Capturing CSR Words and CSR Actions: The Constructive and Constitutive Potential of Employee Communication in Corporate Social Responsibility

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CAPTURING CSR WORDS AND CSR ACTIONS: THE CONSTRUCTIVE AND CONSTITUTIVE POTENTIAL OF EMPLOYEE COMMUNICATION IN CORPORATE SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY

by

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For my grandparents
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ABSTRACT

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Major Professor: Krishnamurthy Sriramesh

Employees have been often overlooked in corporate social responsibility (CSR) literature (Aguilera, Rupp, Williams, & Ganapathi, 2007; May, 2011) despite being regarded as one of the most critical voices that constitute what an organization is and what it does (Morsing & Schultz, 2006; Tompkins, 1987). In particular, there is relatively little research about how employees, as one of the primary stakeholders (Freeman, Jeffrey, & Wicks, 2007), make sense of CSR in their everyday talk, and how such talk informs and shapes the very meanings of organizational CSR (May, 2011). Furthermore, despite the fact that in recent years interest in constructive and constitutive approaches to CSR has increased (see Crane & Glozer, 2016; Schoeneborn & Trittin, 2013), the question of how employees, through their talk and action, may help constitute their organization as socially responsible has gained little scholarly attention. Indeed, a closer look into the literature on CSR and employees suggests that importance of employees in CSR is often taken at its face value, with limited empirical and theoretical insights into why and how employees matter in CSR talk—and CSR action, respectively.

Given that CSR is “communicatively constituted in complex and dynamic networks” (Schultz, Castelló, & Morsing, 2013, p. 685), whereby meanings of CSR are being negotiated in an ongoing process of sensemaking among individuals and organizations (Basu & Palazzo, 2008; Weick, Sutcliffé, & Obstfeld, 2005), the question of what role employees play in such meaning construction becomes particularly relevant (May, 2011). Thus, not only may employees and their talk be perceived as one of the core communicative processes through which organizational CSR comes into being, but through, and in, communication, employees may also help “bridge” internal and external dimensions of CSR (May, 2011; May & Roper, 2014). As explained by Morsing, Schultz,
and Nielsen (2008), employees can further organizational CSR through their commitment and support for CSR agendas and policies within their organization, which can then be passed onto stakeholders and community members outside their organization.

Adopting a communication view on CSR (Schultz et al., 2013) that approaches CSR as communication (e.g., Christensen & Cheney, 2011; Schoeneborn & Trittin, 2013) through, and in, which meanings and values concerning CSR are constructed and come into existence (Basu & Palazzo, 2008; Weick, 1995), this study aims to address such gaps in the literature by exploring the role of employees in CSR. Specifically, this study draws on sensemaking perspective, speech act theory, and communicative constitution of organization (CCO) approach to study how employees construct meanings of CSR, both individually and through interactions with other organizational members. Thereby, it also addresses the overarching question guiding this research: What role may employees play in bringing CSR words into CSR actions?

This study employs a qualitative study using two methodologies: a discursive analysis of interviews from multiple organizations and a case study. First, it draws on one-on-one interviews with organizational members working for various companies in the United States to explore the ways in which they create meanings and constructions of CSR, including with respect to the questions of agency in, and ownership of, CSR. The findings speak to the ambiguous and perplexing nature of CSR to which participants respond through negotiation of multiple, and often contested, values that they attribute to CSR. CSR can, then, be regarded as a “value-laden” resource (Deetz, 2003) that acts on employees as much as they themselves act on it. In addition, the findings suggest that employee agency in CSR cannot be studied without taking into consideration other agencies that too make a difference in meaning negotiation process that brings CSR into being. In this process, employee appropriation of CSR often works in retrospection, through meaning construction in terms of previous job experience, while also through future aspirations for CSR, thereby, challenging the notions of control, consistency, and coherency in communication concerning CSR (Schultz et al., 2013). Second, this research uses a case study of a global pharmaceutical company to explore how employees jointly construct CSR informed by their roles. Comparing the latter constructions with
how employees are framed in corporate CSR talk, this study explores employees’
ascribed role against their achieved role in bringing organizational CSR into being.

Accordingly, this research offers both empirical and theoretical insights into the
role of employees in CSR by unpacking diverse meanings and complexities concerning
CSR talk and CSR action. As such, this study not only contributes to a better
understanding of the nexus between employees and CSR by bringing to focus “localities”
in communication in, and through, which CSR emerges, but it also aims to enrich both
the body of knowledge and practice of CSR beyond this link.
CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Corporate social responsibility (CSR) has become a global phenomenon not only as a corporate practice but also as an important topic on the international diplomatic agenda (Sriramesh, Ng, Ting, & Wanyin, 2006; Stohl, Stohl, & Townsley, 2007). Yet, distinct environments and contexts in which corporations operate challenge the idea that CSR can be defined as a universal concept. The environments of which corporations are a part, and the demands from various social actors with whom corporations interact with, are in a constant state of flux (Christensen, Morsing, & Thyssen, 2013). As continuously evolving and highly contested concept and practice (Dahlsrud, 2008; Guthey & Morsing, 2014; Okoye, 2009), CSR is a “moving target” (Christensen & Cheney, 2011; Christensen et al., 2013; Haack & Schoeneborn, 2015; Morsing, 2005) that is difficult to define and study. Thus, there are often tensions and discrepancies between what organizations and their members communicate with regard to CSR, and deeds that they carry out concerning their organizational responsibilities (Christensen et al., 2013; May & Roper, 2014). Common notions, both in industry (e.g., Keys, Malnight, & van der Graaf, 2009; The keys to corporate responsibility employee engagement, 2014) and academia (e.g., De Roeck, El Akremi, & Swaen, 2006; Elving & Kartal, 2012; Pomering, 2011), that organizations should strive for consistency in and between their words and actions in regard to CSR are thereby complicated and challenged (Christensen & Cheney, 2011; Christensen et al., 2013; Schultz, Castelló, & Morsing, 2013).

Increasingly, coherency in, and alignment between, words and actions that pertain to CSR are seen as important facets that can help companies and their leaders foster “a
culture of engagement that supports the development of highly productive, efficient, and self-actualized workers who can deliver benefits in any number of ways” (The keys to corporate responsibility employee engagement, 2014, p. 4). Despite greater interest in employee engagement in CSR (Glavas, 2016), a vast majority of literature still assumes that CSR is well-received and supported by employees (McShane & Cunnigham, 2012). However, there is little consideration of how employees are actually involved in CSR implementation processes (Bolton, Kim, & O’Gorman, 2011), and how they make sense of CSR in the first place (May, 2011).

Indeed, if we accept the notion that CSR is “increasing sensitivity towards a variety of stakeholders” (Morsing, 2005, p. 32), then questions such as how, as an organization’s primary stakeholders, employees make sense of, and carry out, CSR become necessary and relevant. Several studies suggest that employees, next to customers, are the main stakeholder group that organizations most frequently target when communicating about their CSR (e.g., Coppa & Sriramesh, 2013; Pastrana & Sriramesh, 2014; Sriramesh, Ng, Ting, & Wanyin, 2007). However, while organizational external audiences (like consumers) are often taken into account as independent individuals whose opinions and views matter when it comes to CSR, corporations’ own employees and their views of and involvement in CSR often remain overlooked (Christensen & Cheney, 2011). As argued by Christensen and Cheney (2011), “Ironically, [employees] are expected to be involved without being involved (Christensen & Cheney, 2010), to express loyalty and commitment—and thus lack individuality, critical voice, and personal insight—to organizations that increasingly describe their external audiences, in particular, the consumers, as individual, critical, and independent” (p. 457). Furthermore,
research shows that employees are often excluded from, or have little say in, decision making processes about organizational CSR programs and initiatives (e.g., Coppa & Sriramesh 2013; Pastrana & Sriramesh, 2014; Sriramesh et al., 2007). To add more, noting that CSR scholarship often ignores the differences among employees, “presupposing that this group’s expectations, views, and attitudes were homogeneous” (p. 266), scholars such as Rodrigo and Arenas (2008) legitimately ask: Do employees even care about CSR?

In both the academic literature and popular press CSR is overwhelmingly portrayed as what helps attract potential employees as well as retain and engage current workers (e.g., Bhattacharya, Sen, & Korschun, 2008). However, few studies have delved deeper into issues of employee cynicism and skepticism towards organizational CSR, along with a general lack of support or indifference toward such corporate efforts among employees (Costas & Kärreman, 2013; Du, Bhattacharya, & Sen, 2015; McShane & Cunnigham, 2012; Rodrigo & Arenas, 2008). While still rather scarce, such research suggests that employee understanding of, and involvement in, CSR may not necessarily be aligned with what companies are communicating in regard to their CSR, such as in corporate strategies, annual reports, newsletters, on their corporate websites, etc. Further, Bhattacharya et al. (2008) suggested that a large majority of employees have little or no knowledge about the CSR efforts of their company.

Such a lack of understanding, this study contends, goes beyond “a vague notion that their employer is socially responsible” (Bhattacharya et al., 2008, p. 21). As part of both internal and external environments of their respective companies (Cheney & Frenette, 1993), employees are in the position to constantly negotiate among a variety of
meanings and interpretations of what social responsibility, or socially responsible behavior, may mean for them and their organization (Štumberger & Golob, 2016; Weick, 1995). For instance, when leadership and upper management introduce new CSR initiatives and programs within their respective companies, employees often find themselves in a situation of uncertainty around such initiatives and programs, and may thus question how to positions themselves with respect to CSR (Angus-Leppan, Metcalf, & Benn, 2010; Basu & Palazzo, 2008).

The study aims to address and challenge some of these gaps and assumptions in existing literature by questioning the importance, and role, of employees in CSR. In approaching CSR as a social construct that emerges through how employees make sense of it (May, 2011; Schultz et al., 2013), this study is motivated by recent studies that point to multiplicity of meanings and values that come into play in CSR pertaining to employees (e.g., Gurney & Humphreys, 2006; Humphreys & Brown, 2008; Štumberger & Golob, 2016), along with the dynamic and often conflicting nature of communication concerning CSR (Deetz, 2003, 2007). Thus, I argue that one should be open to the premise that there are inconsistencies and tensions in, and between, how companies, including their employees, communicate and carry out CSR deeds (Christensen et al., 2013; Schultz et al., 2013).

In addition, this study follows recent shifts in CSR literature towards a constitutive view of communication by studying employee CSR talk not as part of internal communication processes that occur within the organization, but as a form of communication through and in which organization and its CSR practices come into being (e.g., Schoeneborn & Trittin, 2013). Namely, as presumably important constituencies of
what a corporation communicates and does in terms of its CSR, employees are not only receivers of information about CSR that their organization is sharing with its internal and external audiences (Cheney & Frenette, 1993); through communicating and/or carrying out CSR, employees can also become a part of constitutive communication processes in, and through, which organization and its CSR practices emerge (Schoeneborn & Trittin, 2013; Tompkins, 1987), regardless of employee commitment and/or support for CSR. As such, employees may have the potential of becoming the very agents that speak on behalf of their organization and its (lack of) CSR (Cooren, 2010), both through conversations (e.g., sharing or rejecting stories about their organization and its social responsibilities) and through direct involvement in CSR practices and programs (e.g., volunteering in the community).

Specifically, the two overarching questions that guided this study in exploring why and how employees matter in CSR are: (1) How do employees (co-)construct meanings of CSR?, and (2) What role may employees play in bringing CSR words into CSR actions? Providing greater theoretical and empirical insights into employee communication pertaining to CSR, as well as tensions and complexities concerning employees’ CSR talk and CSR action (Christensen et al., 2013; May, 2011; May & Roper, 2014), this study contributes to a better understanding of the nexus between employees and CSR.

This research employed a discursive analysis of one-on-one interviews and a case study (consisting of multiple methods) to study how employees construct the notion of CSR in organizational settings. This study consisted of two distinct phases, whereby each of them independently, yet complimentarily, informed proposed research questions. In
the first phase, I used one-on-one interviews with organizational members of various small to medium size organizations across different industry sectors in the United States (US) to study employee sensemaking of CSR. In the second phase, I looked closely into how employees “talked CSR into being” as informed and shaped by a distinct organizational discourse and context. In particular, I studied a global pharmaceutical company headquartered in the United States (US) that strategically engages in various CSR programs and initiatives, with a great emphasis on employee engagement as part of their corporate strategy. Through the use of multiple methods (interviews, focus groups, and documentation analysis), I explored how employees may bring CSR words into CSR actions by comparing the company’s corporate CSR talk with employees’ joint constructions of CSR vis-à-vis their roles.

Accordingly, this research advances the body of knowledge of social constructions of CSR by, and among, employees at both the theoretical and empirical levels. Given the limited literature on employees and CSR, especially within the communication field (see Crane & Glozer, 2016), the main contribution of this study is to explore where the importance of employees might lie in regard to the constructive and constitutive potential of communication pertaining to CSR. First, a closer look into individual and collective sensemaking of CSR (meaning, individually as well as through interactions among organizational members) offers valuable insights into how CSR is being constructed by, and among, employees—that is, by unearthing the social processes in which the construct CSR comes to be (Schultz et al., 2013). Furthermore, since “organizations are built out of direct interactions” (Weick, 1987, p. 98), unpacking potential discrepancies and bridges between individual and collective understandings of
CSR, along with what the organization communicates in its official CSR statements and programs, can also provide a better understanding of how communication at different levels (individual, organizational) can help constitute organization as socially responsible (Schoeneborn & Trittin, 2013). Third, observing CSR talk as it occurs among organizational members offers a better insight into everyday practices of, and involvement in, CSR (May, 2011). Since CSR is “communicatively constituted in complex and dynamic networks” (p. 685) consisting of various individuals and organizations (Schultz et al., 2013), a closer look into the role employees may play in “talking CSR into existence” is needed, for employees are often considered as one of the most critical constituencies in bringing organizations and specific organizational practices, policies, and agendas, including those concerning CSR, into being (Morsing, Schultz, & Nielsen, 2008; Schoeneborn & Trittin, 2013). These theoretical implications, next to several others, are further unpacked in the chapters to come.

The rationale behind this study is also to provide meaningful insights into the topic of interest to practitioners working in CSR, sustainability, public relations, and other related areas. With increasing stakeholder demands for corporations to engage in social responsibility (Benn, Todd, & Pendleton, 2010), CSR has become an important area of work among communication professionals. In addition to the growing number of CSR consultancies around the world (Crane, Matten, & Spence, 2013), many organizations now have specialized departments that deal with CSR and related issues. Yet, as observed by Waddock and Googins (2011), only in recent years have CSR and communication professionals begun to recognize the importance of employees in
carrying out CSR practices and what employees (both current and potential) actually have to say about CSR.

This study contributes to advancing such knowledge by exploring employee CSR talk and CSR actions as not only limited to what occurs within an organization but also as it occurs outside an organization (Park, Kim, & Krishna, 2014). Employees are often referred to as important ambassadors for CSR (Theofilou & Watson, 2014), who share what their organization is doing with regard to CSR with others, while also having the ability to circulate and share information gained from the environment in which their company operates with other organizational members (Kim & Rhee, 2011; Park et al., 2014; Preston & Post, 1975). Perceiving employees as not only internal but also external stakeholders (Cheney & Frenette, 1993), this study aims to advance practice by exploring employee communication concerning CSR, and their CSR involvement, against what May and Roper (2014) referred to as “the complicated nexus” between internal and external organizational boundaries (p. 782).

In addition, this study responds to recent calls for greater inclusion of employees in corporate planning and decision making regarding CSR, without excluding inconsistencies and dissensus in such communication processes (Christensen et al., 2013; Deetz, 2003; Schultz et al., 2013). Looking closely into what employees have to say about their organization and its CSR, and delving deeper into their sense of agency in, and ownership of, CSR, this study hopes to aid in enhancing understanding about the strategic value of employees in CSR, taking into consideration both functional and dysfunctional effects of communicating and organizing around CSR (Golob, Podnar, Elving, Nielsen, Thomsen, & Schultz, 2013; Kim, Kim, & Tam, 2016).
This dissertation manuscript is structured as follows. After this Introduction, Chapter Two discusses the development of CSR as it has been defined and studied in the literature, offering the current debate over CSR that is concerned with three fundamental questions: What does CSR mean?; For whom or what should corporations be responsible?; and, Does the context matter in CSR? Based on this debate, I emphasize the constructive nature of CSR rooted in social constructionist thinking that positions communication and language at the very center of how people make sense of themselves and their world (Allen, 2005; Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Gergen, 1985). Next, I discuss the communication aspects of CSR, including a variety of perspectives and orientations that have guided communication scholars in studying this social phenomenon. I put forward the conceptual and theoretical framework that is guided by an overarching perspective of this study: CSR as communication. This section is followed by a brief review of the communication literature concerning CSR and employees. Based on the main theoretical and empirical gaps in the contemporary CSR scholarship (and CSR practice), I outline key research problems and propose my research questions. Finally, I provide a brief description of the distinct sociocultural environment in which I position my study.

In Chapter Three, I present how I addressed my research questions methodologically. I begin with a brief introduction to qualitative research and its value. Then, I specify the two main strategies of qualitative inquiry used in this study: discourse analysis and a case study. Upon providing a detailed description of methods used, as well as procedures followed, employing each strategy, I address challenges experienced along the way of collecting and analyzing data. In addition, I offer descriptions of participants
and contextual background of the two data corpuses. Next, I reflect upon my positionality as a researcher. Finally, I describe my analysis process consisting of two independent phases.

In Chapter Four, I provide the empirical findings that respond to my first research question concerning employees’ individual constructions of meanings of CSR. I present two general findings that illustrate the ways in which participants made sense of this social phenomenon: (1) CSR as ambiguous and perplexing; and (2) CSR as value-laden and contested. I first delve deeper into ambiguity around CSR to suggest that there are two distinct, yet related levels at which participants deal with such ambiguity: the conceptual level and the practice level. Next, I illustrate participants’ responses to uncertainty concerning multiple interpretations of CSR through value attributions. I further unpack such meaning negotiation process by identifying specific values that come into play in employee sensemaking, and provide examples to suggest that these values are not only polyphonic but also conflicting.

Chapter Five looks beyond ambiguity to explore how participants make sense of agency and ownership as they pertain to CSR. In this chapter, I allow for possibility to take into consideration how, communicatively, other agencies that too speak on behalf of organization and its CSR, and as such enable or limit employees’ own involvement in CSR. I present the findings in support of the argument that, with respect to CSR, employees may act as much as they may be acted upon (Cooren, 2010). In addition, I show, empirically, that the notion of ownership in CSR is in both retrospection and aspirations through which employees make sense of CSR and themselves—and, thereby,
negotiate their individual responsibilities as disperse and interdependent, rather than as autonomous and independent (Cooren, 2010).

Chapter Six further problematizes employees’ role in bringing CSR into being by focusing on a specific case study. I shift the focus of this research from individual sensemaking toward collective sensemaking with the aim to study employees’ joint constructions of CSR vis-à-vis their roles within the organization. These constructions are compared against CSR talk in corporate discourse in order to explore both differences and similarities between employees’ ascribed and achieved roles in CSR, and their implications for employees carrying out CSR practices. The findings show that control and expectations, in particular, are critical factors which employee involvement in CSR as a “sustained effort” is conditional upon.

Last but not least, Chapter Seven reviews and reflects upon findings from both data corpuses. Based on the main theoretical premises that have guided this research, I further elaborate on the key findings and arguments resulting from this study. Upon discussing this study’s major contributions to both theory and practice, I offer its limitations, along with suggestions for future research. Finally, a few concluding remarks are shared.
CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

Corporate social responsibility (CSR) is now a widely known area of research in management, organizational, and communication studies, as well as a common corporate practice in many organizations around the world. Although companies’ involvement in addressing social and environmental issues is not new as such nor is it typical for businesses that operate solely in the Western world (e.g., Sriramesh, 2008), taking into account corporations’ role in the society “more coherently, comprehensively, and professionally—an approach that is contemporarily summarized by CSR” (p. 4) is a rather recent language and practice (Crane et al., 2013). In fact, it seems that in some parts of the globe, particularly outside the United States, various organizations have only started to adopt what we refer to today as CSR (Matten & Moon, 2008).

In this chapter, I delve deeper into the concept of CSR and how it evolved over time across different contexts, fields, and disciplines. I argue that due to its dynamic, contested, and multilayered nature, there is a need for scholars to explore how organizations and their members construct the very meanings of CSR, and what the implications of such social processes may be for carrying out CSR practices, programs, and initiatives at both the individual and organizational levels. Thus, not only are meanings of CSR contested and polyphonic (Christensen et al., 2013), the very contexts and environments in which organizations operate (cultural, national, and political, to name a few) shape how CSR is made sense of and communicated by different individuals and organizations (Matten & Moon, 2008).
As I demonstrate in the literature review below, there is a growing body of research on CSR as communication or discourse (e.g., Schoeneborn & Trittin, 2013; Schultz et al., 2013; Wehmeier & Schultz, 2011). Despite such interest, questions concerning employees as organizational voices with their constructive and constitutive potential have not been fully explored. In this chapter, I discuss that particularly little is known about the ways employees make sense of, and organize around, CSR in their day-to-day work, and the role that employees may play in furthering organizational CSR (May, 2011; May & Roper, 2014; Štumberger & Golob, 2016). By uncovering some of the major empirical and theoretical gaps in the existing literature concerning CSR and employees, I present the main research questions that will guide this study. Acknowledging the importance of taking into account larger discourses (national, sociocultural, etc.) that too inform and shape social constructions of CSR, I conclude this chapter by introducing the sociocultural environment in which my research questions are explored.

