”. Ally was proud that her organization allows employees to “take a day off to do community service” and Dalton mentioned his employer's various wellness initiatives (e.g. gym membership, childcare).

In terms of embarrassment, Fresia discussed the lack of openness and honesty when it comes to onboarding and training new employees. Specifically, she stated:

Personally, I guess as a whole I've been a little embarrassed of is I feel like sometimes we're not honest with people when we onboard them about how much work it is ... I've had 50% turnover in my department over the last year.

Broadly, research has shown that CSR and employee engagement in these practices reduces turnover, specifically as younger generations are calling for companies to engage in social responsibility (Shadovitz, 2018)—and participants, such as Fresia, have recognized this. “Internal transparency” was one area of internal corporate responsibility employees mentioned, and particularly one that is more employee-directed.

Relatedly, CSR efforts made an impact on employees' personal life outside of the office. This personal connection was particularly true for those employee-directed initiatives where employees were the primary beneficiaries including health and wellness initiatives, encouraged work–life balance, parental leave, lactation rooms and so on. Additionally, Max described how his company's prioritization of CSR has led to increased organizational identification⁶ and personal growth. Additionally, employees credited CSR as motivation and desire to come to work. Rose claimed that her active engagement in CSR has undeniably provided professional benefits as her own involvement (e.g. soliciting volunteers) was noted in her most recent annual performance review.

CSR is invaluable when linked to employee-organizational identification and has a clear impact on how employees feel about their work, their company and their relationship (see Schaefer *et al.*, 2020). This again speaks to prospective employee expectations when it comes to job placement and retention. For example, Harry clearly connected the idea of identification through CSR:

Whatever CSR initiatives that company is undertaking are in line with an employee's personal values, that obviously creates a direct connection between the organization and the employee and boost their morale and gives them a reason, a purpose in being there.

Finally, those who took up any kind of CSR practice in their work or as an extra-curricular framed it as meaningful work and also had a positive impact on an organization's recruitment and retention efforts. While the connection between meaningful work and CSR has not been explicitly explored in extant literature, literature confirms the Millennial generation continuing to enter the workforce expects to find meaningful work (Myers and Sadaghiani, 2010) and are often attracted to an organization's CSR reputation (see Ng *et al.*, 2010)—with goals to work for an organization that can “help them to lead more purposeful and meaningful lives” (Myers and Sadaghiani, 2010, p. 283). As Harriet argued, “allowing your employees, uh, the opportunity to volunteer and share their time and their skills with organizations that need support is very meaningful”. Relatedly, Rose credited CSR as a primary reason for retention. Specifically, she said, “like I don't think I would go to a company that did it, at least support CSR to the level that mine does”.

Interestingly, there was also a sense of disidentification⁷ or neutral identification⁸ and disconnect from CSR initiatives expressed by three employees in particular. Both Poppy and Penny credit a disconnect from their organization's CSR because they are not located at headquarters. Penny felt a strong sense of disidentification due to the failure of commitment and explicitly valuing CSR on behalf of her organization. Thus, pragmatically, we can see that CSR has a great impact on employee satisfaction and pride. CSR appears to be an expectation of employees and an influence on organizational identification. However, to what extent employees expect their organizations to engage in CSR specifically (i.e. types of activities) could be further explored.

Discussion

Theoretical contributions

As seen through interviews, CSR is brought to life through formal and informal communicative and social interactions, and considered “real” or “official” when reported publicly. In other words, meaning around CSR is constructed via a cyclical relationship between texts and conversation. Additionally, employees serve a primary, critical role in driving and executing CSR (i.e. bringing into being). As Schoeneborn and Trittin (2013) presented, a “CCO view perceives CSR communication not simply as an instrument for achieving strategic goals but, crucially, as one of several voices that invoke notions of ethics and responsibility within the entire organization” (p. 195). Thus, CSR is communicatively (re) constructed and will continue as such, particularly as an organizing response to social issues and stakeholder expectations creating internal social movements. CSR is not a “thing”, but rather a phenomenon—and the question becomes not necessarily how to define it, but how to decide “what constitutes the social responsibility of business” (Dahlsrud, 2008, p. 6). This work extends Schoeneborn and Trittin (2013) by applying a sensemaking approach to further viewing CSR as communicatively constructed by and through employee experiences and communication.

