



Determinants and consequences of employee attributions of corporate social responsibility as substantive or symbolic



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ABSTRACT

Interest in corporate social responsibility (CSR) has grown beyond traditional macro-level research to also consider employee-level outcomes of CSR. This nascent stream has focused on the relationship between organizational CSR initiatives and employee outcomes within the organization. Distinguishing between substantive and symbolic CSR (i.e. *genuine* CSR vs. *greenwashing*), we argue that to understand employee outcomes requires identifying their underlying attributions of their organizations' CSR initiatives and the process by which these differential attributions are formed. Integrating theorizing and findings from the organizational behavior, marketing, and strategy literature, we propose a model of employee attribution formation of organizational CSR initiatives as substantive versus symbolic to differentiate the positive outcomes to organizations when causally evaluated as engaging in substantive CSR, from the null or possibly negative employee outcomes when these initiatives are attributed as symbolic. Implications for practice and applications to management are also discussed.

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I'm not doing my philanthropic work ... to create good public relations. I'm doing it because I can afford to do it, and I believe in it.

George Soros

1. Introduction

The value of considering employees' attitudinal and behavioral outcomes is increasingly recognized as an important yet understudied stream in corporate social responsibility (CSR) research (Aguinis & Glavas, 2012). Advances in this line of inquiry have been made in identifying positive employee-level outcomes of their employers' CSR initiatives (e.g., Carmeli, Gilat, & Waldman, 2007; Evans, Goodman, & Davis, 2011; Maignan, Ferrell, & Hult, 1999) supporting the theory that employees respond favorably to their employers' engagement in CSR. Two fundamental findings of micro-level research on CSR are that individuals will reward organizations who engage in CSR, and more recently, that the attributions made of the motives underlying these CSR initiatives play a

key role in these responses (Marin, Cuestas, & Roman, 2015). This paper contributes to and expands the current understanding of employee-level effects of CSR while accounting for the growing cynicism of observers toward organizational motivations underlying these initiatives. The increasingly common judgment of organization actions as *greenwashing* suggests the importance of disentangling organizational engagement in CSR from the attributions of these initiatives. The question when it comes to employee outcomes is no longer "whether CSR pays, but instead when or under what circumstances" (Orlitzky, Siegel, & Waldman, 2011, p.9), recognizing that CSR increasingly becomes expected of and enacted to varying degrees and for varying reasons by organizations. We integrate theoretical and empirical work in the organizational behavior (OB), marketing, and strategy literature to propose a model identifying key factors underlying employees' varying attributions of their organizations' CSR initiatives, and their ensuing attitudinal and behavioral outcomes.

The recent and growing interest in the impact of CSR on employees in the OB literature has focused on positive individual attitudes and behaviors resulting from an organization's engagement in CSR initiatives. For example, a positive link has been established between the extent to which an organization engages in CSR and organizational identification (Carmeli et al., 2007), individual and group commitment to the organization (Brammer, Millington, & Rayton, 2007; Chun, Shin, Choi, & Kim, 2011; Ditlev-Simonsen,

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2015; Glavas & Kelley, 2014; Maignan & Ferrell, 2001; Maignan et al., 1999; Peterson, 2004; Stites & Michael, 2011), in-role and extra-role performance (Story & Neves, 2015) and organizational citizenship behaviors (OCBs; Evans et al., 2011; Hansen, Dunford, Boss, Boss, & Angermeier, 2011; Lin, Lyau, Tsai, Chen, & Chiu, 2010; Rupp, Shao, Thornton, & Skarlicki, 2013). While corporate misdeeds or irresponsibility have been shown to lead to null or negative individual-level outcomes (Rupp et al., 2013), the dominant assumption regarding organizational engagement in CSR has been that this produces favorable employee outcomes.

In line with growing societal skepticism over organizations' publicized CSR initiatives (e.g. Chun & Giebelhausen, 2012; Jahdi & Acikdilli, 2009; Skarmeas & Leonidou, 2013), we argue the importance of employees' attributions of their organizations' motives for engaging in CSR as key to understanding their ensuing attitudes and behaviors at work. Two-dimensional organizational motivations underlying CSR initiatives have been accounted for in the strategy (e.g. substantive vs. symbolic; Godfrey, 2005) and marketing (e.g. internal vs. external, Vlachos, Epitropaki, Panagopoulos, & Rapp, 2013; proactive vs. reactive Groza, Pronschinske, & Walker, 2011; and intrinsic vs. extrinsic, Pai, Lai, Chiu, & Yong, 2015; Vlachos, Panagopoulos, & Rapp, 2013) literature as well as in the popular vernacular (e.g. greening vs. *greenwashing*). While a number of organizational motives have been considered, a common thread and broad distinction is that made between CSR mainly motivated by a desire to help its target (other-serving), versus CSR driven with the goal of benefitting the organization (self-serving; from here on referred to as substantive vs. symbolic, respectively). It is important to note that while *actual* organizational motivations (i.e. in the strategy and OB literature) and *attributions* of these motivations (i.e. in the marketing literature) have been addressed, our focus is on the latter.