2.1 The Development of Corporate Social Responsibility

The concept of CSR has a rather eclectic history (Carroll, 1999). It is important to note that historically CSR emerged from management practice rather than academic scholarship (Gond, 2013). The origins of CSR scholarship can be traced back to the 1920s (see Freeman & Hasnaoui, 2011; Kaplan, 2015), but it was not until the 1950s when the first influential writings on CSR appeared (Carroll, 1999). Howard R. Bowen’s book, Social Responsibilities of the Businessman (1953), was referred to as one of the early writings on CSR. Named the “Father of Corporate Social Responsibility” (Carroll,
Bowen, arguably, set the economic, managerial, political, and social conceptual foundation for CSR (Gond, 2013). In his book, he wrote that CSR—or what he referred to as “social responsibility of businessmen”—describes “the obligations of businessmen to pursue those policies, to make those decisions, to follow those lines of action which are desirable in terms of the objectives and values of our society” (Bowen, 1953/2013, p. 6). He argued that, “as servants of society, [businessmen] must not disregard socially accepted values or place their own values above those of society” (p. 6).

Marked by increased attempts to find a more formalized definition of CSR during the 1960s, the decade that followed was “significantly preoccupied with corporate philanthropy and community relations” (Carroll, 1999, p. 273). There was a greater emphasis on economic responsibilities of business, highlighting profit maximization and sole responsibilities to shareholders. Milton Friedman’s (1962/1982) famous quote clearly portraits the spirit of that time:

[...] there is one and only one social responsibility of business—to use its resources and engage in activities designed to increase its profits so long as it stays within the rules of the game, which is to say, engages in open and free competition without deception fraud. (p. 112)

In the 1980s, alternative concepts, theories, and models were coined (e.g., corporate social responsiveness, corporate social performance, business ethics, stakeholder theory, to name a few), in addition to new and refined definitions of CSR (Carroll, 1999).

Important to note during the 1990s is Carroll’s (1991) widely cited “pyramid of CSR,” which contributed to greater systematization of CSR (Matten & Moon, 2008). Informed by Freeman’s (1974) stakeholder theory, Carroll (1991) argued that a socially
responsible company “should strive to make a profit, obey the law, be ethical, and be a good corporate citizen” (p. 43). Although he made it clear that “business should not fulfill these in sequential fashion but that each is to be fulfilled at all times” (Carroll, 1999, p. 289), economic dimension (put at the bottom of his pyramid) was clearly seen as foundational for CSR. Another notable contribution during this time period was made by Jones (1980), who suggested that CSR should be seen as a process rather than an outcome:

> It is very difficult to reach any consensus as to what constituted socially responsible behavior. To make the point even more strongly, it is virtually impossible to define social responsibility in terms of specific decisions. Very few can be judged absolutely socially responsible and many can be condemned socially irresponsible. This leads to the conclusion that corporate social responsibility ought not to be seen as a set of outcomes, but as a process. (p. 65)

Such considerations of, and shifts in, what CSR means and how CSR should be approached had largely informed the contemporary scholarship on CSR. Gond (2013) observed that in recent years scholars have been primarily occupied with “(re)discovering how business may create shared value for both business and society, (re)considering the role of institutional factors in the adoption of social responsibility, and (re)thinking critically how CSR expresses the political role of corporations” (p. xiii). In communication scholarship in particular, several scholars have begun to call for more process-oriented research (Wehmeier & Schultz, 2011) that goes beyond instrumental and outcome-focused views of CSR, which were prioritized in the early writings on this topic. In addition, recent essays pushed against conventional views of CSR as consistent, power-balanced, and consensus-driven concept and practice (e.g., Guthey & Morsing, 2014; Schultz et al., 2013).
As CSR has become a growing trend around the world, with considerable academic investigation in this topic in recent decades, it is important to understand that in practice the increased attention of corporations as to how they can become more responsible towards society has not been completely voluntary (Porter & Kramer, 2006). Coppa and Sriramesh (2013) suggested that CSR “has gained much prominence in the public agenda in the last two decades owing to the series of corporate scandals during this period” (p. 30). Similarly, Porter and Kramer (2006) argued that many business organizations have become more attentive to CSR “only after being surprised by public responses to issues they had not previously thought were part of their business responsibilities” (p. 80).

In addition, governments, NGOs, activists, and other non-business actors have contributed to the spread of awareness and support for CSR, thereby, helping with greater popularization and institutionalization of this term and practice at different societal levels. As noted by Sriramesh et al. (2006), CSR “has evolved into a global movement that includes multiple sectors such as businesses, governments, NGOs, and the general public” (p. 7). For instance, the United Nations Global Compact, now considered one of the largest CSR initiatives in the world, was established in 2000 to spread awareness and encourage responsible corporate practices and policies, globally (Guide to Corporate Sustainability, 2014). Other organizations, such as the International Labor Organization (ILO) and the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), also called for corporations to consider their impact on the society and general wellbeing, and to affirm to responsible practices and CSR policies. In 2011, the European Commission took the initiative to promote CSR among EU member states. Defining CSR as “the
responsibility of enterprises for their impact on society” led by corporations themselves, the Commission has urged the European governments to support corporations that not only comply with the legislation, but also integrate “social, environmental, ethical, consumer, and human rights concerns into their business strategy and operations” (European Commission, 2017).

These are just a few examples that suggest that CSR has become “a legitimate issue on the international diplomatic agenda” (Sriramesh et al., 2006, p. 8). Thus, CSR has also been promoted at national levels. For instance, in India a bill was introduced in 2014 by the Indian government that mandates that companies devote two percent of their profits to CSR and sustainable development (Prasad, 2014). In addition, countries, such as China, Denmark, France, and South Africa, have implemented national CSR reporting laws that require companies to report on CSR issues, such as environment, waste, employment, anticorruption, implementation of CSR policies, etc. (Morris & Baddache, 2012).

Such new regulations and demands have contributed to “mushrooming” of CSR consultancies as well as CSR standards and rankings in different parts of the world (Crane et al., 2013). For example, the Global Reporting Initiative (GRI) was established in 1997 in order to encourage and help various organizations (such as governments, businesses, etc.) in communicating their CSR and sustainability impacts (About GRI, n.d.). In a similar manner, the ISO 26000 Guidance for Social Responsibility was introduced in 2010 with the aim to guide business organizations on how to act in “an ethical and transparent way that contributes to the health and welfare of society” (ISO 26000 - Social Responsibility, n.d.). To add more, numerous other interest groups,
associations, and watchdogs are now operating around the globe to hold organizations accountable for their practices and actions in one way or another (Crane et al., 2013).

While the above discussion on the evolution of the concept of CSR and its growing popularity in various spheres of society is, hereby, rather brief, it helps to illustrate several changes in the ways CSR has been defined, understood, and practiced in different parts of the world. Moreover, this overview suggests that CSR is not only a “buzzword” (Munshi & Kurian, 2005), but rather that CSR has become a critical issue and concern in today’s society that deserves scholarly attention. Apparently, during the times when popularity of CSR both in practice and research appears only to be growing, scholarship is still concerned with questions about the very meaning (and purpose) of CSR, as well as its practical implications in terms of who or what organizations should be responsible for, and how.

### 2.2 Contemporary Discussions on CSR and Its Meaning(s)

Despite attempts to find a stable and universal definition of and approach to CSR, this concept remains highly contested and equivocal (Okoye, 2009). In the contemporary literature, the following questions can help explain the common dimensions of such ambiguity: (1) What does CSR mean?; (2) For whom or what should corporations be responsible?; and, (3) Does the context matter in CSR? While one could agree that different takes on these three questions can only enrich our comprehension and knowledge of CSR (Ihlen, Bartlett, & May, 2011b), greater insights into these queries are nevertheless critical for deeper understanding of ontological and epistemological
underpinnings that guide current CSR research and practice, particularly in the realms of *communication*.

### 2.2.1 What Is Corporate Social Responsibility?

The first question in CSR literature is concerned with the very definition of CSR. CSR has been described as a multifaceted, complex, and contested concept (e.g., Campbell, 2007; Dahlsrud, 2008; Matten & Moon, 2008; Okoye, 2009). In fact, there is no universally accepted definition of CSR (Dahlsrud, 2008). CSR is often seen as “an umbrella term” for concepts such as business ethics, business–society link, corporate citizenship, corporate social performance, creating shared value, and sustainability (Matten & Moon, 2008). Indeed, examples of definitions provided above help illustrate that CSR can “mean different things in different places to different people and at different times” (Campbell, 2007, p. 950). In the academic literature, among the most widely cited and used definitions is the one coined by Carroll (1991). He discussed CSR as consisting of four different dimensions: economic, legal, ethical, and philanthropic responsibilities.

Apparently, scholars responded differently to the ambiguity of the concept of CSR. Some scholars called for a clearer definition of CSR. For instance, Frankental (2001) argued that until CSR remains “a vague and intangible term, which can mean anything to anybody,” it is “effectively without meaning” (p. 23). In his analysis of 37 different definitions of CSR, Dahlsrud (2008) concluded that there are five common dimensions that often appear in scholarly and practical definitions of CSR: economic, environmental, social, stakeholder, and voluntariness. Based on these findings, he suggested that the non-universality of the concept may therefore be seen as less problematic.
Other scholars embraced the idea that CSR is a polyphonic, multivocal concept (e.g., Castelló, Morsing, & Schultz, 2013; Wehmeier & Schultz, 2011), suggesting that its implementation and meanings may vary from organization to organization, and from one individual (organizational member) to another. For instance, Matten and Moon (2008) provided a rather inclusive definition of CSR: “At the core of CSR is the idea that it reflects the social imperatives and the social consequences of business success. [...] Yet the precise manifestation and direction of responsibility lie at the discretion of the corporation” (p. 405). Taking into account uncertainty around CSR, Basu and Palazzo (2008) defined CSR as “the process by which managers within an organization think about and discuss relationships with stakeholders as well as their roles in relation to the common good, along with their behavioral disposition with respect to the fulfillment and achievement of these roles and relationships” (p. 124).

These considerations suggest that CSR is, indeed, a highly contested concept (Okoye, 2009). Yet, another ambivalence in the current literature concerning the concept of CSR seems to be the question of whom, or what for, organization should be responsible.

### 2.2.2 Being Socially Responsible—to Whom and for What?

Several scholars have argued that CSR is not only vague and too broad as to what being socially responsible may mean, but that the question is also to whom exactly, or what for, organizations ought to be responsible (e.g., Freeman, Jeffrey, & Wicks, 2007; Kim et al., 2016; Preston & Post, 1975). There are numerous competing theoretical perspectives that are, directly or indirectly, concerned with this question. For the sake of the scope of this study, I focus only on the three views that have been commonly used by
management and communication scholars: stakeholder, publics, and issues approach. Each of these approaches greatly informs the ways CSR, and CSR communication in particular, has been studied.

To begin with, in one of the earliest attempts to define CSR, Bowen (1953/2013) suggested that social responsibilities go far beyond those that concern solely shareholders. Among the most widely used theories in CSR research has been stakeholder theory, which emphasized the importance of stakeholders as those groups of individuals that affect, or are affected by, the organization in question (Freeman, 1984; Freeman et al., 2007). Grounded in a strategic management perspective, Freeman et al. (2007) described CSR as a monitoring process in which an organization tries to determine the level of responsibility that it has towards its environment. For Carroll (1991), the stakeholder approach was seen as a way to personalize “social or societal responsibilities by delineating the specific groups or persons business should consider in its CSR orientation” (p. 43). Moreover, Freeman et al. (2007) proposed that corporate stakeholder responsibility could be used an alternative term for CSR, as it could help to overcome the ambiguity of the concept.

In public relations scholarship, however, stakeholder theory was seen as rather loose (Grunig & Repper, 1992; Kim et al., 2016; Raupp, 2011). Several scholars considered categories determining who are those individuals that fall into a specific group of stakeholders to be too broad in order to be able to fully capture how people within one stakeholder group are likely to communicate about issues they find problematic (Grunig & Repper, 1992). Moreover, those in favor of such critical accounts argued that stakeholder theory was limited in the ways that it could not clearly identify groups of
individuals whom organizations should be responsible (Kim et al., 2016; Raupp, 2011). Not knowing who those individuals might be, Raupp (2011) questioned how an organization could therefore manage its relationships with various stakeholders. In response to such concerns, Kim et al. (2016) called for reconceptualization of CSR, calling it *corporate public responsibility* (CPR). The latter would, arguably, put in the center *publics* as those groups of people who “organize around issues and seek out organizations that create those issues—to gain information, seek redress of grievances, pressure the organizations, or ask governments to regulate them” (Grunig & Repper, 1992, p. 128; see also Dewey, 1927). These authors went as far as to suggest that unless corporations address their most strategic publics (such as employees) first, these companies cannot be perceived as socially responsible (Kim et al., 2016).

Rather than focusing on groups of stakeholders or publics, others called to bring greater attention to prioritization of CSR *issues*. In a similar manner, this view also implied that corporations should take a strategic approach to address CSR issues, however, in a way that it simultaneously tries to address and solve those issues that can contribute to the corporation’s bottom-line and its competitiveness in the market (Porter & Kramer, 2006). In their influential article, Porter and Kramer (2006) introduced *creating shared value* approach to corporate responsibility, based on the following premise:

No business can solve all of society’s problems or bear the cost of doing so. Instead, each company must select issues that intersect with its particular business. Other social agendas are best left to those companies in other industries, NGOs, or government institutions that are better positioned to address them. (p. 6)
Taken together, not only may these views raise important questions regarding instrumental, profit-making orientations to CSR, as well as questions regarding inclusivity of CSR. These approaches also point to considering the very context of CSR, including when and how does it matter, and why.

2.2.3 Does the Context Matter in CSR?

The third broad question that scholars and practitioners have been concerned with is whether CSR can be used as a universal term, and to what degree (and under which circumstances) CSR practices can or should be contextualized. The fact that the context matters in CSR was highlighted in the early writings on CSR. For Bowen (1953/2013), CSR is context-specific. He described his idea as being:

[...] primarily concerned with the social responsibilities of large corporations in the United States. The term business, when not otherwise qualified, will refer to the several hundred large corporations which we think of collectively as big business. And the term businessmen will refer to the managers and directors of these large corporations. (Bowen, 1953/2013, p. 6)

Bowen pointed out that his debate over CSR only pertained to capitalistic economic system in the United States that was in place at the time of his writing: “No attention is given to possible alternative systems” (p. 7).

Recent studies confirmed that CSR is far from being a “one-fits-it-all” term or practice, but it varies across political, economic, cultural, and historical contexts (see Crane et al., 2013; Habisch, Jonker, Wegner, & Schmidpeter, 2005; Ihlen et al., 2011b; May, Cheney, & Roper, 2007). For instance, Matten and Moon (2008) emphasized the importance of cross-national differences in the ways CSR is perceived and practiced. Their study suggested that there are notable differences in the ways companies in the
United States and in Europe understand, engage, and communicate CSR (Matten & Moon, 2008). Comparing CSR reporting in two different national and cultural contexts, Slovenia and Australia, Golob and Bartlett (2007) showed that people in these two countries have different expectations towards CSR and emphasize different CSR issues. Pastrana and Sriramesh’s (2014) study on CSR of small and medium enterprises (SMEs) in Columbia indicated that culture plays an important role in the ways businesses in Columbia practice their CSR. Sriramesh’s et al. (2007) findings suggested that in Singapore understandings of CSR were based on Western models of CSR, whereby some traditional cultural values in this environment seemed to be forgotten (Sriramesh, 2008). In addition, industry sector and company size were too highlighted as important factors that inform and shape how CSR is communicated and practiced from an organization to an organization (e.g., Coppa & Sriramesh, 2013; Nielsen & Thomsen, 2009a, 2009b; O’Connor & Shumate, 2010).

In sum, questions like what CSR may mean in which context, and who or what CSR may concern, point to the fact that CSR is essentially a social construct with no clear definition nor definite meaning (Christensen, Morsing, & Thyssen, 2015a). Rather than seeking an universal understanding of CSR, we might need to consider that, as suggested by Christensen et al. (2015a), such “conceptual ambiguity” is not necessarily bad but it may actually “stimulate sensitivity, quick adoption, and innovative solutions” (p. 135) in this area. In other words, greater discursive openness of this term may serve as “license to critique” corporate practices as they pertain to social responsibility (Christensen et al., 2015a). In the next section, I discuss social constructionism as a philosophical framework that guides my study.
2.3 CSR as a Social Construct

_Social constructionism_ is now a widely adopted view that informs major assumptions and beliefs researchers have about the nature of being and knowledge creation (Allen, 2005; Crotty, 1998). It has been described as both ontology (Miller, 2005) and epistemology (Crotty, 1998). As there are notable differences between these two terms—the first concerned with the question, _What is there to be known?_, and the latter with the question, _What can be known?_ (Guba & Lincoln, 1998)—, I hereby refer to social constructionism as a philosophical worldview (Creswell, 2009) or a qualitative inquiry framework (Patton, 2015) that informs and guides the way scholars may perceive and study social phenomena like CSR.

From an ontological standpoint, social constructionism builds on _relativity_ by suggesting that “all tenable statement about existence depend on a worldview and no worldview is uniquely determined by empirical or sense data about the world” (Patton, 2015, p. 122). It is also “epistemologically subjectivist in that the qualitative inquirer is also engaged in social construction as opposed to objectively depicting reality” (p. 122). Important to note is that both epistemological and ontological premises of social constructionism inform and influence each other in critical ways, especially in the ways people conduct qualitative research (Guba & Lincoln, 1998; Miller, 2005).

Drawing on Berger and Luckmann’s (1966) celebrated book, _The Social Construction of Reality_, Allen (2005) argued that social constructionism is about the “process of knowledge development” (constructionism) and “human interaction” (social) (p. 37). Indeed, research that employs social constructionists thinking is “principally concerned with explicating the _processes_ by which people come to describe, explain, or
otherwise account for the world (including themselves) in which they live” (Gergen, 1985, p. 266; italics added). According to Gergen (1985), “knowledge is not something people possess somewhere in their heads, but rather, something people do together” (p. 270; italics added). As such, social constructionism questions taken for granted assumptions and understandings that people have about themselves and the world that they live in (Gergen, 1985).

Social constructionists commonly believe that meanings do not arise solely from individuals but also from social systems (Allen, 2005). This is based on the idea that “humans derive knowledge of the world from larger social discourses, which can vary across time and place, and which often represent and reinforce dominant belief systems” (p. 35). In this sense, meanings¹ that individuals construct in order make sense of themselves and their world are not only subjective nor they are only objective (Crotty, 1998). Rather than being “simply imprinted on individuals,” meanings are typically “formed through interaction with others [...] and through historical and cultural norms that operate in individuals’ lives” (Creswell, 2009, p. 8). In other words, it is through social practices that individuals construct the world they live in (Allen, 2005). From an epistemological point of view, knowledge is then “always mediated by preexisting ideas and values, whether this is acknowledged by researchers or not” (Seale, 1999, p. 470).

As “shared activities” (Gergen, 1985, p. 270), language and communication are central to social constructionism, as it is through social interactions that humans come to

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¹ I follow Eisenberg’s (1984) argument in that “all meaning is [...] fundamentally contextual and constructed, at least partly, by individuals” (p. 229).

² For greater clarity, in this study (if not noted otherwise), the term CSR communication is used to refer to research area or topic that explores communication issues and challenges concerning CSR (Schoeneborn & Trittin, 2013).

³ Brunsson (1993) defines hypocrisy as inconsistencies between how organizations talk, make decisions, and act. He distinguishes between three types of hypocrisy: (1) “one whereby organizations use certain structures, processes, and ideologies for external use and others for use inside the organization,” (2)
construct their social reality (Allen, 2005). Allen (2005) pointed out that there are three premises that define social constructionist thinking. First, social constructionism takes a critical stance towards things, people, situations, processes, etc. that are typically assumed as being given. Thereby, it “encourages us to be suspicious of how we understand the world and ourselves” (p. 37). Second, social constructionist lens acknowledges that “all knowledge is historically and culturally specific” (p. 37). And third, social constructionism is concerned with social processes through, and in, which knowledge that people create is sustained, whereby communication is at the very core of these processes. Allen (2005) suggested:

We use language to produce and reproduce knowledge as we enact various roles within various contexts. Language helps us make sense of the world; it allows us to share experiences and meaning with one another. Language is a system we use to objectify subjective meanings and to internalize socially constructed meanings. (p. 37)

Given such emphasis, Ihlen, Bartlett, and May (2011a) suggested that social constructionism can help us understand how “communication is constructing and modifying reality, social conditions, and relations” (p. 11), including those concerning CSR.

Yet, it is important to note that there are notable differences among social constructionists, particularly in terms of how they perceive reality (Allen, 2005). After all, any philosophical worldview is a human construction (Guba & Lincoln, 1998). Specifically, Allen (2005) discussed three points of divergence among social constructionists: how things are made real (process of social construction), what is made real (products of social construction), and what details come into play in interactions (considering both the process and products of social construction). Here, an important
distinction needs to be made between social constructivism and social constructionism, hence, they are often used interchangeably (Patton, 2015). Although both worldviews share ontological relativity and subjectivist epistemology (Patton, 2015), Crotty (1998) suggested that constructivism focuses exclusively on how meaning is made in the mind of an individual, while constructionism assumes that meaning is generated and transmitted collectively. Social constructivism is then based on the assumption that “individuals develop subjective meanings of their experiences” (Creswell, 2009, p. 8), whereas social constructionism “emphasizes the hold our culture has on us: it shapes the way in which we see things (even the way in which we feel things!) and gives us a quite definite view of the world” (Crotty, 1998, p. 58). However, this does not mean that social constructionists accept that there is a single meaning or a single reality; (qualitative) researchers are still interested in the complexity of multiple and contested meanings (Creswell, 2009).