This study takes an explicitly interpretive perspective, one that is relatively lacking to date in CSR research located in the organizational communication discipline (May, 2011; May and Roper, 2014). This was important given the few studies utilizing a qualitative and emergent approach common to interpretive work—particularly in a Western context. From an interpretive perspective, scholarship presenting an “insider's view” (p. 776) and general employee understandings of CSR was a significant contribution provided by this project. Additionally,

few have “necessarily made the link between a company's CSR practices and the ways in which it may affect employees” (p. 95). This study was intentional in presenting CSR from the employee perspective in considering how employees make sense of CSR, specifically those within their organizations and that may be employee-directed, and how these individuals may “account for and “take up” CSR in their day-to-day work lives” (p. 96). Thus, it has begun to fill a gap in literature focused on exploring how individuals experience CSR as well as their psychological sensemaking. This study presented rare insight into the personal experience of CSR by employees—how it is shaping their personal and professional lives. CSR is about doing; it is an agentic and communicative act. Relatedly, this project was unique in presenting perceptions of employees from all levels of organizations rather than of those only in managerial roles, while also presenting a sample with different knowledge about CSR from different organizations. Thus, I found the “inside-out approach” to be necessary in including employees throughout the entire process of CSR creation, execution and communication, and that these individuals are truly “the key stakeholders of concern for CSR activities” (Morsing *et al.*, 2008, p. 103). This work contributes heavily to the limited perspective on CSR from the micro (i.e. actors of organizations) or individual level (Schultz and Wehmeier, 2010; see Aguinis and Glavas, 2012). While the CSR literature is divided between a functionalist (i.e. CSR as an objective message transmitted from the sender to stakeholder recipient) and constitutive (i.e. CSR as co-created through communication) paradigms (Crane and Glozer, 2016), this study uncovers the overlapping reality of both perspectives as experienced and understood by employees.

Methodologically, this study extends the limited work and call for a micro-level analysis of the sensemaking and experience of CSR by individuals (i.e. employees). Understanding how CSR is communicated to employees is crucial (Schaefer *et al.*, 2020), and interviews were valuable for attaining the rather limited “insider's view” (May, 2011, p. 96), that has been difficult to attain due to accessibility challenges (i.e. “gaining access to employees working on or affected by CSR initiatives”, May and Roper (2014, p. 775), see also Crane and Glozer, 2016). Additionally, as called for by May (2011) and May and Roper (2014), this project's methodological approach included employees of all levels of an organization from contract employees to those in mid-level managerial roles, and those at the VP level and even in the C-Suite.

Pragmatic contributions

CSR is on the rise and we have witnessed an increase of company reporting efforts with 99% of Fortune 500 companies including such practices on their websites (Smith, 2017). As Abensour and Hahn (2019) argued, “doing good is no longer the exception; it's the expectation” (para. 3). Thus, CSR is *not* seen as additive or “nice to have” from employee perceptions as many participants admitted to being skeptical of such programs if seen only as a PR or one-off move. Many employees credited their company's CSR as recruitment and marketing strategies in response to an increased interest in such practices from a generational standpoint. As Doerr (2019) stated, “millennials care less about a paycheck and more about the opportunity to be a part of something that's making a difference in the world” (para 1.). Pressures on organizations to engage in CSR and be altogether more socially responsible alter the way in which they do. These specific activities can be a product of: institutional pressures stemming from external entities such as the environment, competitive nature of the industry, at the organizational level by external publics and stakeholders, and bottom up from the micro-level in terms of employees within the organization who clearly often drive CSR initiatives and rely on them for retention. As Shen and Zhang (2019) argued, “employee support for CSR initiatives is critical to their successful implementation, as well as to employee job satisfaction and more general work attitudes and behaviors” (p. 875).

