When corporate social responsibility motivates employee citizenship behavior: The sensitizing role of task significance

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ABSTRACT

Scholars have proposed that organizations' corporate social responsibility (CSR) efforts are often positively associated with employees' organizational citizenship behaviors (OCB) and have invoked identity-based mechanisms to explain this relationship. Complementing these perspectives, we develop a CSR sensitivity framework that explains how task significance, a micro-level job characteristic, can sensitize employees to their organizations' macro-level CSR efforts, thereby strengthening the association between CSR and OCB. Across three field studies, we find that CSR and task significance interact to predict OCB, such that an organization's CSR is more positively associated with OCB among employees who report higher task significance than among those who report lower task significance. Furthermore, we find support for prosocial motivation as a mediator of this interactive effect, but we do not find evidence for several alternative mediators. We discuss the implications of our findings for the literatures on CSR, job design, and other-oriented approaches to organizational behavior.

1. Introduction

For-profit organizations are engaging in corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiatives with increasing frequency (Aguinis & Glavas, 2012; Morgeson, Aguinis, Waldman, & Siegel, 2013). CSR has been defined as the "context-specific organizational actions and policies that take into account stakeholders' expectations and the triple bottom line of economic, social, and environmental performance" (Aguinis, 2011, p. 855), and as "the responsibility of enterprises for their impact on society" (European Commission, 2011, p. 6). Organizations' CSR initiatives can involve a large variety of activities, including philanthropic giving, community development programs, volunteerism initiatives, and environmental sustainability programs (Rupp & Mallory, 2015). Fortune 500 companies currently collectively spend upwards of $15 billion a year on CSR (Financial Times, 2014), and almost all of the world's largest 250 companies report on their CSR (KPMG International, 2013).

In addition to contributing to society and the natural environment, CSR is also valued by those who work in organizations (Rupp & Mallory, 2015). Indeed, employees tend to have more positive attitudes about their organization when it engages in CSR (e.g., Brammer, Millington, & Rayton, 2007; De Roeck, Marique, Stinglhamber, & Swaen, 2014). Therefore, a major component of most CSR programs involves efforts to communicate the organization's socially responsible activities to its employees. Such communications can involve, for instance, reporting on recent CSR efforts and the organization's CSR philosophy via email, the company website or intranet, or the company newsletter. For example, an excerpt from Nike's corporate social responsibility report (Nike, 2016) states, "Our vision is clear. To help NIKE, Inc. and our consumers thrive in a sustainable economy where people, profit, and planet are in balance. To get there, we're integrating sustainable principles and practices into everything we do: design; developing sustainable materials; rethinking processes; advocating for change in the industry. To measure our progress, we set ambitious long-term targets and report on our performance." Communications about CSR can also be incorporated into staff meetings and departmental meetings. Some companies even have corporate volunteering programs that allow employees to volunteer for non-profit organizations through their workplace (Grant, 2012; Jones, 2010).

Given the positive attitude members of organizations have towards CSR, scholars have begun to investigate how CSR affects employee behaviors (for an extensive review, see Rupp & Mallory, 2015). One form of behavior that is particularly relevant is organizational citizenship behavior (OCB). OCB is defined as "individual behavior that is discretionary, not directly or explicitly recognized by the formal reward

system, and that in aggregate promotes the effective functioning of the organization" (Organ, 1988, p. 4). Examples of OCB include giving up personal time to help others at work and showing concern towards one's peers (Lee & Allen, 2002; Smith, Organ, & Near, 1983). Proactive, prosocial behaviors such as OCB are critical for modern organizations. As Grant, Parker, and Collins (2009, pg. 31–32) noted, "As the world of work becomes increasingly uncertain, it is no longer enough for employees to complete their assigned tasks. Organizational success and survival depends on proactivity – anticipatory action taken by employees to have an impact on the self or the environment." Indeed, a meta-analysis found that higher levels of OCB significantly predicted organizational productivity, efficiency, and customer satisfaction, as well as employees' performance evaluations and promotions (Podsakoff, Whiting, Podsakoff, & Blume, 2009). These results suggest that better understanding how organizations' CSR activities influence employee OCB is extremely important for modern organizations.