Such a difference in the ways reality is perceived from either social constructivism or social constructionism is critical for communication scholars who study discourse and language as social constructions that have the potential to constitute social reality (Fairhurst & Putnam, 2014). For instance, Patton (2015) noted that some scholars who adopt postmodern and constructionists thinking “question the possibility of ever finding and expressing true reality, even in the physical world, because language creates a screen between human beings and physical reality” (p. 126). He suggested that “This is because discovering the ‘true nature of reality’ is not the real purpose of language; the purpose of language is to communicate the social construction of the dominant members of the group using that language” (p. 126).
Interestingly, it was not until recently that social constructionist and social constructivist thinking have shifted CSR scholarship towards a more process-oriented view on communication concerning CSR (Golob et al., 2013), raising questions about the constructive nature of CSR, such as how individuals and organizations make sense of CSR, and how such negotiation of meanings may occur (Schultz et al., 2013; Wehmeier & Schultz, 2011). Proposing a communication view on CSR, Schultz et al. (2013) suggested that seeing CSR as “a communicative event” and “symbolic resource” may enable us to “better observe complexities of and around CSR” (p. 685), thereby, challenge the assumption of coherency and consistency in communication and practices pertaining to CSR. Indeed, with scholars beginning to study CSR as communication (e.g., Christensen & Cheney, 2011; Schultz et al., 2013) or discourse (e.g., Christensen, 2007; Grant & Nyberg, 2011; May, 2011) that is “communicatively constituted in complex and dynamic networks” (Schultz et al., 2013, p. 685) greater attention has been given to the constitutive perspective on CSR (see Schoeneborn & Trittin, 2013).

In the following section, I delve deeper into the link between CSR and communication, and elaborate more on the shift from the transmission perspective to the constitutive perspective on what has been commonly referred to as CSR communication—that is, a research area that explores communication issues and challenges in CSR (Schoeneborn & Trittin, 2013). After presenting the four main philosophical orientations used in CSR communication scholarship, I discuss how defining CSR as communication can advance our understanding and knowledge of CSR, particularly in regard to employees.
2.4 CSR and Communication

Communication is now considered a focal point in CSR scholarship and practice. Indeed, communication has become a relevant area of CSR research not only within the field of communication but also beyond. Although not all literature on CSR has been primarily concerned with communication aspects of CSR (Ihlen et al., 2011a), Golob et al. (2013) observed that “much of the literature in management can be conceptually seen as at least partly being about communication, i.e. the literature regarding disclosure, reporting, reputation, etc.” (p. 177). Communicating CSR has been perceived as a way for corporations to share and send information about their socially responsible efforts, which can also be seen in some definitions of CSR. For instance, Matten and Moon (2008) noted that “CSR (and its synonyms) empirically consist of clearly articulated and communicated policies and practices of corporations that reflect business responsibility for some of the wider societal good” (p. 405; emphasis added). Like communication scholars, management scholars have begun to recognize the value of communication in explaining the processes in, and through, which CSR is brought into being within organizations. For example, drawing on Weick’s (1979, 1995) idea of sensemaking in organization, Basu and Palazzo (2008) provided a conceptual model of managers’ meaning construction of CSR at various levels, with communication being a fundamental piece in such sensemaking processes (see also Weick, Sutcliffe, & Obstfeld, 2005).

Scholars now commonly use the term CSR communication to refer to both the acts of communicating about CSR, as well as the social processes in, and through, which meanings of CSR emerge. According to Ihlen et al. (2011a), this term describes “the ways that corporations communicate in and about this process; it is the corporate use of
symbols and language regarding these matters” (p. 8). However, definitions of CSR communication too vary from scholar to scholar. Indeed, as I illustrate in the following section, these definitions differ based on the underlying epistemological and ontological assumptions in which various communication disciplines and research areas are grounded.

2.4.1 CSR Communication Across Disciplines

CSR communication has gained importance among researchers in various areas and sub-fields, such as marketing communication, organizational communication, public relations, and rhetoric, to name a few. In public relations scholarship, CSR has been traditionally related to the question of social responsibility of communication practitioners and the ways public relations as a strategic management function (Grunig, 2006) can contribute to the betterment of society (Verčič & Grunig, 2000; Wright, 1976). Public relations scholars have commonly explored questions, such as what are the most effective ways to communicate and manage organizational CSR practices and programs (e.g., Coombs & Holladay, 2009), whereby significant attention has been given to CSR as a communication tool or technique (e.g., Brønn, 2010; Golob & Bartlett, 2007). In addition, there has also been increasing interest in the nexus between CSR and organization–public relationship (e.g., Dhanesh, 2014; Jones & Bartlett, 2009), as well as global understanding of perceptions and practices of CSR (e.g., Coppa & Sriramesh, 2013; Pastrana & Sriramesh, 2014; Sriramesh et al., 2007). Like some critical public relations scholars (e.g., L’Etang, 1994; Munshi & Kurian, 2005), organizational communication scholars have been rather skeptical and critical toward CSR (May, 2011). Seeing CSR as a discourse, organizational communication scholarship has primarily been
concerned with implications of CSR discourses (May, 2011; May & Roper, 2014). In this regard, organizational communication scholars have explored tensions pertaining to discursive constructions of CSR, including internal–external, agency–structure, and ethics–performance dimensions of CSR communication (May, 2011; May & Roper, 2014). On the other hand, scholars adopting rhetorical lens have been concerned with questions of “how and why corporations communicate about CSR is the way they do” (Ihlen, 2011, p. 157). While the literature on rhetoric and CSR appears to be rather limited, topics like issues management, ethos and legitimacy, and questions of morality have been put forward (Ihlen, 2011). Finally, marketing communication scholars have been concerned with the use of CSR communication for marketing, branding, and reputation purposes, and specific activities like social or cause-related marketing (Brønn, 2011). In particular, these scholars have been interested in issues such as: consumer perceptions, awareness, and attitudes toward CSR, and how and in what ways marketing may contribute to greater prosperity of the society (Brønn, 2011).

Although some communication sub-fields, like organizational communication, have been fairly slow in exploring CSR (May, 2011), in the entire discipline the importance of communication has been highlighted (Golob et al., 2013). In discussing whether communication is really needed for CSR, in one of the first books on this topic, *The Handbook of Communication and Corporate Social Responsibility*, Ihlen et al. (2011) argued that communication is inevitable for CSR. Drawing on Watzlawick, Beavin, and Jackson’s (1967) famous quote that “one cannot not communicate” (p. 51; italics in original), Ihlen et al. (2011a) pointed out that even keeping silence on CSR matters is a way to communicate CSR. However, their notion is quite different from what
Christensen and Cheney (2011) had in mind when they talked about the importance of communication to CSR, and vice versa. While Ihlen et al. (2011b) argued that, “Silence on how the corporation sees its social and environmental responsibility sends a signal that might be interpreted as poor strategizing and/or callousness regarding the consequences of business” (p. 565), Christensen and Cheney (2011) turned to more fundamental, ontological questions by asking “what communication does to CSR and how these two terms are possibly related” (p. 491).

One can learn from the latter paragraphs that the link between CSR and communication has been approached from different angles and orientations. This has, arguably, contributed to CSR communication literature being fairly fragmented (Golob et al., 2013). Golob et al. (2013) observed that, content-wise, communication scholars have been primarily concerned with three main CSR themes: disclosure and accountability; process; and outcomes and consequences. Crane and Glozer (2016) suggested that there are four main approaches to CSR communication in the current literature: CSR integration, CSR image, CSR identity, and CSR interpretation. Additionally, important distinctions have also been made given scholars’ distinct metatheoretical positions and the ways they approached CSR communication, most notably, regarding their perspective on communication as either transmission or constitutive (Golob et al., 2013; Schoeneborn & Trittin, 2013). Such a dichotomy, which is central to this study, is further explained in the next section.

2.4.2 Transmission and Constitutive Perspectives on CSR Communication

Schoeneborn and Trittin (2013) observed that transmission (also referred to as functionalist) perspective on CSR communication is the most prevalent one among CSR
scholars. Grounded primarily in positivist and postpositivist thinking, scholars adopting this perspective have been mainly interested in CSR communication as “means to influence stakeholders’ perception of organizations in terms of the resources of information […] they use to inform stakeholders about their CSR policies and activities” (Golob et al., 2013, p. 178). They emphasized the effectiveness of CSR communication, commonly perceived as a “tool for the production of reputation or legitimacy” (p. 178). Golob et al. (2013) and Schoeneborn and Trittin (2013) observed that such perspective has been typically used in public relations, marketing, and management scholarship that has explored questions related to strategic and instrumental aspects of CSR communication, such as its role in disseminating information about CSR in order to meet organizational (or other) goals.

In recent years, however, more scholars have adopted a constitutive perspective on CSR communication (see Crane & Glozer, 2016; Golob et al., 2013). Instead of emphasizing instrumental or functionalist aspects of CSR communication, these scholars have been interested in the formative role of CSR communication or “one of the many communicative practices that collectively constitute the phenomenon we call organization” (Schoeneborn & Trittin, 2013, p. 198). In addition, the constructive nature of CSR has been emphasized, perceiving CSR communication as an ongoing and complex meaning negotiation process through which individuals and organizations jointly construct meanings of CSR (e.g., Schultz & Wehmeier, 2010; Wehmeier & Schultz, 2011). In line with this perspective, critical questions about both functional and dysfunctional effects of “how organizations interact and connect with stakeholders with the aim of negotiating and discussing CSR projects and activities as a process of
achieving mutual understanding” (Golob et al., 2013, p. 179) have been put forward (see also Schultz et al., 2013). Such perspective is, arguably, more typical among organizational communication scholars (Golob et al., 2013; Schoeneborn & Trittin, 2013).

While both transmission and constitutive perspectives provide valuable insights into how CSR communication may work, Golob et al. (2013) argued that the latter perspective is quite abstract and lacks greater empirical investigation. Indeed, a closer look into different philosophical orientations to CSR communication grounded in these two perspectives reveals that interpretive and dialogic approaches in particular call for further theoretical and empirical exploration (May, 2011).

### 2.4.3 Philosophical Orientations in CSR Communication Research

Broadly speaking, CSR has been studied using various theoretical and conceptual lenses (see Aguinis & Glavas, 2012; Garriga & Melé, 2004; Gond & Matten, 2007). Perspectives and theories, such as institutional theory (e.g., Campbell, 2007) and stakeholder theory (e.g., Freeman et al., 2007), have largely informed and shaped how communication scholars approach CSR. Upon reviewing CSR communication literature, May (2011) distinguished between four common approaches to CSR communication (discourse): normative, critical, interpretive, and dialogical (see also Deetz, 2001). While most studies have been either normative (instrumental) or critical, interpretive and dialogic studies are gaining interest among CSR scholars (Golob et al., 2013; May, 2011; Schoeneborn & Trittin, 2013).
2.4.3.1 Instrumental Approach

The *instrumental approach*, or what May (2011) named *normative* CSR research, has mainly focused on communication tools or channels that can help transmit CSR-related information to target audiences (Golob et al., 2013). Informed by transmission perspective on communication (Schoeneborn & Trittin, 2013), scholars using this approach have emphasized structure, order, and efficiency in CSR communication (May, 2011). CSR communication has been commonly defined as a key tool or means through which organizations can communicate to and with their key stakeholders about CSR practices and initiatives, and thereby achieve and convey corporate moral legitimacy (e.g., Du, Bhattacharya, & Sen, 2010; Golob & Bartlett, 2007; Seele & Lock, 2015). Along with that, a common focus of this approach has been consistency in CSR communication—and between CSR words and CSR actions—targeted at various publics (Christensen et al., 2013; Schultz et al., 2013).

Both persuasive and strategic roles of CSR communication have been emphasized, often “as applied communication skills necessary to accomplish CSR-related tasks” (May, 2011, p. 95). For instance, Coombs and Holladay (2009) suggested that strategic communication “can be harnessed to influence perceptions through messages designed to increase awareness and acceptance of CSR efforts among constituents” (p. 96). Thus, organization’s constituents “must believe the corporation is committed to its CSR efforts and those efforts are not an artificial façade” (p. 96). Similarly, Du et al. (2010) noted that CSR communication can be “a very delicate matter” (p. 17) since stakeholders want to learn about the company’s good behavior while at the same time they question its motives for CSR. One of the main challenges of CSR communication is,
then, they argued, “to overcome stakeholder skepticism and to generate favorable CSR attributions” (p. 17).

2.4.3.2 Critical Approach

The critical approach to CSR communication has been mainly concerned with “broader sets of social, political and economic conditions, with an eye toward critique and self-reflexivity” (May, 2011, p. 96). Scholars adopting this approach have emphasized power relations and have posed questions concerning domination and voice in CSR communication, often by taking into account historical and societal constraints (May, 2011). As such, issues of (organizational) authority and legitimacy have been put forward (May, 2011). Critical scholars have questioned taken for granted assumptions that “power of CSR is positive because it is thought to create opportunities for traditionally less powerful groups such as employees, communities, those representing the environment, etc. to work with companies, to mitigate the impacts of production and to address their needs in conjunction with organizations” (Bondy, 2008, p. 308). For instance, Bondy (2008) interrogated whether the increase in power of individuals responsible for CSR within their organizations could positively contribute to furthering CSR at both individual and organizational levels. Her study suggested that increased power with CSR may be opportunistic among some organizational members who see the benefit of improving their personal power, while showing little interest in the ways CSR could be developed, or improved, within their company as such.

Moreover, critical scholars have questioned the sincerity of corporate involvement in socially responsible practices. Banerjee (2008) argued that corporations cannot perform CSR because of their basic function being profit-making. Postcolonial scholars
in particular have raised issues with regard to CSR and CSR policies being based on Western ideologies and models that contribute to the spread of Western imperialism in developing countries, with little to no concern for local voices (e.g., Khan & Lund-Thomsen, 2011). As such, CSR has often been described as “buzzword” or “greenwashing” that serves economic purposes only and that works solely to maintain the dominant corporate or managerial discourses while suppressing others (e.g., Munshi & Kurian, 2005). Thereby, authenticity and motifs of CSR have too been put into question.

Considering whether CSR can really benefit the wider society other than managerial self-interests and profit maximization, Frankental (2001) described CSR as a “PR invention.” Similarly, L’Etang (1994) took a critical stance on the role of CSR in public relations, suggesting that using CSR for public relations “raises moral problems over the motivation of corporations” (p. 111). Along with such thinking, many have been critical of arguments made by public relations scholars (e.g., Daugherty, 2001; Verčič & Grunig, 2000) that this practice can help organizations become more socially responsible.

### 2.4.3.3 Interpretive Approach

Scholars using the interpretive approach to CSR communication have been interested in “how organizational realities are related and created, maintained, and transformed in/through informal stories, rituals, and other daily practices” (May, 2011, p. 91). Rather than focusing on external dimensions of CSR communication, interpretive approach has been primarily concerned with internal dimensions of CSR communication, such as organizational members’ attitudes, perceptions, and sensemaking of CSR (May, 2011). Following Deetz’s (2001) continuum of organizational communication theory and research, May (2011) described this approach as “premodern.” While scholars adopting
this approach have often been interested in the complex and contradictory nature of CSR communication from a local (participant) perspective, they have generally studied consensus rather than dissensus in CSR communication (May, 2011).

In particular, questions about managerial and leadership attitudes, beliefs, and perceptions concerning CSR and CSR communication (e.g., Angus-Leppan et al., 2010; Dhanesh, 2015a; Nielsen & Thomsen, 2009a) have been explored. In her study on drivers of CSR among executives in India, Dhanesh (2015a) suggested that the interpretive approach has the “ability to unearth nuances and finer layers of understanding by delving deeper into the norms and beliefs of organizational and social actors who communicatively construct and enact CSR,” and thus, “the complex web of factors that drive CSR” (p. 115). Adopting a social interactionist interpretive lens, van der Heijden, Driessen, and Cramer (2010) explored how organizational members involved in CSR implementation (co-)construct meanings of CSR by focusing on “how interaction can create meaningful experiences and how experiences lead to social action” (p. 1790).

Next to commonly used sensemaking perspective (May, 2011), interpretive scholars have also adopted narrative approaches to study how CSR is being constructed through the narratives that people create, re-create, and share among one another (e.g., Gurney & Humphreys, 2006; Humphreys & Brown, 2008). For instance, Humphreys and Brown (2008) highlighted three main contributions of a narrative approach: to address sensemaking processes of how organizational members come to interpret and construct meanings through narratives; to delve deeper into narratives as identity constructions (both individually and collectively); and to tackle issues of power and control that are discursively (re)produced in narratives that individuals share about their organizations.
2.4.3.4 Dialogic Approach

The dialogic approach has been concerned with the issues of conflict, struggle, and tension in CSR communication (May, 2011). Unlike critical scholars, scholars taking the dialogic approach have been interested in “micropractices of power and resistance” and focus on “conceptions of fragmentation, textuality, and resistance” in CSR (May, 2011, p. 91). Rather than unity and coherency, these scholars have emphasized the contradictory and contested nature of CSR, further complicated with self-referential and self-reflexive organizational discourses of what it means to be a socially responsible organization (Christensen, 2007; May & Roper, 2014). Accordingly, dissensus and destabilization of CSR communication have been explored (May, 2011).

While few studies have adopted the dialogic approach, its value in addressing taken for granted assumptions in CSR communication has been put forward (Dhanesh, 2015b; May, 2011; May & Roper, 2014). May and Roper (2014) highlighted that “this approach reminds us, as scholars, that we should not necessarily take language use—or the corporate practices that emerge from it—for granted” (p. 780). In fact, in recent years more scholars have begun to explore the formative potential of CSR communication, thereby, looking into questions concerning the complex interplay in and between CSR words and CSR actions—or when CSR words turn into CSR actions (e.g., Christensen, 2007; Christensen et al., 2013; Livesey & Graham, 2007; Schultz et al., 2013). Specifically, the aspirational potential of language of CSR toward achieving positive social change (as explained later) has been emphasized (Christensen et al., 2013).

As one can learn from this brief overview, there is a great variety of views and approaches in CSR communication research, expanding from postpositivist and critical
orientations to more interpretive and postmodern orientations to CSR communication (Miller, 2005). In the following section, I focus on the overarching premise that guides this study: CSR as communication. Specifically, I adopt Schultz et al.’s (2013) “communication view on CSR” that challenges the three common biases prevalent in current CSR scholarship: control, consistency, and consensus biases. As such, this view offers opportunities to address polyphonic, dynamic, and necessarily conflicting nature of CSR communication (Gurney & Humphreys, 2006; Schultz et al., 2013).

2.4.4 CSR as Communication

I adopt a social constructionist metatheoretical lens to approach CSR as emerging in, and through, the process of meaning negotiation and construction among individuals and organizations (Weick, 1995; Basu & Palazzo, 2008). Specifically, this study is concerned with CSR as communication (e.g., Christensen & Cheney, 2011; Schoeneborn & Trittin, 2013; Schultz et al., 2013) or discourse (e.g., Christensen, 2007; May, 2011; May & Roper, 2014), whereby communication is not seen solely as a transmission of meanings of CSR, but rather as “a process within which reality is constituted by the use of symbols” (Schultz et al., 2013, p. 684; see also Ashcraft, Kuhn, & Cooren, 2009). In this sense, “CSR is fundamentally a communicative event and symbolic resource” (Schultz et al., 2013, p. 685; italics in original).

Drawing on Taylor and Van Every’s (2000) definition of communication as “an ongoing process of making sense of the circumstances in which people collectively find
themselves and the events that affect them” (p. 58), CSR communication\(^2\) can then be defined as a social process in which meanings of CSR are made sense of, constructed, and/or reproduced through the use of language (Basu & Palazzo, 2008; Schultz et al., 2013). Meanwhile, CSR discourse can be seen as a (material) manifestation of such communication (Grant & Nyberg, 2011). As any other discourse, CSR discourse consists of various interrelated texts (whether spoken, written, visualized, material artifacts, etc.) “by which CSR is conceptualized, idealized and articulated” (Grant & Nyberg, 2011, p. 536; see also Grant, Keenoy, & Oswick, 2001; Grant, Hardy, Oswick, & Putnam, 2004; Phillips & Hardy, 2002). In other words, discourse brings CSR “into being so that it becomes a material reality in the form of the practices that it invokes for various stakeholders (employees, managers, consultants etc.) (Hardy, 2001)” (Grant & Nyberg, 2011, p. 536).

As proposed by Schultz et al. (2013), such a “communication view on CSR” can help us to overcome three main biases that are commonly seen in scholarly literature adopting instrumental and political–normative views on CSR: control, consistency, and consensus biases. First, by acknowledging the dynamic and processual nature of CSR (Christensen, Morsing, & Thyssen, 2015b), the communication view addresses the control bias in that it decentralizes managerial power and corporate control commonly prevailing in CSR literature (Schultz et al., 2013). As argued by these scholars, managing and controlling CSR—and the ways CSR is being articulated and legitimized in different organizational discourses and by various stakeholders—, is problematic, since

\(^2\) For greater clarity, in this study (if not noted otherwise), the term CSR communication is used to refer to research area or topic that explores communication issues and challenges concerning CSR (Schoeneborn & Trittin, 2013).
“communication is an indeterminate process, in which meaning is not transmitted but constituted in each interaction and can, therefore, not be centrally controlled” (p. 686).

Alternatively, viewing CSR as a “symbolic resource” allows for multiple interpretations and meanings as well as plurality of discourses, thereby, embracing potential skepticism, critique, and the lack of control in CSR (Schultz et al., 2013). From this perspective, what counts as “functional” or “dysfunctional” in communication concerning CSR (as perceived in a more conventional, instrumental sense) is put into question (Christensen et al., 2013; Schultz et al., 2013).