Deloitte's (2018) recent survey of over 10,000 Millennials across nearly 40 countries, as well as almost 2,000 participants from Generation Z, found these individuals to be particularly skeptical when it comes the motivations and ethics of business—with a “mismatch between what Millennials believe responsible businesses should achieve and what they perceive business' actual priorities to be” (p. 2). From this, the survey reported

diversity and inclusion, as well as work flexibility are vital in keeping young employees happy. Deloitte (2018) concluded that “Young workers are eager for business leaders to be proactive about making a positive impact in society—and to be responsive to employees' needs” (p. 2). Therefore, it would be wise for companies to implement or continue implementing a stakeholder involvement strategy of CSR communication (Morsing and Schultz, 2006), and take an “inside-out approach” to ensure employee commitment and awareness. This study found that employees clearly care about their company's CSR efforts, as it is a contributing factor when it comes to retention, morale and engagement. As one participant, Zelda put it, “these concepts matter to people, and CSR might be, if it isn't already, another category people consider when selecting a job”.

Additionally, what became evident in their sensemaking of CSR was that employees believed CSR efforts needed to align with core business strategies in order to be truly authentic. For them, it needs to make sense. More broadly, “building social impact into your company's core value set is not only the right thing to do—it also has a positive correlation to scaling your business and resonating with potential consumers and employees alike” (Doerr, 2019, para. 3). Thus, CSR as a contextual practice is perhaps necessary and crucial. While the focus of CSR has been historically outward in nature toward external publics, it has been relatively “common for CSR practices to be undertaken as an extension of traditional business practices, without substantively changing the internal dynamics of culture of the organization” (Fyke *et al.*, 2016, p. 226). However, as Fyke *et al.* (2016) observed, companies have increasingly “begun to integrate CSR into strategic decisions and operational practices” (p. 226). In fact, the 2022 PwC Global CEO Survey of nearly 5,000 leaders cited climate change and social inequality in the top global threats to company growth, and are thus integrating these concerns into core business agendas (PwC's 25th Annual Global CEO Survey, 2022). Interviews suggested that “creating a culture of corporate social responsibility” (Rose) was vital—particularly in terms of internal engagement while also actively responding to employee needs.

Therefore, it would suggest that employees are looking for their companies to be altruistic in their CSR agendas—particularly those internal or employee-focused whereby the employee's well-being, happiness and satisfaction is prioritized. In taking a CCO perspective, “whether or not CSR communication has an impact within the organization depends on the extent to which it is resonant with and becomes connected to other communicative practices” (Schoeneborn and Trittin, 2013, p. 204). Pragmatically, then, I recommend organizations be purposeful and strategic in incorporating CSR information throughout internal and employee-based communication such as employee orientation, routinized training sessions and town hall gatherings that include leadership, while continuing to advertise through traditional channels (e.g. e-mail, newsletter, intranet).

Limitations and future directions

This study presents limitations and important future directions surrounding employee sensemaking as well as organizational D/discourse of CSR. From a sampling perspective, while attempting to vary sampled organizations in terms of size and industry, using convenience snowball sample to recruit interview participants did not provide a representative sample of the entire population in fully grasping full-time employees' sensemaking of CSR within their companies and beyond. Additionally, the findings are dependent on the researcher's subjective interpretation of the information provided in the interviews. A case study approach would enable a deep exploration into the localized and situated nature of CSR. Likewise, adding in a more multi-methodological approach would have been useful, such as the use of ethnographic methods to further observe the language-in-action of CSR as well as surveys to grow a larger participant sample. As much of the literature referenced in this manuscript comes from the decade of the twenty-first century, we can see the continued need for scholarship in this area.

As noted in the findings, employees began to consider the changing nature of CSR and where the focus of it might be moving toward in the future. Further research may then consider longitudinally exploring if and how

CSR foci may shift and reflect societal discourse and contention around workplace environments, for example. Therefore, it may be worth asking: how will political and social conversations and concerns further impact CSR as organizations continue to take on more of an activist role? How will CSR impact democracy, or take on political actions? Additionally, it may be worth exploring if and how CSR can be applied to public service organizations. One of the participants, a firefighter, reflected on issues of social responsibility from the perspective of government and the public sector as a whole. While extremely scant in current literature, “the relationship between the concepts of public service obligation and CSR” might be worth exploring (Ates and Büttgen, 2011, p. 347). Finally, we are witnessing ESG becoming an increasing priority on the corporate and investment agenda amidst the fight against climate change and additional disclosure regulations being put into place. Future research may seek to understand the connection between ESG and CSR from both an operational and conceptual standpoint.

