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I think they think we are good citizens: Meta-perceptions as antecedents of employees' reactions to corporate social responsibility

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ABSTRACT

Successfully managing employees' corporate social performance (CSP) perceptions requires insights into their antecedents. However, not much is currently known on the subject. We contribute to the micro-level corporate social responsibility (CSR) literature in two ways: (a) we investigate the antecedents of employees' CSP perceptions; (b) we integrate both customers' perceptions of CSP—as these are construed by employees—and employees' own CSP perceptions into a comprehensive framework. Specifically, we examine (a) the antecedent role of employee–customer CSR *causal meta-attributions* (i.e., what employees think customers think about the company's motives underlying CSR programs); and (b) the antecedent and moderating role of employee–customer CSP *meta-perceptions* (i.e., what employees think customers think about the company's overall social performance) on employees' CSP perceptions and, in turn, on employees' affective organizational commitment. Our study highlights that employees' CSR assessments are more complex than previously thought with employees guessing the perceptions (and attributions) others make about their firm.

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1. Introduction

Firms are increasing their corporate social responsibility (CSR) investments (Palacios-Marqués & Devece-Carañana, 2013) in an effort to strengthen their corporate social performance (CSP) — that is, an 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 societal relationships” (Wood, 1991, p. 693). The heightened corporate interest in CSR is accompanied by increased scholarly research, which has mostly focused on the macro-level by examining linkages between CSP and outcomes such as firm performance (e.g., Tang, Hull, & Rothenberg, 2012).

A second, related line of research concerns the *psychology of CSR*, which represents a micro-level perspective (Rupp & Mallory, 2015) that views employees' perceptions of their firms' CSP as more important than firms' *objective* CSR behaviors and consequent social performance (Rupp, Shao, Thornton, & Skarlicki, 2013). The literature in this domain focuses on the underlying psychological outcomes such as affective organizational commitment (Mueller, Hattrup, Spiess, & Lin-Hi, 2012)

or psychological needs such as security, belongingness, and meaningful existence (Bauman & Skitka, 2012).

Notwithstanding the contribution of these studies, the literature examining how employees assess and respond to CSR is limited and deserves more attention (Aguinis & Glavas, 2012; Shen & Benson, in press). Specifically, the majority of micro-level CSR research has focused on consequences rather than antecedents of employees' CSP perceptions. We now know that employees' CSP perceptions affect critical employee outcomes but we know much less about the factors that drive employees' CSP perceptions (see Rupp & Mallory, 2015). This lack of research is unfortunate, since insights as to how employees come to form favorable (or unfavorable) overall CSP perceptions is crucial for managers attempting to successfully manage those perceptions. In fact, the dearth of research has led researchers to call for more research that will examine the “...factors that affect individuals' perceptions of CSR policies and practices...” (Morgeson, Aguinis, Waldman, & Siegel, 2013, p. 820). We contribute to these research calls by advancing a micro-level CSR framework that posits customers' perceptions of CSP, as these are construed by employees, as antecedents of employees' own CSP perceptions. In this respect, our framework advances a ‘triadic’ examination of the CSP phenomenon that includes three parties — namely, employees, customers, and the company.

The literature on the psychology of CSR has examined employees' perceptions as being primarily a ‘dyadic’ phenomenon, focusing on dyadic perceptions (i.e., how a company's CSP is evaluated by employees) (Kenny, Bond, Mohr, & Horn, 1996). Though important, this ‘dyadic’

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treatment of CSR perceptions neglects the notion that employee appraisals of CSR programs are not made in a vacuum. Here we draw on the social information processing approach (SIP; i.e., how people adopt attitudes and beliefs in light of social information provided by others) (Thomas & Griffin, 1989) and the meta-perceptions literature (i.e., the study of construed perceptions or perceptions people hold about the perceptions of others) (Kenny & DePaulo, 1993) to suggest that employees' CSP perceptions are likely to be influenced by important social referents such as customers. We argue that employees' CSP perceptions operate within a social context and inherently involve employees *guessing* the perceptions and causal attributions others (i.e., customers) make about a company's CSP. In this respect, we contribute a meta-perceptions perspective in the study of employees' perceptions of CSP. Meta-perceptions refer to construed perceptions (i.e., perceptions of others' perceptions) or the beliefs an employee has of another person's beliefs (i.e., customer) about the company's social performance (Kenny et al., 1996). Thus, we extend work in the micro-CSR literature by proposing that employees are likely to use "triadic" – namely, more complex perceptual processes (i.e., processes that involve the employee, the customer, and the company rather than only the employee and the company) – when forming global evaluations of their employers' CSP. Studying CSP meta-perceptions forces researchers and practitioners to recognize that objective investments in CSP may be unsuccessful if employees' CSP evaluations are influenced by social CSP information (i.e., meta-perceptions) that remains unchanged (Thomas & Griffin, 1989).