Second, the communication view on CSR addresses the consistency bias by questioning whether (or how) legitimacy and trustworthiness in CSR are necessarily consistency and clarity dependent (Schultz et al., 2013). Christensen (2007) suggested that while “call for consistency between words and action (including other words) is understandable and sympathetic in a complex world of uncertainty and risk” (p. 453), hypocrisy of “walking CSR talk” may be inescapable. Schultz et al. (2013) noted that consistency bias “limits our understanding of how reality is enacted through communication, as it disregards the productivity of inconsistencies assuming them to be counterproductive” (p. 687). While individuals in organizations have multiple, often conflicting views of and demands for CSR, ambiguity may sometimes also be used as an effective strategy to accomplish individual and organizational goals (Eisenberg, 1984). Following Christensen et al. (2013), communication concerning CSR can then also be

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3 Brunsson (1993) defines hypocrisy as inconsistencies between how organizations talk, make decisions, and act. He distinguishes between three types of hypocrisy: (1) “one whereby organizations use certain structures, processes, and ideologies for external use and others for use inside the organization,” (2) “whereby they try, or are compelled to handle contradictory demands by talking, making decisions, and acting in accordance with different norms,” and (3) “to present a picture of the organization that does not agree with the way in which it actually functions or ever could function” (p. 8)
formative in that it allows us to (re)consider how, and under which conditions, communication, as a form of aspirational talk, can foster organizational and social change.

Third, the communication view aims to overcome the consensus bias that is commonly present in instrumental and political–normative views on CSR and organizational legitimacy (Guthey & Morsing, 2014; Schultz et al., 2013). Thus, communication pertaining to CSR may not always be intentional and planned, but rather conflictive and unpredictable (Schultz et al., 2013). Moreover, it may as well involve voices that are traditionally excluded from CSR dialogue (Schultz et al., 2013). Following Deetz (1992, 2003), such multiplicity of conflicting voices and dissent can be “necessary conditions for legitimacy building” and “important sources for social change” (Schultz et al., 2013, p. 688; see also Deetz, 2007; Christensen et al., 2015a). This challenges the idea that CSR interactions and discourses should be based on consensus and agreement.

In sum, a communication view on CSR questions taken-for-granted assumptions prevalent in the existing literature on CSR, as it forces us to turn our attention to greater “sensitivity to the language” (Christensen, 2007, p. 448) pertaining to CSR. Furthermore, a communication view also invites us to embrace social constructionist thinking in that, as scholars, we need to take a more critical stance towards social phenomena that people commonly take as given by posing context-sensitive questions that are grounded first and the foremost in communication (Allen, 2005).
2.5 CSR and Employees

Employees have often been perceived as one of the most critical target groups to whom corporations should be responsible (Bhattacharya et al., 2008; Freeman et al., 2007; Morsing et al., 2008). Safe and healthy work environment, employee benefits, diverse workforce, and gender equality are only a few examples of how companies can target their CSR towards their employees (Santhosh & Baral, 2015), thereby, emphasizing employees as important and valued organizational assets. Research has shown that such organizational practices, policies, and values not only attract new employees, but also help with worker retention and loyalty (Bhattacharya et al., 2008). In addition, the ways companies around the world treat their employees has become an important human rights issue (UN Global Compact, n.d.). Accordingly, in both research and practice, responsibility toward employees has been considered as one of the key areas of organizational CSR efforts.

In fact, the importance of employees in CSR has been emphasized from early writings on this topic. Bowen (1953/2013) acknowledged that, next to products and services, corporations also produce working conditions, therefore, they should take into consideration “the economic rationality of investing in social responsibility to enhance the well-being of employees” (Gond, 2013, p. xiv). While Bowen himself noted that his definition is specifically concerned with responsibilities of managers and directors, as observed by Gond (2013), he was also concerned with the idea of trying to avoid “paternalistic approaches to CSR” by controlling “business power through counter-power,” such as in a form of labor unions (p. xiv).
On the other hand, Preston and Post (1975) studied issues that employees recognize as problematic in their organizational environment. Although their definition of CSR emphasized public responsibility (i.e., referring to the general public), these authors considered “internal scanning” as an important way of assessing employee attitudes toward, knowledge of, and satisfaction with what their organization does. These scholars noted that learning about the latter is critical, as employee reactions to issues in the society may “inevitably reflect in some ways the changing characteristics of the society itself” (p. 115). Interestingly, while such early writings did not explicitly discuss communication aspects of CSR, one can recognize the underlying idea that what employees communicate (about) CSR should be taken into account by organizations and ways they carry out their CSR practices.

In recent years, scholars have given considerable attention to communication aspects of CSR (see Golob et al., 2013). Indeed, studies have explored employees and their ability (likelihood) to communicate about the organization and its CSR practices and issues to the outside audiences (e.g., Kim et al., 2016). In addition, studies have often identified employees as one of the key stakeholders who are able to engage in strategies and programs that companies have in place in regard to their social responsibility, such as through employees’ direct involvement in CSR practices and policies (Bhattacharya et al., 2008; Farooq, Farooq, & Jasimuddin, 2014). In respect to these considerations, strategic aspects of CSR communication have been emphasized.

But while the link between employees and CSR has been recognized, the literature on CSR and employees remains rather limited compared to that on other topics in CSR communication research (Crane & Glozer, 2016; May, 2011; O’Connor,
Importantly, as I illustrate in the literature review below, the importance and role of employees in CSR seems to be often taken at their face value. This is not to say that what various studies say about employees in CSR may not hold true, but that some of the most basic beliefs and assumptions about their role in CSR—in particular, concerning the constructive and constitutive potential of employee communication in CSR—seem to be taken for granted. What follows is that there is, generally speaking, still little discussion on whether and why employees can be seen as one of the most important organizational constituencies when it comes to CSR, and what role employees play in bringing CSR into being (May, 2011).

Before I delve deeper into these questions, I proceed with a brief overview of the main research topics in communication and organizational studies concerning employees and CSR. I then present the main theoretical and empirical gaps, along with the theoretical framework that will guide my study. After I identify my research questions, I operationalize some of the core concepts used in this study. I conclude this section with a brief presentation of the sociocultural context in which I situate my study.

### 2.5.1 Common Topics in Research on CSR and Employees

Several scholars (e.g., Aguinis & Glavas, 2012; Crane & Glozer, 2016; Garriga & Melé, 2004; Godfrey & Hatch, 2007; Golob et al., 2013; Lockett, Moon, & Visser, 2006; Rupp & Malory, 2015) reviewed the existing literature on CSR, taking into account both general and more specific questions concerning CSR. For instance, Aguinis and Glavás’s (2012) study identified three levels of analysis used in CSR literature: individual, organizational, and institutional. These scholars concluded that the individual (e.g., employee) level of CSR has been understudied. Rupp and Malory (2015) offered one of
the few reviews of so-called “micro-CSR” literature focusing on employees. Specifically, they delved into psychology research to provide an overview of studies concerned with questions, such as how CSR affects individuals within organizations, in order to uncover gaps in the literature pertaining to CSR at the employee level. However, in their review, no attention has been given to communication aspects of the nexus between CSR and employees.

As the rest of scholarship in the area of CSR, communication literature on employees remains to be rather limited. Golob et al.’s (2013) systematic literature review that identified common themes, topics, and issues addressed by CSR communication scholars provided little mentions of employees. Similarly, Crane and Glozer’s (2016) conceptual framework of four different approaches to CSR communication—i.e., CSR integration, CSR image, CSR identity, and CSR interpretation—that is based on a thematically driven literature review has yet projected that future research (within CSR integration) will focus more on internal stakeholders, such as employees.

While such reviews offer valuable insights into “what is known and not known about the specific question or theme” (Golob et al., 2013, p.180) and uncover paths where CSR research could move in the future (Crane & Glozer, 2016), studies on CSR and employees like the rest of CSR literature (see Aguinis & Glavas, 2012; Golob et al., 2013; Sorsa, 2008) remain quite fragmented. As a result, in the paragraphs below, I focus only on topics in CSR communication research that seem to be most dominant, and are most relevant for my study.

In organizational and communication scholarship, I identify the following common topics concerning the CSR–employees link: employee perceptions and attitudes;
employee commitment; employee participation and engagement; and internal strategic
communication. Within these broader topics, common questions that the current CSR
research has dealt with concern organizations’ financial and economic responsibilities
toward their workers; employee voice as important counter-power to challenge
organizations, and the effects of such counter-power; and employees’ role in strategic
CSR communication through employee participation and employee engagement.

To begin with, the current scholarship on employees and CSR has been
predominantly focused on employee perceptions of, and attitudes toward, CSR. Several
scholars have been concerned with questions such as how CSR can help strengthen the
relationships at work, and how CSR can contribute positively to the ways employees
perceive their organization. For instance, Dhanesh (2014) studied how the relationships
that employees have with their employer can be informed by the ways they perceive
organizational CSR practices. Based on her findings, she suggested that CSR can serve as
an effective management strategy for strengthening organization–employee relationships.
Similarly, Glavas and Kelly (2014) were interested in employee CSR perceptions in
regard to what their organization is doing to others, as opposed to employees directly.
These scholars suggested that such “third-party” focus may help employees to recognize
that their organization is “working towards a higher purpose” (p. 175), and may result in
employees finding their work more meaningful.

Scholars have also explored employee perceptions of CSR emphasizing the
importance of alignment in such perceptions. For example, Lee, Park, and Lee (2013)
studied how antecedents, such as perceived fit between corporate culture and CSR
practices, and perceived CSR capability, impact the ways employees view organizational
CSR. Their study suggested that the more employees perceived their company’s culture and CSR to be in alignment, “the more likely they are to think that their firm is effectively executing CSR” (p. 1722). In addressing the consequences of such perceptions, these scholars suggested: “Strategic CSR influences not only employees’ attachment to the firm but also its financial performance” (p. 1722). Another example of such research focus is seen from McShane and Cunningham’s (2012) study on employee perceptions of the authenticity of CSR programs. Their findings indicated that employee perceptions of authenticity critically inform whether employees receive their organization’s CSR programs positively. Perceived authenticity among employees is, arguably, also informed by “the extent to which the organization’s image, as presented by the CSR program, is a reflection of its true identity” as well as “the extent to which the CSR program is in the process of ‘continually becoming’” (p. 96).

In addition, scholars have (though, to a lesser extent) raised questions about whether employees even care about CSR, and how much they consider CSR important, or demand for it. For instance, Costas and Kärreman (2013) explored employees’ attitudes toward CSR, and its implications for CSR as a form of managerial control. They distinguished between three common identities that can help describe how employees feel about organizational CSR: believers, straddlers, and cynics. Similarly, studying employee attitudes toward the organization and society, Rodrigo and Arenas (2008) developed an employee attitudinal typology, distinguishing between committed, indifferent, and dissident employees when it comes to their reactions to CSR. In another study, Du et al. (2015) identified three types of employees in regard to their multi-faceted job needs and demands for organizational CSR: idealists, enthusiasts, and indifferenters,
thereby, suggesting that employee support and receptivity to organizational CSR varies. Another illustrative example is a case study of employee understanding of CSR during a lockout, where O’Connor et al. (2016) asked how employee perceptions of CSR may help inform what employees expect from their employer when it comes to CSR. The findings of this study suggested that employees perceive CSR as a combination of economic and ethical responsibilities that are “intimately tied to a set of explicitly and implicitly communicated values” (p. 46). These studies highlight the complexity of employee perceptions of CSR.

Employee commitment to CSR is another major topic in the CSR scholarship concerning employees. While there are various definitions of employee commitment, Allen and Meyer (1990) suggested that organizational commitment can be described as consisting of three main components: affective (employees’ emotional attachment to, identification with, and involvement in the organization), continuance (employees’ perceived costs associated with them leaving the organization), and normative (employees’ feelings of being obliged to remain with the organization). Turker (2009) noted that employee commitment to CSR has been explored from two main angles: First, studies have explored how CSR may contribute positively to good reputation of a company, thereby, helping to attract new employees. Second, studies have commonly explored what impact does CSR and specific CSR have on current employees. Indeed, as observed by Powell (2011), more scholars now perceive CSR as “a strategy of corporate concern for deepening both employee and consumer commitment and relationships with organizations over time” (p. 1369).
One of the common assumptions in the literature is that employees are often viewed as the ones who ought to carry out organizational CSR practices. For instance, Collier and Esteban (2007) noted that employee “buy-in” and collaboration is critical for companies to be able to successfully implement and deliver on CSR. As they argued, “it is employees—rather than the board or the consultancy firms—who carry the main burned of responsibility for implementing ethical corporate behavior in the daily working life of the company” (pp. 19-20). Therefore, corporations should take into consideration the motivation as well as commitment that drive employees to deliver on CSR (Collier & Esteban, 2007). Following Powell (2011), such focus has been considered necessary from an alignment point of view as well. Indeed, both scholars and practitioners have regarded employee and corporate identity alignment as critical for companies to “gain their employees’ full commitment” (Powell, 2011, p. 1371). Hence, such process can help “in nurturing the right kind of beliefs behind a CSR initiative internally, and in designing the appropriate kind of ethical climate conducive for fostering such beliefs within the ethical corporate identity” (p. 1371).

Next to employee perceptions, attitudes, and commitment, another common research topic in CSR scholarship focusing on employees has come from strategic communication and public relations literature, focusing on the questions related to employee participation, employee engagement, and internal strategic communication. While there are notable differences between employee participation and employee engagement, and what each of these two concepts may concern (see e.g., Hallberg & Schaufeli, 2006), scholars studying both employee engagement and employee participation in CSR have commonly emphasized strategic benefits of such “positive
attachment to work” (Hallberg & Schaufeli, 2006, p. 120). For instance, Godkin (2015) studied how middle manager and employee engagement in CSR may lead to more “reliable” and “sustainable” CSR. Such generation of CSR, as she argued, lies in the ways employees voice their concerns in regard to CSR (both positive and negative), and the ability of management to pick up on those cues. Differently, Chen and Hung-Baesecke (2014) approached employee CSR participation from a leadership perspective. They argued that employee participation in CSR means that CSR becomes “a part of the organization’s actions deriving from its culture or values” rather than “an outcome of external pressure” (p. 211).

A considerable number of studies have also looked into strategic CSR communication and employees, broadly. For instance, Morsing et al. (2008) distinguished between “outside-in” and “inside-out” approaches to CSR communication, arguing that by taking the latter approach to CSR communication employees may be more inclined to display commitment and support for organizational policies, practices, and programs concerning CSR. In a similar manner, Nielsen and Thomsen’s (2009a) study showed that Danish small and medium size companies are likely to adopt “inside-out” approach, since managers feel more close to their employees. Similarly, other studies have looked into the ways strategic CSR communication can enhance and strengthen employees’ commitment to and relationship with their organization (e.g., Hoeven & Verhoeven, 2013; Santhosh & Baral, 2015).

Last but not least, scholars have observed how organizations communicate about their employees, or specific CSR issues that concern employees, in their formal CSR communication. For instance, employing a critical–interpretive lens, Mäkelä (2013)
analyzed how organizations talk about employees in their corporate reports using specific ideological strategies. Andreu, Casado-Diaz, and Mattila (2015) studied the effects that employee-based CSR initiatives have on consumers, comparing them to environmental-based CSR initiatives. Their study suggested that consumers pay less attention to CSR communication concerned with employees and their wellbeing (e.g., employee support and diversity). While the scope of such research is rather limited, these studies nevertheless raise important questions concerning what organizational texts may say about employees in regards to CSR, and whom these organizational texts actually target.

To conclude, scholarship on employees and CSR seems to be primarily concerned with employee attitudes toward, perceptions of, and commitment to CSR, with a major emphasis on strategic aspects of communication pertaining to CSR that are rooted in the ideas of consistency and control (Schultz et al., 2013). From a metatheoretical stance, CSR scholars commonly use postpositivist lens to approach communication as a “conduit metaphor” (Ashcraft et al., 2009; Craig, 1999). While critical studies on CSR and employees focusing on dissensus and issues of power seem to be on the rise, localities of such complexities and tensions from an “emergent” rather than “a priori” view of social discourse (Deetz, 2001, p. 11) are yet to be explored. As such, premodern and postmodern orientations to communication (Deetz, 2001) prevalent in dialogic and interpretive approaches to CSR (May, 2011) offer unique opportunities not only to explore new ways, but also to challenge the current ways in which we study CSR and employees.
2.5.2 Theoretical and Empirical Gaps

The literature presented above points to several gaps in communication literature concerning CSR and employees. This section addresses some of the main theoretical and empirical gaps that I consider particularly relevant and important for the expansion of the body of knowledge of CSR and employees.

To begin with, literature on CSR and employees primarily adopts the instrumental view of communication, emphasizing strategic benefits, and thus, consistency, consensus, and control in communication pertaining to CSR (Schoeneborn & Trittin, 2013; Schultz et al, 2013). As such, communication is often seen as transmission tool or technique through which organization can disseminate information about its CSR programs and practices to their employees (Schoeneborn & Trittin, 2013). While the constructive and constitutive perspectives on communication are gaining interest in CSR research (e.g., Schoeneborn & Trittin, 2013; Wehmeier & Schultz, 2011), there are few studies that specifically focus on employees. However, as I discussed in the previous sections, there is a considerable value in going beyond instrumental approaches to accept the notion that communication concerning CSR is essentially dynamic, conflicting, and polyphonic (Schultz et al., 2013). As suggested by May (2011), interpretive approach to can help provide a deeper understanding of how employees make sense of CSR—that is, the “insider’s view” (p. 96). In addition, formative approach has the potential to challenge consistency bias (Schultz et al., 2013) in communication pertaining to CSR by delving deeper into questions of what may be the role of organizational members, especially employees, in turning CSR words into CSR actions (Christensen & Cheney, 2011;
Christensen et al., 2013), and what might be the consequences of such actions for organization and its CSR as a whole.

Despite the fact that the importance of employees in CSR has been acknowledged, there is still little empirical evidence of what role do employees play in CSR, and where their importance may lay when it comes to communicating CSR (May, 2011). Empirical studies concerned with employee importance in CSR primarily draw on managerial and leadership perceptions and insights, asking questions about what CSR communication strategies might work best within organizational settings. Thereby, the focus remains to be on management and leadership processes (e.g., Angus-Leppan et al., 2010; Morsing et al., 2008; Nielsen & Thomsen, 2009a). Insights into the integration of employees in organizational CSR, and what could that mean for both organization and its internal stakeholders (Crane & Glozer, 2016), along with how organizational CSR talk could affect employee everyday work and meanings that they construct concerning CSR (May, 2011), are underexplored. With a few exceptions (e.g., Costas & Kärreman, 2013; Du et al., 2015; O’Connor et al., 2016), questions like to what extent are employees actually involved in CSR (Christensen & Cheney, 2011), and whether employees even care about CSR (e.g., Rodrigo & Arenas, 2008), get rarely asked.

Furthermore, there is little understanding of how CSR is brought into being in, and through, employee everyday social interactions (May, 2011). Scholars have suggested that individual or micro level of CSR, such as individual interactions and individual actions, in particular, as to why individuals take part in organizational CSR, has been generally understudied (e.g., Aguilera, Rupp, Williams, & Ganapathi, 2007; Aguinis & Glavas, 2012; Rupp, Ganapathi, Aguilera, & Williams, 2006; Rupp &
Mallory, 2015). To add more, current studies that aim to understand organizational members’ social constructions of CSR have rarely addressed both individual and organization level of analysis at which meaning negotiation of CSR may occur. For instance, Štumberger and Golob’s (2016) study of how employees make sense of CSR primarily concerns the individual level of sensemaking, however, with limited implications for sensemaking of CSR at the collective level. Greater focus on social processes in, and through, which negotiation of meanings of CSR occurs at various levels of analysis (individual, collective) could provide a richer understanding of the underlying dynamics of such communication processes, and their (de)constructive effects and complexities (Christensen & Cheney, 2011; Golob et al., 2013). An illustrative example of such attempt is Humphreys and Brown’s (2008) study on shared narratives through which employees try to make sense of issues that concern organizational CSR.

Last but not least, there is a limited understanding of the interplay between employee constructions of CSR and the ways these constructions are affected by, and negotiated against, what is being communicated in regard to CSR in organizational texts (e.g., corporate statements, strategies, programs, values, etc.). Previous studies have pointed to polyphony of meanings and values that employees associate with CSR (e.g., Gurney & Humphreys, 2006; Humphreys & Brown, 2008; Štumberger & Golob, 2016). This nevertheless suggests that CSR is not only highly contested (Okoye, 2009), but fostered in, and through, organizational micropractices as “value-laden” (Deetz, 2003, 2007). Drawing on Deetz (2003, 2007), it is then not a question of whether values matter in CSR, but rather whose and what values matter. Accordingly, a better understanding of multiple meanings and values, and their inclusiveness in daily corporate practices,
provides an opportunity to learn more about communication processes in which conflict and dissensus, rather than consensus and consistency, may work as a springboard for organizational and social change (Christensen et al., 2015a; Deetz, 2003, 2007; May, 2011; Schultz et al., 2013). For instance, a closer look into these questions could provide greater insights into whether and how organizations’ aspirational CSR talk may be reflected in the ways employees make sense of CSR, both individually and collectively (Christensen et al., 2013).

To sum up, there is a need for both empirical and theoretical insights into the processes in, and through, which employees construct and negotiate meanings of CSR, and values attached to those meanings, both individually and collectively, in order to unpack potential tensions and complexities in such meaning negotiation processes. As I present in the following paragraphs, these considerations do not only pose critical questions about the constructive potential of communication pertaining to CSR but also its formative and constitutive potentials, thereby, raising important questions concerning the very agency in, and ownership of, CSR.