Several recent studies have begun to explore the relationship between CSR and OCB (e.g., De Gilder, Schuyt, & Breedijk, 2005; Hansen, Dunford, Boss, Boss, & Angermeier, 2011; Lin, Lyau, Tsai, Chen, & Chiu, 2010). These studies have primarily identified identity-based mechanisms – for instance, moral identity or organizational identification – in explaining the relationship between CSR and OCB. For instance, one paper (Rupp, Shao, Thornton, & Skarlicki, 2013) argues and finds that the positive relationship between CSR and OCB is more pronounced among employees high in moral identity. Other papers (Farooq, Rupp, & Farooq, 2017; Jones, 2010; Shen & Benson, 2016) suggest that CSR increases employee's organizational identification, which has a positive impact on their OCB. Although these findings provide useful insights about the link between CSR and OCB, we argue that an identity-based lens may be insufficient to fully understand the relationship. Specifically, although identity-related concerns are one important driver of employees' workplace behavior, there are a variety of other factors that can also influence this behavior. In particular, a wide variety of research has identified motivation (see Locke & Latham, 2004 for a review) and in particular prosocial motivation (Grant & Mayer, 2009) as a critical antecedent of proactive behaviors such as OCB. We therefore set out to complement existing research by exploring the potential for a motivational pathway to transmit the effects of organizations' CSR activities to their employees' OCB. In this research, we develop and test what we refer to as a "CSR sensitivity" theoretical framework, which helps explain when, why, and how organizations' CSR efforts can encourage OCB. The framework is grounded in research suggesting that when employees are aware of the beneficial effects of their actions on others, they desire to make an even greater positive difference in others' lives (Grant et al., 2007; Lemoine, Parsons, & Kansara, 2015). It proposes that task significance – a job-level characteristic defined as the extent to which one's work has a positive impact on other people (Grant, 2008; Hackman & Oldham, 1976; Morgeson & Humphrey, 2006) – influences the degree to which organization-level CSR activities increase employees' prosocial motivation, and hence, their OCB. We argue that when employees have jobs high in task significance, they become more sensitive to the social implications of their own actions and the actions of their organization. In this way, working in a job that enables one to make a prosocial difference increases one's sensitivity to whether one's organization is making a positive difference in society through CSR. Therefore, we propose that the positive association between CSR and OCB via prosocial motivation is likely to be stronger among employees whose jobs are higher in task significance. These predictions are summarized in Fig. 1. We test the model in three field surveys of working individuals employed across a variety of organizations and industries.

Collectively, this package of studies offers several important theoretical contributions. First, we add to a burgeoning literature focused on the effects of CSR at the micro level by introducing the notion of CSR sensitivity – the idea that some employees, due to characteristics of their jobs, might be more sensitive to the CSR in their organization, thus strengthening the effects of CSR on their behavior. Our focus on task significance follows from our interest in the motivational component of the CSR-OCB relationship, as task significance is a feature of the work context that can increase employees' concern with their own prosocial impact (Grant, 2008). Extending prior research, we argue that a job high in task significance also makes employees more sensitive to their organization's influence on others, thereby strengthening the association between CSR and OCB. This motivational lens, including task significance as a moderator and prosocial motivation as a mediator, represents a novel theoretical contribution of our research, and we suggest that it is a useful complement to existing identity-based approaches to understanding the micro-level research on CSR. We also contribute to the literature on job design, which explains how attributes of an individual's jobs and tasks influence their motivation and performance (Grant, 2008; Hackman & Oldham, 1976; Morgeson & Humphrey, 2006). Although job design research is fundamentally a micro-level endeavor related to the job itself, our studies suggest it is also important to examine how these micro-level characteristics interact with the macro-level features of the organizations in which these jobs are embedded. Specifically, our research suggests that micro-level task significance may influence employees' reactions to more macro-level CSR initiatives within the organization. Third, we contribute to the growing research on other-oriented approaches to organizational behavior (e.g., De Dreu, 2006; Grant, 2007; Meglino & Korsgaard, 2004). Our theoretical model is unique in that it explains how externally-focused organizational activities (CSR) can encourage other-oriented employee motivation and behavior (prosocial motivation and OCB) under conditions of high task significance. In this way, we explain how prosocial activities at different levels of the organization can reinforce one another, influencing prosocial motivation and behavior.

2. Theoretical background

We propose that employees can differ in their level of *CSR sensitivity*, which we define as the extent to which employees are behaviorally influenced by their organizations' CSR activities. We argue that employees who are more sensitive to their company's CSR are more likely to respond or react to their organizations' CSR efforts by experiencing increased prosocial motivation and engaging in OCB, whereas employees lower in CSR sensitivity are less likely to respond in such a fashion. This argument is supported by prior research that has established that the consequences of CSR can differ for different employees. For example, studies have found that individuals vary in the extent to which they value such activities, and therefore individuals vary in the extent to which they are likely to be influenced by their organizations'
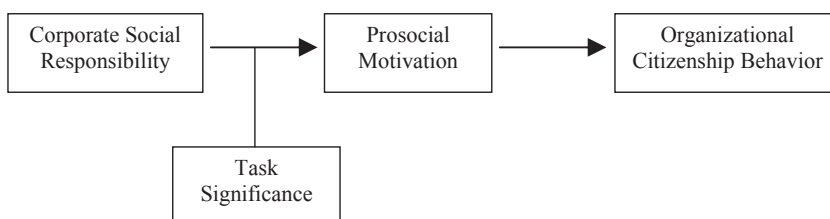
Fig. 1. Theoretical model.