Building on this previous work, we develop a theoretical model demonstrating that employees' attributions of their organizations' motives comprise the most proximal and valid predictors of employee-level outcomes. As such, although it is logical to focus on predicting positive individual-level outcomes from CSR perceived as substantive, in line with recent findings in the marketing literature, we argue that attributions of these same initiatives as symbolic may lead to different (and perhaps even undesirable) employee-level outcomes. For example, Ellen, Web, and Mohr (2006) found that consumers and employees attribute different motives to an organization's CSR initiatives, and Vlachos and colleagues (Vlachos, Panagopoulos et al., 2013; Vlachos, Theotokis, & Panagopoulos, 2010) found that these different attributions lead to varied individual-level outcomes. However, while Walker, Heere, Parent, and Drane (2010) found negative impacts for consumer perceptions of self-serving CSR motivation, Vazquez, Lanero, Garcia, and Garcia's (2013) study of consumer attributions did not find support for any negative effects related to perceptions of strategic or egotistic driven motives for CSR which aligns with Skarmers and Leonidou's (2013, p. 1836) findings that "consumers are tolerant of strategic motives for corporate social engagement".

Our goals in this paper are twofold. First, integrating theorizing and findings in the OB, marketing, and strategy literature, we develop a conceptual model identifying key antecedents underlying employees' attributions of their organizations' CSR as substantive or symbolic. As we explain below, while the marketing literature has contributed important empirical evidence of differential outcomes of CSR attributions, it has been silent on their antecedents. We propose that important considerations include how employees' experiences in previous employment begin to shape their evaluations of their current organization's CSR practices as substantive or symbolic, followed by cues from the CSR initiatives they observe in the current organization, and finally, how

influential others further influence these attributions. Second, by accounting for employee attributions of CSR as substantive or symbolic, as well as individual moral identity and self-interest, we propose interactions toward explaining a range of employee-level outcomes (both positive and negative) previously accounted for in the OB and marketing literature.

2. Review of the literature on individual outcomes of CSR

A review of the CSR literature noted that only 4% of the empirical work on CSR examined relationships at the individual-level of analysis (Aguinis & Glavas, 2012), and as would be expected only positive relationships with desirable employee attitudinal and behavioral outcomes of organizational CSR initiatives were theorized.

2.1. The relationship between extent of CSR and employee-level outcomes

Research on job applicants found CSR initiatives influence individuals' attitudes even before entry into the organization by it being seen as more attractive to like-minded individuals (Greening & Turban, 2000; Jones, Willness, & MacNeil, 2009; Rupp et al., 2013; Turban & Greening, 1996). As noted earlier, the positive outcomes of employees' perceived CSR include greater commitment, identification and attachment to the organization, as well as job satisfaction. For example, not only do employees who perceive higher levels of CSR report greater engagement in the organization, they also demonstrate more creative involvement toward their work (Glavas & Piderit, 2009). This is in line with a recent survey by Deloitte (2015a and 2015b) that Millennials believe businesses are too focused on profit rather than in improving society; and that this new generation of workers is as interested in how companies contribute to society as they are in products and profits when considering potential employers.

Research also indicates that organizational involvement in CSR initiatives fosters employee behaviors that lead to better functioning organizations. For example, CSR involvement was found to make work more meaningful, and in turn lead to higher quality connections for employees within the organization (Glavas & Piderit, 2009). Also, a positive link between corporate citizenship and OCBs (de Gilder, Schuyt, & Breedijk, 2005; Evans et al., 2011; Hansen et al., 2011; Lin et al., 2010; Story & Neves, 2015), as well as a negative relationship to organizational deviance (Evans et al., 2011) have been identified. These results are in line with those of Jones (2010) who not only found a positive link between employee attitudes toward volunteer programs and employee performance of OCBs, but also that these positive attitudes led to greater identification with the organization and lower turnover intentions. Similar to attitudinal evaluations, research on behavioral outcomes focused on positive actions (Evans et al., 2011), as well as positive evaluations (Glavas & Piderit, 2009). Furthermore, recent findings also support the bottom line benefits of engaging in CSR as these initiatives in the form of "green" practices and standards are associated with higher employee productivity (Delmas & Pekovic, 2013).

Focusing on explaining positive individual-level outcomes, conceptual work invoking an extended view of justice theory has expanded the theoretical lens to consider the role of third-party perceptions in employees' evaluations of their organizations' fairness toward themselves. Organizational engagement in CSR initiatives is proposed to positively influence individuals' perceptions of just treatment (Rupp, 2011). Rupp, Ganapathi, Aguilera, & Williams (2006) model also accounts for employee behaviors that result from organizational engagement in CSR initiatives. They suggest that employees' observance of their organizations'

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