2.5.3 The Constructive and Constitutive Potential of Communication in CSR

In order to further theorize CSR as communication with special focus on employees, I explore the constructive, formative, and constitutive potential of communication concerning CSR. Specifically, I draw on the ideas of three theoretical perspectives: organizational sensemaking, speech act theory, and the communicative constitution of organization (CCO) perspective. The ideas of sensemaking, speech acts, and organizational discourse are central to the Montreal School of CCO (see Taylor in Schoeneborn, Blaschke, Cooren, McPhee, Seidl, & Taylor, 2014). I suggest that the main
premises about reenactment (e.g., Taylor & Van Every, 2000) and non-human agency
(e.g., Cooren, 2010) can be particularly useful to explore the role of employees and their
talk in CSR. Namely, they may challenge to what extent employees, communication
wise, actually *act* as opposed to are being *acted upon* in regard to CSR (Cooren, 2000).
Whereas each of these perspectives provides a rather unique “way of looking at the world
and making sense of it” (Crotty, 1998, p. 8), together they inform the *theoretical
framework* of this study. As such, this framework serves as “a general viewpoint” that is
applicable to various cases, yet particular in the sense that details observed and analyzed
in this study “can only be given a *local explanation*” (Alasuutari, 1996, p. 377; italics in
original).

2.5.3.1 *Sensemaking Perspective*

Scholars have increasingly recognized *sensemaking* (Weick, 1979, 1995; Weick
et al., 2005) as a useful framework that can help provide a deeper understanding of how
social phenomena such as CSR are brought into being through the interplay of various
voices and actors (e.g., Angus-Leppan et al., 2010; Basu & Palazzo, 2008; Cramer, van
der Heijden, & Jonker, 2006; Golob, Johansen, Nielsen, & Podnar, 2014; Morsing &
Schultz, 2006; Nijhof & Jeurissen, 2006; Schultz & Wehmeier, 2010; Štumberger &
Golob, 2016; van der Heijden et al., 2010; Wehmeier & Schultz, 2011). For instance,
Morsing and Schultz (2006) saw sensemaking and sensegiving⁴ as integral parts of two-way symmetric communication (see Grunig & Hunt, 1984) where various stakeholders participate in co-construction of CSR. They proposed a stakeholder involvement strategy that does not impose “a particular CSR initiative on stakeholders,” but rather “invites concurrent negotiation with its stakeholders to explore their concerns vis-à-vis the company, while also accepting changes when they are necessary” (p. 328).

What this implies is that not only is sensemaking essentially social and communicational (Weick, 1995; Weick et al., 2005); rather, what is central to this idea is chaos (ambiguity⁵) that people try to make sense of in what Weick (2012) called “a diagnostic process directed at constructing plausible interpretations of ambiguous cues that are sufficient to sustain action” (pp. 55-56; italics added). In other words, as discussed by Taylor and Van Every (2000):

The sensemaking, to the extent that involves communication, takes place in interactive talk and draws on the resources of language in order to formulate and exchange through talk (or in other media such as graphics) symbolically encoded representations in these circumstances. As this occurs, a situation is talked into existence and the basis is laid for action to deal with. (p. 58)

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⁴ Morsing and Schultz (2006) draw on Gioia and Chittipeddi’s (1991) distinction between sensemaking and sensegiving in the context of strategic change. According to the latter authors, sensemaking is “meaning construction and reconstruction by the involved parties as they attempt to develop a meaningful framework for understanding the nature of intended strategic change,” whereas sensegiving refers to “the process of attempting to influence the sensemaking and meaning construction of others toward a preferred redefinition of organizational reality” (p. 442). By opening up to external stakeholders, Morsing and Schultz (2006) suggests that it is not only managers and employees but also other stakeholders who engage in the processes of sensemaking and sensegiving of CSR.

⁵ While in his theorizing, Weick (1979, 1995) makes a clear distinction between concepts of uncertainty, equivocality, and ambiguity, in this study I use the latter two interchangeably to refer to “multiple interpretations of the same event” that cause “confusion” (see also Miller, 2005; Putnam & Sorenson, 1982; Weick et al., 2005). As such, ambiguity is not “an attribute of messages” (p. 229), but it involves multiple “contextual cues that allow for multiple interpretations on the part of receivers” (p. 230) (Eisenberg, 1984).
Such a way of organizing to “sustain action” (Weick, 2012, pp. 55-56) is critical in ambiguous situations. According to Weick et al. (2005), uncertainty leads people to try to carve out and invent new meanings and interpretations for what has already occurred during the very organizing process, but may have not yet been recognized as such by individuals who are involved in this process. Through such “noticing” and “bracketing,” people use mental models to label, differentiate, and classify (that is, simplify and stabilize) their experiences (Weick et al., 2005). Thereby, new meanings and interpretations “emerge from retrospect, connections with past experience, and dialogue among people who act on behalf of larger units” (Weick et al., 2005, p. 413). Following Cornelissen, Mantere, and Vaara (2014), sensemaking is then also about the use of frames—that is, “socially learnt structures of reference” (Holt & Cornelissen, 2014, p. 526)—as the action unfolds. They explained:

A general characteristic of sensemaking is that the world does not present itself directly in its ‘raw form’; rather, individuals actively construct it using available cognitive frames that ground their perceptions, thoughts, and behavioural actions (Cornelissen and Clarke, 2010; Maitlis and Sonenshein, 2010; Weick et al., 2005). The implication is that the ability of individuals in organizations to either fail or succeed in their coordinated actions depends on the way in which they, individually and collectively, cognitively frame and potentially reframe their circumstances as a basis for action (Taylor and Van Every, 2000; Weick, 1993a, 1993b, 1995). (Cornelissen et al., 2014, pp. 699-700)

Given such characteristics, a sensemaking perspective can be particularly useful to explore social processes through, and in, which organizational members (employees, managers, leaders) construct and negotiate meanings of CSR (Angus-Leppan et al., 2010; Basu & Palazzo, 2008; Štumberger & Golob, 2016). Thus, sensemaking does not only help uncover how organizational members construct meanings to cope with ambiguity
around CSR, and to make better sense of their organizational surroundings, situations, and practices, as well as their selves (Angus-Leppan et al., 2010; Eisenberg, 1998; Eisenberg, 2006; Schoeneborn & Vásquez, forthcoming; Weick, 1995).

Indeed, sensemaking is also the process of interaction through which identities get constituted (Weick, 1995). Drawing on Weick’s work, Mills (2003) defined identity construction as “the individual actor’s need for affirmation, that a person will be influenced in a ‘reading’ of events by what light this shines on his or her sense of being” (p. 126). Yet, it is worthy of mention that “in an equivocal, postmodern world, infused with the politics of interpretation and conflicting interests” (p. 61), sensemaking may also be an issue of negotiating among multiple and shifting identities (Weick, 1995). As noted by Mills, Thurlow, and Mills (2010):

According to this property, who we are and what factors have shaped our lives influence how we see the world. Our identity is continually being redefined as a result of experiences and contact with others, for example, parents, friends, religion, where we went to school, where we work and what type of job we do all affect how we view certain situations. (p. 184)

In other words, identity construction can be viewed a continuum of “making sense of the sensemaker” (Mills et al., 2010, p. 184) through which individuals, such as employees, are able to construct their sense of self with respect to CSR (Eisenberg, 1998; Weick et al., 2005).

Furthermore, sensemaking may also provide a better insight into the very processes of organizing or enactment\(^6\) of CSR (Dobusch & Schoeneborn, 2015; Weick et al., 2005).

\(^6\)The main idea of enactment is that “knowledge, information, and understanding never occur outside a context of acting, and that people, singly or in collaboration, are not bystanders, passively observing the world around the, but participants, actively shaping what they in turn respond to” (Taylor & Van Every, 2000, p. 244; see also Weick, 1979, 1995; Weick et al., 2005).
al., 2005). Focusing on CSR as a societal narrative, Wehmeier and Schultz (2011) for instance noted that “CSR can be regarded as an outcome of organizational and societal stories and narrations on organizational responsibility: CSR itself is a societal narrative that is enacted within public discourse: corporations not only create own CSR stories (sensegiving); at the same time they try to make sense narratively out of the concept itself” (p. 477). Seeing sensemaking as a process that brings an organization and its CSR into being, then, “suggests that patterns of organizing are located in the actions and conversations that occur on behalf of the presumed organization and in the texts of those activities that are preserved in social structures” (Weick et al., 2005, p. 413; italics added).

While for Weick (1979, 1995) sensemaking is always a process of organizing, it is necessary to distinguish between individual and collective approaches to sensemaking (Barge & Fairhurst, 2008). Individual sensemaking refers to how “individuals make sense of situations through the internal conversations they have with themselves and the external conversations they have with others” (Barge & Fairhurst, 2008, pp. 237-238). On the other hand, collective sensemaking can be described as “how groups and organizations manage sensemaking in their d/Discourse” (Barge & Fairhurst, 2008, pp. 237-238). While in both types of sensemaking the social nature of this process is being emphasized, such nuances require a careful consideration in regard to empirical investigation of sensemaking of single individuals (e.g., through one-on-one interviews with employees) and sensemaking of multiple individuals (e.g., through studying social interactions that occur among employees), simultaneously.
As I discuss more thoroughly in the next sections, the above considerations are critical in exploring how CSR words may become CSR actions—and by whom. Thus, as emphasized by Taylor and Van Every (2000), in the process of sensemaking, communication can accomplish two things:

[...] the mapping of (a) circumstances to frame knowledge in order to produce an epistemic interpretation of the state of affairs that characterizes the situation that participants are in, and of (b) conversation exchanges to construction knowledge in order to produce a deontic interpretation of what is to be done and who is to do it. (p. 59)

Accordingly, this study is based on the premise that, first, sensemaking helps to explore how employees make sense of CSR as a concept, and thereby legitimate their companies as socially responsible more generally (e.g., Štumberger & Golob, 2016). Second, sensemaking perspective can also provide a better understanding of how employees experience ambiguity around CSR in terms of their own involvement, expectations, and ownership in regard to CSR—this is, those aspects of current literature concerning employees and CSR that have oftentimes been taken for granted—, by taking into account how communication concerning CSR makes people to “do things” (Taylor & Van Every, 2000, p. 59). However, as I explain below, the concern with getting someone to do something is not only an important aspect of organizational sensemaking, but is also central to speech act theory (Taylor & Van Every, 2000).

### 2.5.3.2 Speech Act Theory

Speech act theory originates with J. L. Austin, who was among the first scholars and philosophers who systematically addressed the performative (also referred to as formative) potential of communication (Cooren, 2000). According to Austin (1962/1975),
“to utter the sentences [...] is not to describe my doing of what I should be said in so uttering to be doing or to state that I am doing it: it is to do it” (p. 6; italics in original). Based on the premise that language does not only describe but can also do things, Austin called such utterances *performative sentences* (or *performative utterances*) due to having the ability to *perform* some kind of action or event.

While there are numerous definitions of what *action* may mean (see Cooren, 2010), in Austin’s view (1962/1975), there are various conditions that must be met for a performative utterance to become action: conventionality of speech procedure; participants involved; circumstances; and intentions, thoughts, and feelings before and after the act (see also Cooren, 2000). According to Austin (1962/1975), failing to meet those rules, performative utterances would be “unhappy” (pp. 14-15). Thus, there are notable differences between acts of saying something (*locutionary act*), acts performed in saying something (*illocutionary act*), and act performed by saying something (*perlocutionary act*) (Austin, 1962/1975; Cooren, 2000).

Building on previous work, Searle (2002) provided a classification of speech acts, distinguishing between assertive, directive, commissive, expressive, and declarative types of speech acts. He suggested that “in the illocutionary line of business, there are fine, and only five, basic types of things one can do with language” (p. 6). Further, he explained:

One can tell people how things are (assertives); one can try to get them to things (directives); one can commit oneself to doing things (commissives); one can express one’s feelings and attitudes (expressives); and one can bring about changes in the world through one’s utterances (declarations). (Searle, 2002, p. 6)

For Searle, speech acts were “the primary units of meaning and communication in the use and comprehension of language” (Vanderveken, 2002, p. 141). In this sense, as
Vanderveken (2002) suggested, “Any meaningful utterance always consists of an attempt by the speaker to perform an illocutionary act at the moment of the utterance and that attempted performance is part of what that speaker means and intends to communicate to the hearer” (p. 141). From this perspective, intentionality—whether conscious or not—is viewed as essential to speech acts (Searle in Stoecker, 2002).

Interestingly, only in recent years speech act theory has been brought to attention with respect to the formative potential of communication concerning CSR (e.g., Christensen, Morsing, & Thyssen, 2010; Christensen & Cheney, 2011; Christensen et al., 2013; Schoeneborn & Trittin, 2013). Combining Austin’s ideas with some of the early writings on the constitutive view on communication (e.g., Taylor & Cooren, 1997; Taylor & Van Every, 2000), Christensen et al. (2013) argued that “Talk about plans and intentions with respect to CSR are actions just as actions in this area simultaneously speak” (p. 376). Moreover, they suggested: “Communication and action are intimately linked in all process of organizing, because saying is doing and because actions inevitably “speak”” (p. 376). Recognizing that the difference between CSR talk and CSR actions is in comparing “two different modes of communication” (p. 376), these scholars questioned how views of CSR words and CSR actions go against such talk–action link, what messages can bring about actions, and what may be other conditions under which words may lead to actions with respect to CSR—or “talk the organization out” of CSR (Christensen et al., 2013; see also Christensen, 2007).

In line with such thinking, speech act theory can be particularly valuable in the context of CSR because it can challenge scholars and practitioners in suggesting that the immediate discrepancy between CSR words and CSR actions may not necessarily be
viewed as a negative form of organizational hypocrisy (Brunsson, 1993), but rather as a positive aspiration for potential organizational and/or social change (Christensen et al., 2013). Nevertheless, such theoretical considerations also lead to considering CSR talk at more “local” levels, such as in critical accounts and circumstances in regard to employee potential in “walking CSR talk” (May, 2011). Indeed, opening the possibility that by employees talking (about) CSR they also do something in regard to CSR might reveal interesting insights into the very role of employees in CSR, communication wise. In the paragraphs that follow, I delve deeper into the constitutive view of communication with respect to CSR.

### 2.5.3.3 Communicative Constitution of Organization (CCO) Perspective

Although the idea of the constitutive view of communication is not new (see Axley, 1984; Craig, 1999), only in recent years what has become known as *communicative constitution of organization* (CCO) perspective has developed into a more distinctive (meta)theoretical lens (Ashcraft et al., 2009; Schoeneborn & Vasquez, forthcoming). The CCO perspective is based on the premise that it is through communication that organization comes into being and can be sustained (Cooren, Kuhn, Cornelissen, & Clark, 2011). While there are three schools of thought in CCO scholarship—the Montreal School of Organizational Communication, the Four Flows Model, and Luhmann’s Theory of Social Systems (see Schoeneborn et al., 2014)—, what is common to all CCO thinking is that communication is seen not as transmission within organization but what constitutes organization. Cooren et al. (2011) suggested:

[...] organizations can no longer be seen as objects, entities, or ‘social facts’ inside of which communication occurs. Organizations are portrayed, instead, as ongoing
and precarious accomplishments realized, experienced, and identified primarily—if not exclusively—in communication processes. (p. 1150)

What this means is that “organizations are understood first and foremost as communicative phenomena” (Schoeneborn et al., 2014, p. 286; italics added).

Although a constitutive perspective is closely related to the aforementioned constructive view of communication (Schoeneborn & Trittin, 2013), a distinction between construction and constitution should be put forward (Deetz & Eger, 2014). CCO scholars highlight not only symbolic but also material aspects of organization—that is, the importance of both human and nonhuman entities in bringing organization into being (Ashcraft et al., 2009; Schoeneborn et al., 2014). Communication then not only concerns human beings but also other things that people talk and write about or do (Taylor in Schoeneborn et al., 2014), like texts (e.g., Brummans, 2007), standards (e.g., Haack, Schoeneborn, & Wickert, 2012), attitudes (e.g., van Vuuren & Cooren, 2010), places (e.g., Wilhoit, 2015), and rituals (e.g., Koschmann & McDonald, 2015), to name a few.

Following such considerations, the CCO perspective then implies a rather unique understanding of CSR as “a communicative representation of the dynamic continuum of different and competing meanings and narrations about corporate roles in society” (Schultz et al., 2013, p. 658). According to Schoeneborn and Trittin (2013), there are four main arguments why the CCO perspective is relevant to study CSR. First, scholars who adopt CCO thinking believe that communication concerning CSR is often contradictory and dissonant, rather than equivalent and resonant, with other forms of communication that constitute an organization (Cooren et al., 2011, Schoeneborn & Trittin, 2013). Such dissonance can also be present in CSR communication as such. From this perspective, corporations can no longer “expect that the careful orchestration of one consistent and
coherent CSR message will result in the achievement of legitimacy across a variety of stakeholders” (Schultz et al., 2013, p. 658). Rather, following Schultz et al. (2013), CSR needs to be approached as an “enabler of corporate legitimacy [that] is interactively constituted in communication through ongoing and changing descriptions” (p. 658).

Second, in the CCO view, CSR communication is not necessarily seen as problematic when decoupling words from actions (Haack et al., 2012; Schoeneborn & Trittin, 2013). Drawing on speech act theorists, like Austin and Searle, CSR communication can itself be approached as (aspirational for) CSR action (Christensen et al., 2013). As Christensen (2007) noted, “the ways organizations talk about themselves and their practices are not neutral undertakings, but constitutive activities that contribute—through the articulation of ideals, values, and horizons—to the continuous enactment of organizational reality (Weick, 1979)” (p. 457). Or, as suggested by Schoeneborn and Trittin (2013):

On those grounds, corporations that engage in practices of CSR communication should not generally be accused of “decoupling” talk from action or of mere “green-washing” (e.g. Laufer, 2003), because CSR communication can at least trigger a “creeping” commitment to CSR practices over time (Christensen et al., 2010; Haack et al., 2012). (p. 194)

Third, in line with the CCO view, various stakeholders, including third parties, continuously co-create and co-negotiate CSR (Morsing & Schultz, 2006; Schoeneborn & Trittin, 2013; Schultz et al., 2013). As such, organizational boundaries are never clearly defined and stable, but instead “continuously (re-)established through communication (Luhmann, 2000; McPhee and Zaug, 2000)” (Schoeneborn & Trittin, 2013, p. 194). “Thus, the CCO view points out a direct connection between practices of CSR
communication and the fundamental question of boundary maintenance” (Schoeneborn & Trittin, 2013, p. 194).

Last but not least, the CCO thinking emphasizes that not only humans but also nonhumans constitute and stabilize organization (Schoeneborn & Trittin, 2013). Following Schoeneborn and Trittin (2013), this means that nonhuman entities (e.g., texts, standards, policies, processes, routines, etc.) can too have agency and responsibility in CSR communication. For instance, Haack et al.’s (2012) empirical study showed how CSR standards and interpretations of such practice as what they termed “moral entrapment” can help constitute organizational and social change by organizations and their members “talking themselves into a new reality” (p. 835) of doing their work. In other words:

[…] narratives that co-evolve with the diffusion and entrenchment of CR standards shed light on whether a formally adopted practice becomes infused with meaning beyond instrumental reason and on how it is gradually accepted, understood and enacted as the ‘natural way of doing’ things” (Haack et al., 2012, p. 817).

Taken together, the CCO view contributes to the understanding of CSR as communication by: (1) accepting the inconsistent, ongoing, and conflicting nature of CSR communication; (2) allowing the opportunity to view CSR words as essentially performative, and therefore, capable of furthering organizational and social change; (3) acknowledging that CSR communication exceeds organizational boundaries, and thus, blurs internal–external dimensions of CSR; and (4) recognizing that other forms of agency (that is, beyond human agency) too play a critical role in carrying out organizational CSR (Schoeneborn & Trittin, 2013).
Among various approaches within the CCO view (see Schoeneborn et al., 2014), this study draws primarily on the Montreal School and its main premises, while taking into account previous theoretical underpinning of sensemaking and speech act theory.

2.5.3.3.1 CSR Manifestation in Text and Conversation

Indeed, I follow the Montreal School of CCO thinking that emphasizes two manifestations of communication: textual dimension and conversational dimension (Ashcraft et al., 2009; Taylor, Cooren, Giroux, & Robichaud, 1996). While the former is considered to be more stable, and concerns how organization may be “identified and described through text,” the latter emphasizes the dynamic and constructive nature of communication, or how organization is “accomplished” and “experienced” in social interactions (Ashcraft et al., 2009, p. 20; italics in original; see also Taylor & Van Every, 2000). Such thinking is grounded in speech act theory presented previously, where representation can be seen as locution, and where action—or enactment, in Weick’s terms—can be approached as illocution (Taylor & Van Every, 2000). It also aligns with sensemaking perspective in that “intertwining of text and conversation turns circumstances into a situation that is comprehensible and that can then serve as a springboard for action” (Weick, 2012, p. 5).

Four main arguments that derive from the Montreal School are particularly relevant for this study, and thus require further elaboration. To begin with, I suggest that CSR action is first and foremost emergent in interpretation of such texts and conversations (Taylor et al., 1996). Second, I suggest that CSR action concerns making difference by those that have the capacity of appropriation and attribution of such action (Cooren, 2010). Here, the question of bringing individual voices into collective
(organizational) voice (Taylor & Cooren, 1997), and whether these are available to or inclusive of all organizational members, becomes critical. Finally, I follow the argument that not only humans but nonhumans too have agency in communication pertaining to CSR through which employees’ role in CSR need to be studied (Cooren, 2010; Haack et al., 2012; Schoeneborn & Trittin, 2013). In other words, employees may act socially responsible as much as they are acted upon organizational texts, practices, ideals, values, etc. that concern organizational CSR (Cooren, 2010). In the paragraphs that follow, these key premises are presented more closely.