Our framework extends the micro-CSR literature in another important way. Specifically, Aguinis and Glavas (2012) reported that only 5% of studies in the area address CSR from different perspectives (i.e., institutional, organizational, individual), and argued that for future CSR research to be informative it will require the study of different

perspectives. Integrating perspectives is important since the effects of CSR may be explained by mechanisms related to individual employees, their companies, and institutions shaping the perceptions of individuals. Accordingly, our triadic SIP perspective integrates employees' own CSP perceptions with employees' customer CSR meta-perceptions – namely, construed perceptions that employees make regarding an important institutional group – that is, the customers of the company (Aguinis & Glavas, 2012).

Our article proceeds as follows. First, we delineate the research framework and develop hypotheses. Next, we describe the research methods employed. We conclude with a discussion of the theoretical and managerial implications of our study and offer ideas for future research.

2. Research model and hypotheses development

2.1. Research model

Our micro-CSR model (Fig. 1) depicts employee three-party meta-perceptions as antecedents of employee CSP perceptions. Drawing on the SIP perspective and the meta-perceptions literature, we argue that employees may rely on others' perceptions when assessing their firm's CSP. We define (a) *employees' customer CSP meta-perceptions* as what employees think about customers' overall evaluations of the firm's social performance; (b) *employees' customer CSR causal meta-attributions* as what employees think about customers' perceptions about the motives underlying a firm's CSR initiative; and (c) *employee CSP perceptions* as employees' own global/overall evaluations of the firm's social performance.

Our model distinguishes between two types of CSR-related meta-perceptions: employee CSP meta-perceptions and employee CSR causal

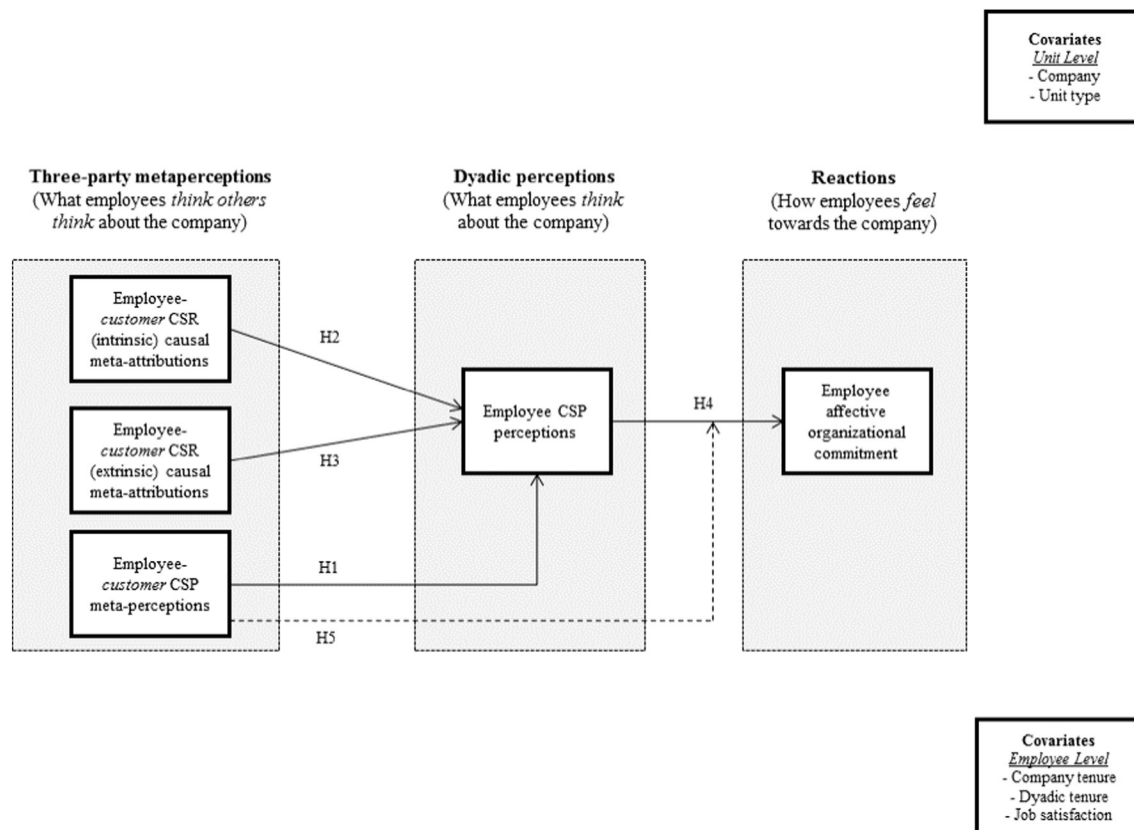


Fig. 1. Research model.

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