

“Micro-macro tensions in CSR: How employees make sense of incongruent personal and organizational CSR preferences”

In the competitive world of today, corporate social responsibility (CSR) has effectively become a regular feature of businesses (Crane et al., 2008). Also, it is well established that employees play a vital role in CSR implementation (Gond et al., 2017; Jones et al., 2017; Sendlhofer, 2020). The literature on micro-CSR commonly posits that CSR implementation requires employees and the organization to have congruent views on CSR (Brammer et al., 2007; Glavas & Piderit, 2009; Venkatraman, 1989) or a person-organization fit (Kristof, 1996). In CSR terms, this implies that employees and organization have congruent CSR agendas which is thought to keep employees engaged (Aguinis & Glavas, 2013). At the same time, research has shown that employees' engagement with CSR varies considerably (Hejjas et al., 2019; Hemingway, 2005).

In comparison to the body of literature that focuses on congruence of employees and their organization with regard to CSR, situations of incongruence between the employee and the organization in a CSR context (Singhapakdi et al., 2015) remains an under researched area (Willness, 2019). The few studies that do deal with incongruence between employee and the organization in a CSR context mostly relate such incongruences to negative outcomes (Beckman et al., 2009; McShane & Cunningham, 2012; Singhapakdi et al., 2015; Vlachos et al., 2010), and varied attitudes to engagement with CSR (Rodrigo & Arenas, 2008).

Overall, there are a few studies that have attempted to unpack how employees cope with and make sense of incongruences around CSR (Bansal, 2003; Seivwright & Unsworth, 2016). Recognizing the scant focus in this area of research, our first aim is to enhance our understanding of incongruence between employees and the organization in a CSR context. We do so by adopting a tensions lens. As a second step, we unpack how employees deal with these situations of incongruences, taking a sensemaking perspective. This is in line with Glavas' (2016) call for theory-building by investigating the *'why, how, and when employees experience CSR'* (p.28).

Our two research questions are: **1)** *what are the tensions that employees experience due to incongruence between their preferred and the perceived organizational CSR agenda?* and **2)** *How do employees interpret tensions due to incongruence between preferred and perceived organizational CSR agenda?* To address these questions, we develop an inductive case study by using data built on 72 interviews with junior and middle managers from a FMCG. These interviews were conducted online in two rounds of 49 and 23 participants. The interviews were recorded, transcribed verbatim, and then coded in MAXQDA. As a result of the analysis, our data revealed three main categories of CSR-related tensions that employees experience: tensions on implementation, tensions on ambitions, and tensions on priorities, that we conceptualize as person-organization or P-O tensions in CSR.

Building on the characterization of CSR incongruence (Singhapakdi et al., 2015) and tensions (Stohl & Cheney, 2001), we define these said P-O tensions in CSR as *'the clash of ideas or principles or actions and the discomfort that arise due to employees' perception of discrepancies between their own CSR preferences and the CSR agenda of their organization'*. Furthermore, our conceptualization of P-O tensions confirms the existence of tensions that reside between different levels (Hahn et al., 2015; Putnam et al., 2016; Whiteman et al., 2013), and thus adds to the understanding of micro-macro tensions because P-O tensions extend across the individual and organizational levels of analysis.

Summary for the 14th Sustainability Academy

We contribute to the micro-CSR literature by conceptualizing incongruences between employees and the organization around CSR in terms of P-O tensions in CSR. The notion of P-O tensions in CSR provides micro-CSR scholars with an empirically grounded construct to overcome the dominant assumptions and calls for alignment and fit in the micro-CSR literature. Second, our domain-specific categorization of tensions in CSR adds to the diversity of organizational tensions literature that mostly relies on generic organizational tensions (Cunha & Putnam, 2019). More specifically, it highlights the relevance of normative tensions in the context of CSR, a type of tension that is underrepresented in the dominant generic categorization of tensions by Smith and Lewis (2011). Finally, this study also adds to our understanding of the micro-macro tensions that span from individual to organizational level of analysis.

OUTLOOK & NEXT STEPS

This is a working paper where we have so far unpacked the P-O tensions in CSR to identify domain-specific tension as per Cunha & Putnam's (2019) call. This was in response to the first research question above. As next steps, we intend to consolidate emerging patterns on how employees' interpretation of the same P-O tensions varies (second research question). In so doing, we have also started to notice in our data an element of emotions, and we suspect that emotions may have a role to play in the sensemaking of tensions. With respect to this working paper, we specifically look forward to receiving feedback around the following in addition to any other observations:

- Does the notion of P-O tensions make sense?
- Should we consider sarcasm, irony, and other emotions as part of sensemaking in this study if we find sufficient supporting evidence?
- How can we make the theoretical contribution more salient?