2.5.3.3.2 CSR Action as Emergent in Interpretation

In academic literature, CSR actions have commonly been understood as a synonym for CSR practices or deeds (e.g., McWilliams & Siegel, 2001) that are distinct from CSR talk (that is, written or spoken words). In this study, all CSR action is viewed as necessarily “communicational” (Christensen et al., 2013; Taylor et al., 1996), whether in the form of deeds or in the form of talk concerning social responsibility of an organization. However, whereas communication is at the very core of action, it is important to acknowledge that not all communication is action.

I follow Cooren’s (2010) definition of action as “a transformation of state operated by an agent”7 (Cooren, 2010, p. 17; italics in original). Important to note is that action is never objective nor given but ongoing in its nature, and therefore, emerging (Taylor et al., 1996). As opposed to language, action follows the “unfolding” logic in that its accomplishment is “inherently sequential: initial stimulus to reaction to action to

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7 Following Taylor and Van Every (2000), agent is one who speaks on behalf of somebody or something else, whereas actor speaks only for herself or himself.
result” (Taylor et al., 1996, p. 11). What this suggests is that an essential component of action is *difference*. According to Cooren (2010): “Whenever one can identify someone who or something that makes a difference, whether in terms of activity or performance, there is action and agency”\(^8\) (p. 20). In line with the Montreal School of thought, the two central functions of communication—to represent and to act—can help us study action (Taylor et al., 1996):

> Representation is accomplished through the production and comprehension of text; action is mediated by text, but only when the text has been submitted to an interpretation. The text is not the action, but merely its token. The action unfolds interactively in the context of a conversation. Communication thus has two modalities: text and conversation. In the ongoing translation from one modality into another, context is crucial (because context supports, and is necessary to, the interpretation of the text, not as representation but as action). In such a field of interpretation, variability is inevitable. (p. 4)

This suggests that action cannot be observed but in *multiple interpretations* that people make in specific social contexts (Taylor et al., 1996). Bringing this discussion to a broader organizational level, organization is then “not in the activities as such, but in their interpretation” (Taylor et al., 1996, p. 4).

The notion that interpretations and articulations are ongoing is critical for seeing CSR action as emergent through and in communication (Taylor & Van Every, 2000; Weick, 2012). To elaborate further, interpretations become a necessary condition for action to unfold in that:

> […] working through of an interpretation is a social process […] by means of which members both come to understanding (however tentative) of what the

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\(^8\) Pragmatically, *agency* can be understood as: (a) action or instrumentality; and (b) acting on somebody’s behalf (Taylor & Van Every, 2000).
events mean, organizationally, while they simultaneously reconfirm their own positions in the network through the role they play in the interpretive process. (Taylor et al., 1996, p. 4)

Important to highlight in this passage is the word “organizationally,” that is, how do such interpretations work collectively. The answer might be found in Weick’s essay:

The resulting network of multiple, overlapping, loosely connected conversations, spread across time and distance, collectively preserves patterns of understanding that are more complicated than any one node can reproduce. […] This ongoing articulation gives *voice* to the collectivity and enables interconnected conversations and conversationalists to see what they have said, to understand what it might mean, and to learn who they might be. (p. 5; italics added)

Though, in order to understand how multiple interpretations and articulations may become “one voice of an organization” (Taylor & Cooren, 1997), it is important to look closely into the idea of *employee voice*, and to consider other forms of communication that too help constitute organization as socially responsible.

### 2.5.3.3 Employee Voice(s) as an Organization

Scholars have suggested that employees may raise and share their opinions, ideas, and information in order to confront, or improve, their organizations, or they remain silent about certain organizational issues when they have the opportunity to do so (Bashshur & Oc, 2015; Morrison, 2011; Van Dyne, Ang, & Botero, 2003). Hirschman (1970) argued that organizational members can take two alternative routes to express their dissatisfaction with management: either they exit or leave the organization, or they voice their opinions in a form of an expression or protest to whoever listens to them
(managers, leaders, or other individuals). Such employee expressions have been commonly referred to as *employee voice*.

According to Botero and Van Dyne (2009), voice is a “specific form of proactive employee behavior” that “emphasizes suggestions for change intended to benefit the group or organization” (p. 87). Others suggested that voice can also be active (responsive) (e.g., Morrison, 2011). For Hirschman (1970), *employee voice* is “any attempt at all to change, rather than to escape from, an objectionable state of affairs, whether through individual or collective petition to the management directly in charge, through appeal to a higher authority with the intention of forcing a change in management, or through various types of actions and protests, including those that are meant to mobilize public opinion” (p. 30). Two key characteristics are worthwhile to highlight here. First is the idea of change (or making a difference) discussed previously, as to what defines action (Cooren, 2010), and second is the notion that employee voice can occur in different forms and at different levels, both within and outside the organization (Farndale, Van Ruiten, Kelliher, & Hope-Hailey, 2011).

However, in considering communication pertaining to CSR at collective rather than solely individual level, a critical question becomes how multiple employee voices “of a (loosely defined) collectivity come to be the one voice of the (now clearly boundaried) social unit” (Taylor et al., 1996, p. 26). In other words, how can multiple employee voices help constitute their organization as socially responsible? Taylor et al. (1996) provide the following answer in response to such a communication challenge:

> Until it finds a voice, the collectivity is merely a congeries of interests and preoccupations; it is not yet an organization. The key term here is voice. It becomes an organization at the moment that an agent is authorized to speak in its
name. Then, and only then, is it clearly differentiated from other actors. Only by the ability to participate in interaction as a recognized voice is identity achieved. Until organization has an agent recognized as acting for it, it remains a diffuse, unrealized potential. (p. 26)

Following this argument, two conditions in particular need to be met in order for multiple and diffused employee voices can give voice to organization: (1) becoming *authorized agents* to speak on the organization’s behalf, and (2) having the *opportunity* to do so (Taylor et al., 1996). Such “symbolic construction” then results in organization not only becoming “the scene of the action, it is itself an actor” (Taylor & Van Every, 2000, p. 210). In the next section, I further explain *ownership* as key to *action* and *agency* in CSR.

2.5.3.3.4 CSR Ownership

The term *action* is often perceived as having to do with *intention* (e.g., Austin, 1962/1975; Searle, 2002), and thus, aimed to achieve specific goals or results (Cooren, 2010). For Cooren (2010), such thinking is problematic. Namely, as he argued, *intentional action* implies that people are in *control* over what is happening when they act:

As actors, we indeed prefer to think that we are in control of what we do. What we call our actions, that is, what should be *proper* to us, usually is what we are aiming to for, what we want to obtain, what we intend to do. Intentionality therefore appears to have a lot to do with appropriation in that an intentional action is what I will tend to attribute myself in a chain of agency I appeared to initiate. (Cooren, 2010, pp. 24-25; italics in original)

What one can learn from this passage is that, rather than solely intention, Cooren (2010) emphasizes the idea of *appropriation* as central to action. In other words, it is in those appropriations that something (or someone) can make a difference (i.e., action).
While Cooren (2010) equates “to appropriate” with “to make mine” and “to claim ownership” (pp. 24-25), it is worthwhile to note that such operationalization is quite different from a more traditional understanding of organizational ownership (also referred to as employee ownership). In psychology literature, ownership has been commonly viewed as an objective and formal state that exists outside individuals’ “minds, values, and symbols” (Pierce & Rodgers, 2004). Yet, for Pierce and Rodgers (2004) such operationalization is inadequate. Drawing on Pierce, Kostova, and Dirks (2001), they argued that ownership “reflects that state where an object (material or immaterial in nature) is experienced as part of the extended self—it is based on feeling of possessiveness and being psychologically tied to the target of ownership” (p. 596; italics added). In other words, ownership is the possessive feelings of an employee that the object, idea, or entity is “mine” or “ours” (Van Dyne & Pierce, 2004).

Such feelings can be closely related to employee attitudes toward, and employee sense of responsibility for, the object, idea, or entity, as well as to employee sense of self (self-concept) (Van Dyne & Pierce, 2004). However, as Van Dyne and Pierce (2004) suggested, one should be careful not to confuse psychological ownership with other work-related attitudes. Psychological ownership “has unique explanatory power because its conceptual core is feelings of possession that trigger affect-driven behaviors” (p. 442). What this means is that such “emotional attachment,” directed either toward the organization as a whole, or its aspects (group, job, work, etc.), “transcends the mere cognitive evaluation of the firm” (p. 442).

From a communication point of view, however, sense of responsibility is particularly critical to take into consideration in studying employee ownership. While in
his essay on action and agency, Cooren (2010) does not provide a very clear definition of responsibility, his concern lies with ethical implications of actions. First, the question of responsibility becomes important when we start to ask ourselves why we did something, or what were the reasons that led us to certain action (Cooren, 2010). Second, what happens with responsibility, if we say “something or someone made us do something” (Cooren, 2010, p. 68)? Third, sense of responsibility also becomes important in instances when action is shared (Cooren, 2010). Thus, sharing of action or agency with someone does not mean “deresponsibilization” (p. 117) of the person acting in a certain way, because there are other conditions at play (such as rules, rights, obligations, authority, etc.) that hold an individual responsible for her or his action (Cooren, 2010).

Regarding employees, an interesting question then becomes how ownership plays out in employee sensemaking concerning their own role and responsibility in CSR. Moreover, to what extent may employees get acted upon by other agencies, rather than act, with respect to their organization’s CSR, and how do they discursively appropriate those actions? This leads me to the next premise; namely, that nonhuman entities are as important in communication that brings an organization and its CSR into being as are human entities (Schoeneborn & Trittin, 2013).

2.5.3.3.5 Nonhuman Agency in CSR Communication

According to Latour (2010), “when “we” speak many other voices are speaking as well” (p. xiii). The idea of taking into account other voices that come into play as we speak then forces us to (re)consider where the origins of agency may lie, and what is that “makes that agent speak and act” (Latour, 2010, p. xiv; italics in original). Despite the fact that action has been commonly attached to humans only, in recent years the
importance of *nonhuman agency* has been put forward (e.g., Cooren, 2010; Latour, 1987, 2010; Schoeneborn et al., 2014). Cooren (2010) suggested that taking into account “nonhuman contributions in a given action” (p. 22) is critical, as it “allows us to decenter our analysis and show that people are acted upon as much as they act” (p. 22). An illustrative example can be found in Brummans’s (2007) reflections upon, and theorizing of, how a seemingly simple text (i.e., euthanasia declaration) has become an important agent affecting how individuals made sense of and (re)constructed a difficult situation (i.e., death of a beloved person). Indeed, acknowledging nonhuman agency can also help us recognize that “*we share our actions and/or activities with others*” (Cooren, 2010, p. 23; italics in original), including nonhuman entities. In other words, when actions are shared, rather than independent and autonomous, each agent “contributes in its own way to what happens, which means […] that each of them *does something*” (Cooren, 2010, p. 23; italics in original).

Considering employees as actors who, through their talk, have the potential of bringing organization and its CSR into being, two concepts in particular are worthwhile to discuss. First is the idea of a *spokesperson*—or an *advocate*, as used later in this study. In his compelling work on how science works, Latour (1987) introduced the term spokesperson as “someone who speaks for others who, or which, do not speak” (p. 71). According to him, a spokesperson’s strength “comes from the representatives’ word when they do not talk by and for themselves but *in the presence of* what they represent” (p. 72; italics in original). What this means is that only in such situations “the dissenter is

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9 In public relations literature, *spokesperson* can be defined as an individual working in public relations practice who is authorized to publicly represent and speak on behalf of an organization, movement, association, or another individual (PR dictionary, n.d.; Schriner, 2008). To avoid confusion, this study instead uses the term *advocate* to refer to the abovementioned ideas of speaking, and thus acting, on behalf of somebody else (Cooren, 2010; Latour, 1987; Taylor & Van Every, 2000).
confronted simultaneously with the spokesperson and what they speak for” (p. 72; italics in original). Yet, Latour (1987) admitted that such communication event is far more complex:

Who is speaking? The things or the people through the representative’s voice? What does she (or he, or they, or it) say? Only what the things they represent would say if they could talk directly. But the point is that they cannot. So what the dissenter sees is, in practice, rather different from what the speaker says. (p. 73)

Latour suggested that this is problematic, not only from the standpoint of the extent to which those who are represented actually get represented by those who represent them, but also from the point of view that such communication implies critical questions of power and control. Thus, things may carry as much power as do people who are the authors of claims in question, which suggests that one should not “impose any clear distinction between ‘things’ and ‘people’ in advance” (Latour, 1987, p. 72). This leads us to the second idea: a principal. One of the main arguments of the Montreal scholars is that “communication implies not only an agent and a recipient but also that an agent is always acting on behalf of, in the name of, or for someone or something else (that is, a principal)” (Taylor in Schoeneborn et al., 2014, pp. 289-290).

Taken together, the above premises help to extend our understanding of agency in, and ownership of, CSR by acknowledging that not only humans (i.e., employees) but nonhumans too can have agency in CSR (Schoeneborn & Trittin, 2013). Such thinking allows for possibility that in CSR organizational members, such as employees, may act as much as they may “react to agencies of totally different size and energy” (Latour, 2010, p. xvi; italics in original; see also Cooren, 2010). As such, CSR action becomes a question of multiple interpretations that people make in, and through, communication
(Taylor et al., 1996), involving multiple agents (and principals) that help to unfold and sustain such action (Cooren, 2010; Koschmann & McDonald, 2015; Weick, 2012).

2.5.4 Research Problem and Research Questions

In the preceding sections, I have reviewed the literature that addresses the missing link between CSR and employees employing different (meta)theoretical perspectives on this topic. Based on this review, I have argued that despite the general importance of (future and current) employees in CSR being highlighted (e.g., Morsing et al., 2008; O’Connor et al., 2016), understanding of why, how, and when employees matter in CSR as communication is underexplored. Particularly, questions addressing the very role that employees may play in bringing CSR into being are yet to be uncovered, both theoretically and empirically. In this present section, I take the opportunity to bring to light specific research questions that this study addresses, taking into account the above mentioned ontological and epistemological premises rooted in the constructive and constitutive views of communication.

To begin with, this study looks into meanings that employees construct and negotiate with respect to CSR, both generally as well as concerning their respective companies and their selves. Such focus on employee sensemaking is inspired and motivated by previous research that suggests that meanings of CSR, and values that employees attach to those meanings, are not only contested but also polyphonic and context-sensitive (e.g., Gurney & Humphreys, 2006; Humphreys & Brown, 2008; Štumberger & Golob, 2016). Doing so, I also respond to May’s (2011) call to better locate “how employees account for and “take up” CSR in their day-to-day work lives” (p.
I pose the following research question to aid in a better understanding of such meaning negotiation processes among employees:

*RQ1: How do participants construct meanings of CSR?*

Second, I look beyond the constructive nature of employee communication concerning CSR to explore its constitutive potential, specifically, with respect to the questions of agency in, and ownership of, CSR. As suggested previously, I allow for possibility to study employees as agents in CSR as much as the ones who react to other CSR agencies in various ways, communicatively (Latour, 2010). Additionally, I also interrogate Morsing et al.’s (2008) argument that unless employees develop a “sense of ownership” of CSR, they might not display commitment and support for organizational CSR. Following these considerations, my next research question reads:

*RQ2: How do agency and ownership emerge in employee CSR talk?*

Third, while answers to my first research question can provide interesting insights into how meanings of CSR are constructed by employees, individually, they might be limited in that they cannot fully capture how meanings of CSR are negotiated among employees. I propose that looking into how CSR as a social phenomenon comes into being through social interactions (Allen, 2005; Crotty, 1998) among organizational members simultaneously may provide a richer understanding of employee CSR talk as an ongoing reproduction of an organization and its CSR (Schoeneborn & Trittin, 2013). In addition, capturing how CSR is “talked into being” through, and in, organizational members’ interactions may reveal complexities and tensions between individual and shared understandings of CSR, and how corporate CSR talk may reflect and/or affect employees’ sensemaking of CSR (Basu & Palazzo, 2008; Humphreys & Brown, 2008;
May, 2011; Weick, 1995). As discussed by Grant et al. (2004), “everyday attitudes and behavior of an organization’s members, along with their perceptions of what they believe to be reality, are shaped and influenced by the discursive practices in which they engage in to which they are exposed and subjected” (p. 3). Accordingly, I propose the following research question:

*RQ3: How do participants co-construct meanings of their company’s CSR vis-à-vis their roles?*

Finally, this study responds to recent calls to study complexities not only in employee communication pertaining to CSR as such, but also between what organization and its members communicate and what they actually do with regard to their CSR (Christensen et al., 2013). Since not all CSR-related communication has the potential to become CSR action, Christensen et al. (2013) suggested that scholars should take a closer look into conditions that determinate when and how organizations can live up to CSR aspirations that they communicate about. While employees are commonly perceived as having a unique ability and potential to live up, and carry out, organizational CSR practices, programs, strategies, etc. (e.g., Morsing et al., 2008), there is a need to explore under which circumstances, and in which contexts, this may occur (Christensen et al., 2013). Thus, one must remain critical of when employees are expected to be involved in CSR, and when they actually can choose to be involved in CSR (Christensen, 2007). This leads me to the final research question of this study:

*RQ4: How are employees constructed in corporate CSR talk?*

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10 Drawing on Mäkelä (2013), I define corporate CSR talk as “all forms of corporate communication” (p. 361) that pertain to CSR. Corporate communication does not represent solely an individual, managerial mindset, but is “shared and kept alive by many different actors inside and outside the organization” (Christensen & Cornelissen, 2011, p. 365).
Taken together, these research questions aim to uncover “localities” in communication concerning CSR (May, 2011), taking into account its constructive and constitutive potential, and with a critical eye on employees.

2.5.5 Operationalization of Relevant Concepts

2.5.5.1 Employees

While employees can be defined, broadly, as a group of individuals who work for a specific organization, such operationalization may be problematic in CSR research. Thus, there may be considerable differences among employees who work at different hierarchical levels and hold different positions within the organization, and the ways these individuals perceive, communicate, and/or carry out CSR (May & Roper, 2014). Furthermore, recent studies suggest that employee experiences with, and understandings of CSR, may not only vary significantly among employees, but that meanings of CSR that employees construct can also be contested, polyphonic, and conflicting (e.g., Costas & Kärreman, 2013; Humphreys & Brown, 2008; Štumberger & Golob, 2016).

However, a brief look into CSR literature reveals that employees are often viewed as speaking with one voice only (Cheney & Christensen, 2001a; Rodrigo & Arenas, 2008). Even in public relations scholarship that has traditionally been concerned with distinct types of publics (e.g., Grunig & Repper, 1992), there has been relatively little recognition of differences among employees; meaning, employees have been commonly studied as a single public (L’Etang, 2005). Public relations scholars have used the term internal publics to refer to “groups of people inside the organization: supervisors, administrative assistants, clerks, and other staff members” (Sowa, 2013, p. 466), often
with little consideration of whom these different employee groups may concern, and how one can differentiate among employees.

Similarly, in studies employing stakeholder theory, employees have commonly been described as a stakeholder group who share “similar interests, claims, or rights” (Clarkson, 1995, p. 106). Not surprisingly, however, the question of who (or what) counts as stakeholder has long been debated. For instance, Mitchell, Agle, and Wood (1997) noted that “Persons, groups, neighbourhoods, organizations, institutions, societies, and even the natural environment are [all] generally thought to quality as actual or potential stakeholders” (p. 885). At the same time, scholars also offered a range of narrower definitions to suggest who (or what) qualifies as a stakeholder (see Clarkson, 1995; Freeman, 1984; Freeman et al., 2007; Mitchell et al., 1997). For instance, McVea and Freeman (2005) emphasized the importance of treating stakeholders, such as employees, as unique “human beings with names, faces and families” (p. 67), and not as a nameless and faceless group. The latter is especially relevant when dealing with small companies, where relationships tend to be less formal and more personal (Spence, 2016).

In this study, I follow Mäkelä’s (2013) argument that meanings of employees “are diverse and their implications more far-reaching than any simple conception may imply” (p. 360). In line with my metatheoretical lens, I acknowledge that the term employees is a social construct, whereby employee attributes too are socially constructed (Mitchell et al., 1997). For operationalization of employees as primary focus of this study is needed, I draw on Rupp et al.’s (2006) definition of employees as workforce who is “less likely to be involved in developing and implementing CSR policy, less likely to have fully
internalized the corporate culture and be defensive of it (as compared to top management teams), and more likely to evaluate and react to the organization’s acts of CSR” (p. 538).

2.5.5.2 Employee Communication

Following Tompkins’s (1987) notion that “organization is reproduced in the day-to-day interactions of employees” (p. 88), I use the term employee communication (or employee talk) to refer to work-related conversation and interactions by, and among, employees. Hereby, employee communication is not limited to transmission of information about CSR, but represents a form of communication that has the potential to constitute an organization and its CSR (Schoeneborn & Trittin, 2013); namely, when employee voices become representatives of that organization (Taylor et al., 1996; Taylor & Cooren, 1997; Taylor & Van Every, 2000).

Since employee interactions may occur in different forms and settings (Kunda, 2006), I consider the latter term more appropriate and inclusive than the term internal communication—i.e., its synonym commonly used to describe communication that occurs within organization (see Berger, 2008). Thus, not only are internal and external organizational boundaries becoming more blurred (Cheney & Christensen, 2001b), but, as argued by Verčič Tkalac, Verčič, and Sriramesh (2012), internal communication is also becoming more cross-national and cross-cultural which challenges how we define its parameters. In this study, employee communication therefore does not distinguish between internal and external communication, but encompasses employees and their interactions in what has been traditionally considered as internal and external organizational environments (Cheney & Christensen, 2001b).