Table 1. Participant profile

Pseudonym	Position	Industry	Tenure
Winona	Senior Project Coordinator	Construction	1 year
Flora	Director, Projects	Construction	5 years
Angie	Senior Communication Specialist	Financial Services	3 years
Penny	Marketing Associate	Food Service Wholesale	1.5 years
Rick	Manager, Sustainability	Airline	4.5 years
Max	VP, Finance	Oil and Gas	20 years
Mason	Director, Corporate Affairs	Beverage	8 years
Betty	Sales Representative	Beverage	6 years
Kory	Actuary	Insurance	3.5 years
Rose	Manager, Human Resources	Insurance	4 years
Kris	Financial Analyst	Beverage	3 years
Freddy	Senior Financial Analyst	Automation	3.5 years
Viola	Director, Corporate Communication	Manufacturing	4 years
Harriet	Assistant Director, Philanthropy	Financial Services	16 years
Rose	VP, Corporate Communications	Financial Services	8.5 years
Brenda	Senior Communication Specialist	Financial Services	4 years
Brandy	Senior Account Executive, Sales	Professional Sports	3 years
Dalton	Manager, Research and Analysis	Professional Sports	6 years
Zelda	Engineer	Construction	7 months
Stan	Senior Engineer	Electronics	5 years
Cora	Business Manager	IT Solutions	4 years
Stella	Senior Account Executive	IT Solutions	4 years
Rudy	Engineer	Food Processing	9.5 months
Tony	President and CEO	Food Processing	4 years
Walter	Accountant	Construction	5 years
Elise	HR Specialist	Healthcare	1 year
Harry	Account Supervisor	Agency	2 years
Sid	Firefighter and Pandemic	Public Sector	5 years
Robin	Account Representative, Sales	Heating and Cooling	4.5 years
Willa	Strategy Partner	Not for Profit	2 years
Ally	Strategy Partner	Not for Profit	8 years
Marcia	Project Management Coordinator	Not for Profit	15 years
Polly	Assistant Buyer	Retail	4 years
Fresia	Senior Account Director	Marketing	5 years
Cleo	Senior Communication Specialist	Hospital	6 months

Halle	Independent Sales Associate (Contractor)	Medical Device	15 months
Carlo	Operations Supervisor	Utility	6 years
Kassie	Manager, Content Marketing	Consulting	6 months
Melody	Team Lead, Marketing	Consulting	3.5 years
Matilda	Barista	Coffee	2 years
Poppy	Account Executive	Entertainment	1 year
Elliott	Engineer	Automotive	5 years

Notes

1. Here I refer to growing social concern and disclosure of unethical workplace practices by organizations and/or individuals within these contexts. Also referring to issues amplified by #MeToo, Time's Up, Black Lives Matter and related movements.
2. Weick's sensemaking theory is grounded in his move from "organizations" as a noun to the verb of "organizing" as "the experience of being into an ongoing, unknowable, unpredictable streaming of experience" (Weick *et al.*, 2005, p. 410).
3. It is important to note that the process of "sensemaking is driven by plausibility, rather than accuracy" (Weick, 1995, p. 55).
4. "The idea that sensemaking is focused on equivocality gives primacy to the search for meaning as a way to deal with uncertainty" (Weick *et al.*, 2005, p. 414).
5. Note that Weick (1995) distinguishes sensemaking from interpretation in that sensemaking is about an activity or process, whereas interpretation is simply describing something. Additionally, interpretation implies there is something to be discovered, whereas sensemaking "is less about discovery than it is about invention" (p. 13)—rendering "the subjective into something more tangible" (p. 14).
6. Put simply, organizational identification is referred to as a sense or "perception of one's belongingness" (Ashforth *et al.*, 2008, p. 329) and occurs "when a person's self-concept contains the same attributes as those in the perceived organizational identity" (Dutton *et al.*, 1994, p. 239).
7. While not the polar opposite of identification, disidentification often "occurs when an individual defines him or herself as *not* having the same attributes or principles that he or she believes define the organization" (Kreiner and Ashforth, 2004, p. 3 italics in original; see also Elsbach and Bhattacharya, 2001).
8. Neutral identification typically occurs when there is an absence of both identification and disidentification (Kreiner and Ashforth, 2004).

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