2.6 CSR in a Distinct Socioeconomic and Political Environment

Research has shown that there are considerable differences in how CSR is practiced, understood, and communicated across different national and sociocultural environments (e.g., Coppa & Sriramesh, 2013; Golob & Bartlett, 2007; Morsing, Midttun, & Palmås, 2007; Pastrana & Sriramesh, 2014; Sriramesh et al., 2007). Studies have shown that contextual differences are critical to take into account, especially when studying social constructions of CSR. Thus, not only are meanings embedded in societal and organizational contexts, meanings can also have “multiple interpretations” (McKie, 2001), which complicates our understanding of how CSR is perceived, communicated, and practiced in different parts of the world.

This study concerns individuals working for for-profit organizations that are located and operate within the US. With the population of 318.9 million people, the American culture, unlike in some smaller countries, is far less homogeneous and consists of various ethnicities, values, and traditions. The US is also one of the largest economic powers in the world. Following numerous corporate scandals and environmental disasters that occurred as a result of corporate mismanagement, in past years, the US government has given more attention to CSR issues (Avetisyan & Ferrary, 2013). However, compared to some other countries around the globe, the US government does not perform an active role in promoting and coordinating CSR policies and practices (Avetisyan & Ferrary, 2013). In fact, legislation concerning corporations is less rigorous when it comes to CSR issues, such as health care, worker rights, environmental print foot, and similar, compared to some other Western countries, like in Europe (Avetisyan & Ferrary, 2013). Therefore, corporate CSR efforts and programs in the US are articulated and implemented primarily
on voluntary, self-driven basis, with great tradition in, and emphasis on, corporate philanthropy and charitable giving (Matten & Moon, 2008).

Comparing CSR development in the US and Europe, Matten and Moon (2008) showed that, apart from institutional entities and structures (corporations, governments and other legal institutions, civil society, etc.), norms, values, and rules also affects companies’ language and practice of CSR on each side of the Atlantic Ocean. They identified two distinct approaches to CSR: Explicit approach to CSR focuses on corporate policies, articulated, and implemented primarily on voluntary basis by the corporations, and is more common for American business enterprises. Implicit approach to CSR emphasizes values, norms, and rules that reflect wider society’s concerns and interests rather than that of the corporations themselves, and is more typical for European businesses. Matten and Moon (2008) showed that these two approaches have important implications for how European and American companies communicate about their CSR programs, practices, and commitments. While business organizations in the US are more inclined to communicate to external audiences, European companies are concerned about getting information out to their internal audiences, such as employees (Matten & Moon, 2008).
CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

Qualitative inquiry is concerned with making sense and interpreting what meanings people construct in their “natural settings” (Denzin, 1996, p. 129). Given that my study concerns CSR as a social construct, qualitative methodology is particularly relevant and useful. In this section, I discuss some of the distinct features of qualitative inquiry, and its use in communication and CSR research. I then present two different strategies that I used in this study: discourse analysis and a case study. My first data corpus consists of interviews with organizational members from various organizations to understand the process of employee sensemaking of CSR. My second data corpus represents a case study including various data sources, such as interviews, focus groups, demographic information sheets, and documentation, which were obtained from a single organization. The latter data corpus allowed for a more in-depth understanding of what role employees play in bringing organizational CSR into being, specifically, looking at employee interactions concerning CSR. This case study also gave me the opportunity to study corporate CSR talk about employees’ role in carrying out the company’s CSR initiatives against employees’ own constructions of meanings of organizational CSR. For each data set, I introduce specifics of the chosen qualitative strategies and methods, followed by descriptions of my recruitment process, participants’ characteristics, setting and context, and procedure of obtaining my data. I conclude this section by discussing my data analysis process.
3.1 Distinct Features of Qualitative Inquiry

In their attempts to position themselves as legitimate, relevant, and needed against the dominant positivist way of thinking and doing research, researchers from various fields and disciplines discussed differences and similarities between qualitative and quantitative inquiry. Becker (1996) wrote that both qualitative and quantitative inquiry are essentially interested in society and how it works. For Trinchero (2014), qualitative research and quantitative research are necessarily interrelated. He argued that while qualitative and quantitative methods may derive from different ontological and epistemological orientations, “qualitative and quantitative tradition are not alternative and opposite approaches but complementary [research] strategies in order to capture the complexity of the real in relation to the objectives of the study” (p. 47). However, there are important distinctions in the ways researchers from both camps conduct research, and what specific questions they ask about social reality and its parts (Becker, 1996).

One of the major differences is that qualitative researchers use words and in-depth descriptions, and quantitative researchers use numbers and measurements to approach research (Creswell, 2009; Patton, 2015). According to Creswell (2009), qualitative inquiry can be described as “a means for exploring and understanding the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem,” whereas quantitative inquiry can be referred to as “a means for testing objective theories by examining the relationship among variables” (p. 4). Alasuutari (1996) noted that the uniqueness of qualitative research lies in that this type of inquiry is not concerned with universal but local understandings of the social, whereby “structures of meaning are always considered as historically and culturally specific” (p. 372). The task of the qualitative researcher is,
then, “to make sense of a particular, unique phenomenon, to come up with a local explanation of matters” (p. 378).

Another important distinction lies in the potential of qualitative methods for theory building, and the very role theory plays in qualitative research. Creswell (2009) argued that the ways theory is being used in qualitative inquiry vary. For instance, Alasuutari (1996) described qualitative research as “a means for generating social and cultural theory” (p. 371). Rather than providing “general statements about some universal social mechanism to be used as hypotheses in explaining local phenomena,” he argued that (cultural) theories are used to “provide different viewpoints of social reality” (p. 372). Qualitative research can therefore be seen as a “theorizing process” (p. 372), whereby the researcher tries to uncover new viewpoints of a rather mundane, taken-for-granted social reality (Alasuutari, 1996). Furthermore, Creswell (2009) suggested that uniqueness of qualitative research is the opportunity for theory to become “the end point” of a qualitative study through an inductive process of generating theory and theoretical models based on empirical data (p. 63), which is the basic idea of a grounded theory approach (e.g., Strauss, 1987).

Not only is theory in qualitative research “produced from inside,” it also “enters from outside the boundaries of any one research project” (Sandelowski, 1993, p. 214). Theory used in qualitative research should therefore not limit the researcher; rather, it should serve as her or his “inspiration” (Alasuutari, 1996, p. 375). The qualitative researcher uses theoretical lens or theoretical perspective as an orientation that informs and shapes her or his research and, at the same time, helps the researcher to position herself or himself in the study (Creswell, 2009). Moreover, the qualitative researcher is
open to various ways of observing and analyzing the data “instead of narrowing his or her vision” with a single theoretical or methodological perspective (Alasuutari, 1996, p. 375). Not surprisingly, many scholars highlighted the need for qualitative researchers to be theoretically informed about diverse approaches and viewpoints of data at hand (Alasuutari, 1996). Thus, as suggested by Alasuutari (1996), the qualitative researcher should be “reflexive toward the deceivingly self-evident reality one faces in and through the data, able to toy with different perspectives to it, and [be] open to new insights about everyday life and society” (p. 374).

This leads to another characteristic of qualitative research that makes this type of social inquiry rather distinct from quantitative research: its flexibility. The qualitative researcher is not only flexible when it comes to data collection (i.e., his or her research design), but also in her or his data analysis processes (Merriam, 2009). Therefore, theory or theoretical framework with which the qualitative researcher enters her or his study needs to be, at times, “modified or adjusted based on participants’ views” (Creswell, 2009, p. 65). Being closed to different theoretical possibilities the qualitative researcher may otherwise limit her or his opportunities to do good qualitative work (Alasuutari, 1996).

Next, compared to quantitative research, qualitative research is nonlinear and cyclical (Hennink, Hutter, & Bailey, 2011). Quantitative research design unfolds in stable, linear steps in order to examine, measure, and/or evaluate cause–effect relationships (Daymon & Holloway, 2011). As such, quantitative research is often seen as “less suited to investigating the complexity and transformability of contemporary communication relationships” (Daymon & Holloway, 2011, p. 5). Qualitative research,
on the other hand, is able to embrace complexity, heterogeneity, and unpredictability in studying communication phenomena (Daymon & Holloway, 2011). The qualitative researcher allows for steps in her or his design to be followed in a nonlinear manner—that is, by engaging in several rounds of analysis (cycles), and by changing or adopting her or his research path (when necessary) to come up with unexpected and surprising ideas and conclusions (Daymon & Holloway, 2011; Gibson, Sullivan, & Riley, 2012; Tracy, 2013).

Last but not least, complexity and diversity should also be embraced in qualitative research (Daymon & Holloway, 2011). Daymon and Holloway (2011) suggested that, to some degree, the qualitative researcher is working “at the edge of chaos,” or what they described as “the point of balance where the research has some structure but the researcher may not be totally in control if they are open to spontaneously following up on new and interesting ideas or experiences which may not have been anticipated when the research began” (p. 7). These and other characteristics have been essential in the use of qualitative methods, including CSR and communication scholarship.

### 3.2 The Use of Qualitative Methods in CSR Scholarship

For a long time, the creation of knowledge was justified primarily through the positivist lens of doing research that is grounded in numbers, hypothesis testing, and experiments, to name a few (Tracy, 2010). The crisis of representation (see Denzin, 1996; Denzin & Lincoln, 1998a) in the broader social sciences and humanities, and so-called linguistic or discursive turn (see Alvesson & Kärreman, 2000; Ashcraft et al., 2009), have largely shifted the ways scholars perceive and study communication—and
organization, respectively (Putnam & Mumby, 2014). In fact, this shift has also been reflected in their use of qualitative methods in communications studies (Putnam & Mumby, 2014). Rather than seeing communication as something that happens within organization, an alternative view had been suggested: communication constructing or constituting organization (Ashcraft et al., 2009; Axley, 1984; Craig, 1999). Arguably, this contributed to more diversified use of methods in communication research, but also “tensions between methods and analysis on the one hand and disciplinary norms of textual presentation on the other” (Putnam & Mumby, 2014, p. 5). Putnam and Mumby (2014) observed that, particularly in organizational communication, many research methods nowadays “focus on the complex ways in which routine organizing shapes people’s lives and, reciprocally, how members’ communication practices constitute organizing” (p. 6).

Given that much communication literature on CSR is still grounded in the transmission view of communication, it is not surprising that quantitative methods such as surveys, experiments, and quantitative content analysis dominate this field (Aguinis & Glavas, 2012; Golob et al., 2013; Lockett et al., 2006; Wehmeier & Schultz, 2011). While both qualitative and quantitative inquiries are important to move CSR scholarship forward, the potential that qualitative research has to offer to CSR researchers can be particularly useful and insightful in addressing questions about the constructive and constitutive nature of CSR (May, 2011; Wehmeier & Schultz, 2011). Indeed, there is an increasing number of scholars who now call for the use of qualitative methods that can help gain a better understanding of CSR as a communicative or discursive phenomenon.
that is *socially constructed* (e.g., Golob et al., 2013; May, 2011; Wehmeier & Schultz, 2011).

While qualitative methodologies, such as ethnography and discourse analysis, seem to be on the rise, most studies in CSR literature employ case studies or interviews as their only data sources (Aguinis & Glavas, 2012; Bass & Milosevic, 2016; Golob et al., 2013). With CSR communication scholarship moving toward multidimensional and process-oriented approaches, Wehmeier and Schultz (2011) proposed that shadowing and critical discourse analysis may provide greater insights into how individuals and organizations construct and negotiate meanings of CSR. These methodological approaches, as they argued, can help to uncover “the changing perceptions and constructions of CSR” (p. 483), as well as to reveal potential tensions between discourse and Discourse (see Alvesson & Kärreman, 2000). May (2011) observed that there is little empirical work focusing on employee involvement in CSR employing qualitative methods like in-depth interviews and fieldwork. Furthermore, Bass and Milosevic (2016) pointed out that CSR scholarship is still lacking a thorough understanding of organizational members’ sensemaking and enactment of CSR, and how organizational culture and organizational practices (along with interactions among individuals) shape CSR. They suggested that ethnographic studies that focus on “cultural dimensions of CSR” would enable “researchers to uncover deeper ways in which organizations internalize the diverse claims of multiple stakeholders and how and why they formulate given practices in response” (p. 2).

However, one should not assume that such methodological gaps alone are able to justify the use of qualitative methods in CSR communication research. Thus, each
methodology and method is unique and may serve different purposes. In the following paragraphs, I explain how the two chosen methodologies helped explore my research questions.

### 3.3 Strategies of Qualitative Inquiry

Broadly speaking, *strategy of inquiry* is an approach that the qualitative researcher uses to conduct and evaluate her or his study (Patton, 2015). In this study, I employed the following two strategies of qualitative inquiry: *discourse analysis* (comprising of interviews as the primary data source) and a *case study* (comprising of interviews, focus groups, and documentation as primary data sources). I used each strategy as an independent data set, responding to one or more research questions in unique ways. As this section unfolds, I present key characteristics of each methodology and method, my rationale for choosing each strategy, as well as recent developments and relevant studies that helped me guide through the data collection, data analysis, and writing processes.

#### 3.3.1 Discourse Analysis

Organizational discourse analysis is now a well-developed area in communication studies (Fairhurst & Putnam, 2014). Drawing on Grant et al. (2011), Fairhurst and Putnam (2014) defined discourse studies as “a broad class of approaches that focuses on the constitutive effects of language; processes of text production, distribution, and consumption; and reflexive, interpretative analysis aimed at deciphering the role of discourse in a socially constructed reality” (p. 272). Discourse analysis can defined and used as an epistemological position, methodology, method, and data analysis technique (Fairhurst & Uhl-Bien, 2012; Fairhurst & Putnam, 2014; Hammersley, 2014; Phillips &
Hardy, 2002). Grounded in social constructionism, it assumes “the constructive effects of language” (Phillips & Hardy, 2002, p. 5). As such, “it is a perspective in its own right” (Fairhurst & Putnam, 2014, p. 272). At the same time, discourse analysis involves “a set of techniques for conducting structured, qualitative investigations of text” (Phillips & Hardy, 2002, p. 5). Important to note is that while such “theory–method pairings” are quite common in organizational research employing a constructionist perspective (Fairhurst & Putnam, 2014, p. 272), there are also important differences between discourse analysis as a qualitative inquiry framework and qualitative inquiry strategy. As suggested by Fairhurst and Putnam (2014), there is a difference between questions of “what discourse is doing” and “how it represents ideas and objects” (p. 272).

In recent years, CSR has often been theorized as discourse or discursive practice (e.g., Christensen, 2007; Grant & Nyberg, 2011; May, 2011; May & Roper, 2014). Following Grant and Nyberg (2011), the relevance of discourse analysis in CSR communication studies can be discussed as two-fold. First, discourse analysis may help us “identify and analyze the key discourses by which CSR is conceptualized, idealized and articulated” (p. 536). Second, discourse analysis may aid in understanding the central role that discourse plays in the ways CSR policies and practices are socially constructed (Grant & Nyberg, 2011). Up to date, many communication scholars have used discourse analysis to explore how companies talk about CSR in their corporate reports, documents, and other organizational texts (e.g., Livesey & Graham, 2007; O’Connor & Gronewold, 2013). This is not surprising; following Grant and Nyberg (2011), the communication field is rather unique in that it provides appropriate analytical tools which help explain the role that discourse plays in CSR, and its effects. Nevertheless, discourse analysis also
allows scholars to address the issues of power and control in CSR discourse (e.g., Costas & Kärreman, 2013; Fyke & Buzzanell, 2013; Siltaoja, 2009).

In this study, I use discourse analysis as a strategy to help me study and understand social construction of CSR based on texts (obtained primarily from one-on-one interviews). Grant and Nyberg (2011) defined texts as “material manifestations of discourse” (p. 536) that comprise of various types of written and oral texts, such as interviews, formal speeches, informal talk, reports, etc. Based on the epistemological assumptions that social reality is constructed and “made real” through and in communication (Fairhurst & Putnam, 2014; Phillips & Hardy, 2002), discourse analysis aims to understand “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, Lawrence, & Hardy, 2004, pp. 636-637; emphasis added). Thus, the ways meanings of CSR arise, and are constructed, through social interactions cannot be studied without looking into other discourses/ Discourses that too shape and inform those meanings (Phillips & Hardy, 2002; see also Allen, 2005; Alvesson & Kärreman, 2000).

3.3.1.1 Interviews

Interviews are one of the most popular methodological tools among qualitative researchers (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998b), including those who study CSR and related topics (Bass & Milosevic, 2016). Lofland (1971) defined interview as “the act of perceiving” (p. 75) that is conducted between people. According to Denzin and Lincoln (1998b), interview can be viewed as “a conversation, the art of asking questions and listening” (p. 36). As such, interview is never “a neutral tool” (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998b,
p. 36) because the interviewer too takes part in the process of (co)constructing social reality in a given situation.

Among various types of interviews that qualitative researchers can use to collect their data (Patton, 2015; Tracy, 2013), I found *semi-structured interviews* most suitable for my study. First, while semi-structured form can add to the control of what the researcher brings to an interview (Fontana & Frey, 1998), it also allows the researcher to stay on track with questions that she or he anticipates asking. Second, semi-structure allows for more openness both on the researcher’s and the participants’ end. Indeed, as argued by Fontana and Frey (1998), employing fully structured interviews can mean that there is “little room for variation” in participants’ responses (p. 52). Third, semi-structured interviews proved to be useful in other communication studies concerning CSR and employees (e.g., Costas & Karreman, 2013; Humphreys & Brown, 2008; Rodrigo & Arenas, 2008).

### 3.3.1.2 Recruitment

Participants were recruited using a combination of purposive and snowballing sampling technique (Patton, 2015). One of the main criteria that I used to recruit potential participants was that the company they worked for, to one degree or another, reported that it practices CSR. I relied on the existing lists of companies in the Midwestern region in the United States, such as best places to work for as well as certified socially and environmentally conscious companies in the region, to identify companies that met these criteria. In addition, I used regional business newspapers and other publicly available information to find companies. I was also given suggestions and contact information by participants and other professionals who are active in the area of CSR in this region. Not
being familiar with many companies in the region (except some of the large international or multinational ones, none of which I ended up including in this data set), I was able to be less selective and bias in the recruitment process.

Before I reached out to companies, I browsed through their websites, searching for keywords and phrases that would indicate their CSR involvement and/or commitment, such as corporate responsibility, social responsibility, sustainability, community involvement, and similar. Being more inclusive and taking into account that different companies might use different words and phrases to describe their CSR involvement or commitment was important, since there are numerous similar or closely related concepts that both practitioners and scholars use interchangeably to refer to corporate responsibility (e.g., Ihlen et al., 2011a; Strand, Freeman, & Hockerts, 2015; Waddock, 2008). Next to acknowledging the general ambiguity of CSR (e.g., van der Heijden et al., 2010), several participants mentioned that they had not heard of the word CSR before. In fact, some of them used other terms (e.g., community involvement) to describe what they consider to be (social) responsibility of their company.

To increase richness and multivocality of my sample, I made an effort at heterogeneity of the sample in order to achieve a maximum variation among participants (Patton, 2015; Tracy, 2010). For this reason, my goal was to conduct interviews with employees who work in organizations of different sizes across different industries. I started by contacting five companies from a single size range each (small, medium, large, and very large) that I could easily access in order to be able to conduct interviews in person. However, during the course of recruitment, I soon realized that smaller companies were more responsive to my requests, and generally more open to participate
in my study. Indeed, after having collected about three-thirds of my data (24 interviews), I noticed that only two of my participants were employed by large organizations (with more than 500 employees), with the rest of my participants working at companies with less than 300 employees. In addition, while I was initially not interested in how the size of the company might influence how organizational members construct meanings of CSR, several participants spoke of how size of their company affects the ways they conduct CSR and communication.

Due to these reasons, and for the sake of greater focus and comparability of my data, I decided to continue interviewing individuals working in companies with no more than 500 employees (i.e., a maximum number of employees in small and medium size companies in the US\textsuperscript{11}). I also chose to exclude from my data set the interview that I conducted with an individual that works for a company that employs several thousands of workers, the interview with a consultant who is currently self-employed, and one interview that included responses from two employees. In addition, I left out the interview with a participant who asked to seek his permission to include any data from my conversation with him in the final report. In the end, my sample included 40 one-on-one interviews with individuals working in companies of micro, small, or middle sizes, ranging from as little as two workers up to 600 employees.

To further diversify my sample, in my initial letter to companies, I asked whether I could speak with up to three managers and up to five employees who do not hold management or leadership positions. My aim was to focus primarily on file-and-rank

\textsuperscript{11} Various organizations and institutions use different criteria to define small to medium size enterprises (SMEs). In fact, even within the US government, definitions of SMEs vary (Small and medium-sized enterprises: Overview of participation in U.S. exports, 2010). In this study, I use a criterion by the SBA Office of Advocacy (2014) that states that SMEs comprise of no more than 500 employees.
employees and to conduct interviews with managers/leaders only to further my understanding of CSR practices and policies in each organization. In the end, the number of informants from each company (and their positions) varied depending on their interest and availability to participate. Nevertheless, including individuals working in management and leadership positions allowed me to get a better insight into how managers/leaders of these companies viewed and understood the role of employees in CSR initiatives of their organization. In addition, I found that including managers/leaders was particularly important when recruiting smaller companies, since organizational members’ hierarchy levels and roles may be less distinct and more fluid in small companies than those in medium size and large companies (Spence, 2016).

After having collected and initially coded 27 interviews, I revisited my reflection notes and analytical memos to see whether more data would need to be collected. My aim was to proceed with interviewing until I reached saturation, meaning, no more new information or themes were evident in the data (Patton, 2015). For this reason, I recruited 17 more participants, which (after excluding four interviews from my final sample) turned out to be a sufficient number.

3.3.1.3 Setting and Context of the Study

Any qualitative researcher who employs a social constructionist lens needs to be sensitive to how the context of her or his study (cultural, social, economic, political, institutional, or environmental, etc.) may “illuminate social constructions” (Patton, 2015, p. 127). Previous studies have shown that there are considerable differences in the ways

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12 In business and management terminology, individuals who hold management and leadership, and often ownership, positions in SMEs are commonly referred to as owner-manager/founder, due to blurred boundaries of their roles (see Quinn, 1997; Spence, 2016).
individuals and organizations across different socioeconomic, political, and cultural contexts understand, practice, and communicate CSR (e.g., Golob & Bartlett, 2007; Matten & Moon, 2008). Moreover, distinct organizational features such as organizational structure, size, and culture, in addition to industry, can inform and shape CSR language and CSR practice in distinct ways (e.g., Coppa & Sriramesh, 2013; O’Connor & Shumate, 2010).

In particular, size of the organization has been emphasized as an important factor that affects CSR practice and communication (e.g., Baumann-Pauly, Wickert, Spence, & Scherer, 2013; Coppa & Sriramesh, 2013; Pastrana & Sriramesh, 2014). As noted by Baumann-Pauly et al. (2013), large companies are often “implicitly considered capable of assuming responsibility by implementing CSR-related organizational practices and structures that allow them to effectively interact with civil society” (p. 693). Not surprisingly then, CSR initiatives and practices are commonly designed for large companies with enough resources, both financial and human, for their implementation (Baumann-Pauly et al., 2013). On the other hand, small and medium size enterprises (SMEs) “differ from big corporations in a variety of ways including the amount of resources available, strategies, drivers, importance of managerial values, level of involvement and stakeholder prioritization” (p. 32), which affects CSR perceptions and practices (Coppa & Sriramesh, 2013).

However, it important to note that despite the fact that CSR implementation in SMEs is generally seen as less developed than in large companies, recent research suggest that this might not be the case (Baumann-Pauly et al., 2013). As shown in Baumann-Pauly et al.’s (2013) study, SMEs differ from large companies in that they are
more favorable of implementing CSR practices into their core business operations, “including engaging employees” (p. 694). At the same time, SMEs are less advanced in external reporting and promoting their CSR practices, as opposed to large companies (Baumann-Pauly et al., 2013). Furthermore, literature suggests that owner–manager/founder is more likely to bring his own ethical attitudes into organizational decision making in comparison to managers of large companies (Quinn, 1997).

Interestingly, current research on CSR in the US primarily focuses on CSR of large companies. This is rather surprising, given the importance of SMEs in the American economy. According to the Office of the United States Trade Representative, SMEs are “the backbone of the U.S. economy,” and as such, they represent “the primary source of jobs for Americans” (Small Business, n.d.). In addition, they “account for the largest group of U.S. exporters and are a major user of imported goods” (Small Business, n.d.).

While this study is not aimed to focus on particularities and/or differences in social constructions of CSR among SMEs and large companies in the US, such contextual significance and nuances nevertheless help situate this study further, while they also point to broader contributions of this research in addressing this gap.

3.3.1.4 Participants

This research draws on 40 interviews with organizational members in varied positions and at different hierarchy levels that work for 17 for-profit organizations in the US (see Table 1). Industry sectors of participants’ respected companies included: accounting (2 participants), architecture and engineering (5 participants), beverage production (1 participants), communications (5 participant), CSR consulting (1 participant), cosmetics production (1 participant), digital services (1 participant),
information services (7 participants), legal services (4 participants), management consulting (11 participants), and social services (3 participants). Participants’ age ranged from 23 to 65 years old. Among participants were 22 females and 18 males. Time spent at their respective companies varied from 3 months up to 22 years, with an average of 4.4 years and the mode of 3 years.

Table 1 Interview participant demographics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Number of employees</th>
<th>Industry</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Position</th>
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<td>lawyer</td>
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<td>34</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>project manager</td>
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<tr>
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<td>social services</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>case manager</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>300</td>
<td>social services</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>case manager</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Katelyn</td>
<td>300</td>
<td>social services</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>director of human resources community relations manager corporate recruiter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>beverage production</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>F</td>
<td></td>
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<td>Brian</td>
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<td>57</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>corporate recruiter</td>
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<td>46</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>project/account manager</td>
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<td>63</td>
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Table 1 continued

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<th>Department</th>
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<th>Gender</th>
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<td>Anne</td>
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<td>communications</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>CEO/president/founder</td>
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<td>information services</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>president/founder</td>
</tr>
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<td>information services</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>research manager</td>
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<td>45</td>
<td>M</td>
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<td>title researcher</td>
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<td>F</td>
<td>strategist</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

3.3.1.5 Procedures

The interviews were conducted between January and April 2017, after receiving the approval to conduct the study by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at Purdue
University. Prior to conducting each interview, I briefed my participants on the purpose of this study and what my desirable outcomes were. I also informed them that participation in this study is voluntary and that confidentiality of data and participants’ anonymity will be ensured. Each participant was asked to sign the informed consent form. When interviews were conducted over the phone, I sought participants’ oral consent to participate in this study. All participants agreed to be audio recorded.

In order to obtain participants’ “narratives or accounts in the person’s own terms” (Loftland, 1971, p. 81), I used an interview guide that helped me to keep in mind the general idea of what to cover in each interview. This guide aided me to stay on top of the specific topics and themes that I wanted to touch upon during the interviews, while it also allowed for flexibility for participants to speaking freely (Loftland, 1971). Questions that I posed to my participants were open-ended, inviting participants to provide more complex and elaborative answers (Tracy, 2013). I also used probes and follow-up questions to ask about specifics that were not included in participants’ spontaneous answers, or when I wanted my participants to elaborate more on specific parts of their answers that were unclear to me or which arouse my interest (Loftland, 1971; Tracy, 2013). Such combination of questions aimed to “yield in-depth responses about people’s experiences, perceptions, opinions, feelings, and knowledge” (Patton, 2015, p. 14).

In each interview, I aimed to cover four main themes (see Appendix A). Each interview began with questions about participants’ general understanding of CSR. I found that to be important, since some participants were not confident if they were providing “right” answers and/or admitted that they had not heard of the term prior to the interview. Among the questions I posed were: How would you define CSR?; and, How would you
describe a socially responsible organization? I then asked more specific questions concerning their company’s involvement in CSR as well as their individual experiences with CSR, pertaining to both CSR communication and CSR practices within their organizations. Some of my questions were: Based on what you have just discussed, to what extent would you consider your company socially responsible?; Tell me about the importance of your company being involved in CSR?; How much do you personally feel part of what your company does in regard to CSR?; and, Tell me about your involvement in CSR? These questions varied slightly, depending on participants’ positions within the company (employee or upper management/leadership levels).

Out of the 40 interviews, 31 were conducted in person and 9 over the phone. All interviews were audio recorded, with the exception of one that was partially recorded due to technical problems. In the latter case, I took extensive notes during the interview to make sure that I did not miss any important information. The interviews ranged from 25 to 65 minutes, with an average length of 45 minutes. All interviews were transcribed, yielding 417 single-spaced pages. I took also notes during all interviews and wrote down my reflections and observations after conducting and transcribing each interview. These reflection notes varied in length, from a single paragraph to several pages, resulting in more than 15 single-spaced pages, in addition to multiple pages of hand written notes.

3.3.2 Case Study

Case study is a common strategy of inquiry that has been used across different disciplines for a long time (Merriam, 1985). However, there is a lack of consensus among scholars about what constitutes a case study (Patton, 2015; Yin, 2104). For Patton (2015), case study is an in-depth, rich story about an individual, organization, place, program,
campaign, etc. (p. 259). Similarly, Creswell (2009) defined it as “a strategy of inquiry in which the researcher explores in depth a program, event, activity, process, or one or more individuals” (p. 13). According to Yin (2014), case study concerns “an empirical study that investigates a contemporary phenomenon (the “case”) in depth and with its real-world context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context may not be clearly evident” (p. 16). He suggested that a case study can provide a better understanding of “contextual conditions” of a real-world case (p. 16). Importantly, case is always bound by time, place, and activity (Creswell, 2009; Patton, 2015). As a “locally bounded system,” it is “contextualized within a larger historical and cultural framework” (Alasuutari, 1996, p. 374), which makes it highly relevant and appropriate to use in a study rooted in social constructionism.

Yin (2014) noted that a key feature of the case study methodology is that it “copes with the technically distinctive situation in which there will be many more variables of interest than data points” (p. 17). Consequently, a major feature as well as strength of this strategy of inquiry is that it uses a variety of data collection procedures and approaches, informed and guided by the context of our study and its focus (Creswell, 2009; Patton, 2015; Yin, 2014). Thus, what constitutes a case study, and how it can be used, may vary depending on the researcher’s views and orientation to research (Patton, 2015). Merriam (1985) observed that while many scholars agreed that a case study can be used to test theories and employ quantitative data, it is commonly used in naturalistic (qualitative) inquiry.

When it comes to the question of what role theory plays in a case study, it is important to keep in mind that a case study should not be confused with other qualitative
strategies, such as ethnography or grounded theory, where theory is being developed in the later phases of research (Yin, 2014). As suggested by Yin (2014), a case study inquiry “benefits from the prior development of theoretical propositions to guide data collection and analysis” (p. 17). Accordingly, theory development, at least a portion of it, should be done before the qualitative researcher actually engages in data collection, in planning our research design (Yin, 2014). At the same time, case study can also generate new theories. Through analytical generalization, a case study may offer “the opportunity to shed empirical light about some theoretical concepts or principles,” whereby findings can “go beyond the setting for the specific case or specific experiment that had been studied” (Yin, 2014, p. 40).

The latter is important for my research, since there is still a lot of room in the current CSR literature for new theoretical insights, especially in terms of social constructions of CSR at both individual and organizational levels (Golob et al., 2013; May & Roper, 2014; Wehmeier & Schultz, 2011). Moreover, case studies are commonly used in CSR and communication literature (Aguinis & Glavas, 2012; Cutler, 2004; Golob et al., 2013). Cutler (2004) observed that in public relations scholarship alone, about a third of academic articles employ the case study approach. In addition, case studies are often used as teaching tools among communication and management practitioners and students (Crane et al., 2013; Cutler, 2004).

Thus, it seems that in many cases further revisions and developments of this methodology are needed. Drawing on a methodological review of the case study use in public relations, Cutler (2004) noted that “understanding and application of appropriate methodology is a major issue for public relations researchers wishing to use case studies
as a research tool” (p. 372). His findings showed that a greater majority of cases did not take into consideration the implications of this methodology for research (Cutler, 2004). In addition, an appropriate interpretation of such methodology and its theoretical implications—or what case studies can bring to the development and improvement of (public relations) scholarship—were also lacking in studies that he assessed (Cutler, 2004). Furthermore, case studies that rely on a single data source rather than multiple data sources may as well be limited (Yin, 2014).

Case studies are particularly relevant for studying communication processes since, as noted by Merriam (1985), this strategy of inquiry may contribute to a better understanding of “the process or dynamics of certain aspects of practice” (p. 204). Although Merriam (1985) hereby referred specifically to education, the same could be said for communication studies, particularly concerning CSR. For instance, Nielsen and Thomsen (2009) used a case study to understand how CSR occurs, and is being communicated, in small- to medium-size companies, as perceived by middle managers. Employing a combination of ethnography and case study, Costas and Kärreman (2013) studied CSR discourses and practices in consulting companies based on multiple data sources, such as interviews, participant observations, and documentation. Humphreys and Brown (2008) used an inductive, interpretive case study to explore CSR narratives that organizational members of a banking institution draw on, and co-construct, in order to make sense of their organizations and themselves. These examples illustrate value in using the case study strategy to expand the body of knowledge of CSR and communication.
3.3.2.1 Recruitment

The aim of this study was not to look for generalizations. Rather, my task as a qualitative researcher was to look for local explanations and meanings of a unique social phenomenon (Alasuutari, 1996). As suggested by Trinchero (2014), “Qualitative researchers don’t need to assume a high level of comparability among observations because qualitative epistemology insist on the specificity of the subjects of the study, that also emerge from the differences and commonalities between them” (p. 50). Therefore, this study focuses on one case (i.e., a single company) as it seeks to explore local perspectives and interpretations (May, 2011). In other words, looking into a single case offered me the opportunity to understand a particular aspect of the social in a specific context (Alasuutari, 1996), while also building on the previous findings about employee constructions of CSR that I obtained through analyzing my first data set.

Selecting an information-rich case was critical for my study, since the very nature and substance of the case determinates findings (Patton, 2015). I used a combination of high-impact and criterion-based comparison sampling (Patton, 2015) to find an appropriate case. To begin with, the company included in this study is considered one of the leaders in CSR, ethics, and sustainability areas in its industry (e.g., CR’s 100 Best Corporate Citizens, 2017; Global CSR RepTrak 100, 2015; World’s Most Ethical Companies Honorees, 2017). As a high-visibility case (Patton, 2015), the company is often portrayed by the local media as one that contributes to the development of CSR in its local environment as well as globally. Secondly, the case was selected based on the following two criteria: size of the organization, and its formalized CSR program or strategy. Previous studies as well as my own research on this topic suggest that large
organizations often have more established and formalized CSR programs, and thus, may communicate and practice CSR more often. For these reasons, I anticipated that there might be a better chance that both formal and informal conversations concerning CSR and CSR-related issues might occur in the organization.

Criteria, like the ones described above, are often used in case selection in CSR research (e.g., Rodrigo & Arenas, 2008; Nielsen & Thomsen, 2009; Costas & Kärreman, 2013). Although my research did not require an investigation of a specific industry sector, I acknowledge the fact that the industry can impact how CSR is being communicated and carried out by the organization studied. Indeed, numerous studies suggested that next to size, type of industry can too play an important role in how organizations and their members perceive, practice, and communicate CSR (see Beschorner & Hajduk, 2017; O’Connor & Shumate, 2010).

In addition, it is important to keep in mind that although I selected the case based on this company’s CSR involvement, its formal CSR initiatives and programs might not be equality spread out throughout the year(s). Since a case study is always time-bounded (Creswell, 2009; Patton, 2015; Yin, 2014), one needs to take into consideration the time period when data is to be collected. As suggested by Patton (2015), “Sensitivity to time […] can be especially important in evaluation because programs, organizations, and communities may function in different ways at different times during the year” (p. 263).

This case study focuses on a large for-profit company that employs more than 40,000 people worldwide. Upon learning more about the organization and its CSR from various sources (its corporate website, the media, local community members, etc.), I reached out to the company’s Communications Director in early November 2016. In my
initial invitation letter to him, I provided a short description of my study, including my desired outcomes. My hope was to be granted access to the company in order to do observations in the field, which, in addition to collecting interviews and documentation, would give me the opportunity to try to capture how CSR is carried out on a day-to-day basis by, and among, employees. After several email exchanges and meetings (both over the phone and in person) over a period of four months, the Communications Director (who became my “gatekeeper”) and I agreed on the possibility to conduct two focus groups with 6-10 employees who have previously taken part in the company’s corporate volunteering programs (i.e., one of the main employee engagement programs falling under the umbrella of the company’s CSR). In addition, the gatekeeper offered to share with me other organizational materials (such as the results of internal research studies on CSR) that could aid my research.

All data were collected after receiving Purdue’s IRB approval. Per IRB requirement, prior to data collection, I was also asked to obtain an official letter from the company permitting me to conduct this study, along with written consent from individual participants including their willingness to take part in this research.

3.3.2.2 Setting and Context

Pharma Company (pseudonym) is a global for-profit pharmaceutical organization based in the United States. With several thousands workers around the world, it is among the largest companies in the pharmaceutical industry. In fact, there are more than 10,000 employees at its US headquarters alone. The company’s history dates back in the late 19th century when it was first founded by a man whose desire was to create medicine to
improve people’s lives. Today, it has manufacturing plants spread all over the globe, and its products are sold in more than 120 countries.

Pharma Company’s CSR journey started with its founding father’s commitment to giving back to the community. Over the years, this path evolved from primarily charitable giving and philanthropy towards a more active involvement in the society, as well as strategically identifying areas where the company can make the greatest impact not only locally but also globally. As one can learn from Pharma Company’s website, the company puts a great value on CSR and positions it as part of its corporate vision and identity. Next to addressing issues such as diversity, inclusion, education, and global health, the company puts a strong emphasis on employee engagement as part of their CSR strategy, particularly through volunteering opportunities. Indeed, as I learned from the company’s Communications Director:

So for us go and work in improving global health, that’s a great way for us to able to have to do our corporate responsibility. Because we are experts in health and we can use our knowledge and experience and passion of our employees to go make a really meaningful difference. [...] And we’ve increasingly sharpened our focused and really trying to identify areas where we can have the greatest impact. So what we are doing, fewer projects and giving away money to less people, but we’re doing it a very strategic and targeted way. And so that’s really important that, in that sense a new evolution of corporate responsibility, is doing it with things that you’re already good at.

Given this active role in the society through its philanthropic, charitable, volunteer, and other CSR efforts, as noted previously, Pharma Company is often recognized as being one of the most ethical and socially responsible companies in the US and the world.
3.3.2.3 Data Sources

I employed a combination of people- and structure-focused case study (Patton, 2015). Three common types of data sources in qualitative research (interviews, focus groups, and documents) were used. Through interviewing and the focus groups discussions, I was able to explore how organizational members (individually and collectively) make sense of CSR, and how the very setting of the case may shape and inform such constructions (Patton, 2015). At the same time, document analysis allowed me to get a broader understanding of the company’s CSR programs and initiatives that might have been overlooked or not included in participants’ responds (i.e., learning from various organizational texts) (Daymon & Holloway, 2011; Patton, 2015). I followed Patton’s (2015) suggestion that different units of analysis should not be taken as “mutually exclusive,” but that “each unit of analysis implies a different kind of data collection, a different focus of analysis of data, and a different level at which statements about findings and conclusion would be made” (p. 262).

It is important to note that one of the unique features and strengths of this qualitative strategy is to involve various data sources (Patton, 2015; Yin, 2014). A variety of sources can help the researcher to go broad as well as to delve deeper into specific issues, which can ultimately contribute to better quality of a case study (Yin, 2014). Combining multiple sources of data also allows for methodological triangulation that is typically used to “illuminate” research questions and overcome possible weaknesses associated with the use of a single method (Patton, 2015; Yin, 2014). As suggested by Yin (2014), without multiple sources of evidence, case study looses its unique strength and potential.
3.3.2.3.1 Focus Groups

Although interviews can be a valuable source of data in order to learn what employees have to say about CSR, this method is limited due to the fact that it does not allow for observing how meanings of CSR emerge through interactions among organizational members. Both focus groups and observations are therefore suitable for studying people’s interactions (Patton, 2015). Compared to observations that allow the study of social phenomena “in the natural context of occurrence, among the actors who would naturally be participating in the interaction” (Adler & Adler, 1998, p. 81), focus groups differ in that they are more staged and require a formal structure (Morgan, 1997). Indeed, one of the main characteristics of focus groups as a qualitative method is that data are collected based on participants’ interactions on a topic that is selected by the researcher (Morgan, 1997).

Although my initial hope was to do participant observations in the field, this method turned out to be inappropriate for several reasons. The first challenge was practical: a rather limited access to the organization that I chose to observe. Second, from an empirical standpoint, there was a high possibility that during my time spent in the field there would be very little “naturally occurring” talk among organizational members (in particular, file-and-rank employees) about this specific topic. Due to these limitations and impracticalities, I decided to conduct focus groups that would allow me to be more efficient, yet still help me capture people’s interactions.

Nevertheless, focus groups proved to be a rather useful method, given that the major focus of this case study was indeed to explore employees’ interactions among each other about specific organizational processes, which might have been more difficult to
observe in their natural settings (Morgan, 1997). In fact, the “disadvantage” of being limited to verbal rather than actual (physical) behavior (Morgan, 1997) turned out to be beneficial in the end, as I could be more attentive to discursive traces in participants’ talk. In addition, being able to gather a more specific group of organizational members (i.e., employees in non-managerial functions), and having the ability to direct where the group discussion was going, kept my research more centered and focused (Morgan, 1997).

Other scholars have used focus groups to study CSR topics, typically, as one of multiple methods in a case study. An example that uses solely focus groups to understand social constructions of CSR is a study by O’Connor, Shumate, and Meister (2008). In particular, these scholars explored what meanings and attributes a unique stakeholder group (i.e., Active Moms) assign to CSR. Not only has this method offered a better insight into how participants constructed CSR, but also how they negotiated meanings of CSR among each other (O’Connor et al., 2008).

I followed O’Connor et al.’s (2008) procedure of data collection using focus groups by further diversifying my data into primary and secondary forms. Transcriptions (i.e., the final product of focus groups that served as my primary data) were accompanied by observations notes (secondary data) which I took as I was conducting the focus groups as well as afterwards. Hereby, I define observations broadly as consisting of “gathering impressions of the surrounding world through all relevant human faculties” (Adler & Adler, 1998, p. 80). While there are various ways the qualitative researcher can do observations in the field (Adler & Adler, 1998; Denzin & Lincoln, 1998b; Yin, 2014), a major issue with writing observation notes during the focus group discussions was that, since I was performing a role of the facilitator of each focus group, I was not able to write
down detailed and rich descriptions of interactions among organizational members (Patton, 2015). In this sense, to “inscribe social discourse” (Geertz, 1973, p. 19) as it evolved and unfolded during staged the focus groups proved to be rather challenging. To overcome such challenge, I wrote down reflections from each focus group within a few hours after conducting them. This step helped me to document more general as well as more specific observations that I made during the focus groups. In addition, I was able to jot down my thoughts and impressions from data collection, which were helpful in later analysis and writing processes.

3.3.2.3.2 Demographic Information Sheets

I distributed demographic information sheets to all participants in order to ask them more specifics about their current position within the company and other details about their corporate volunteering experiences, such as type of project or work they volunteered with, location of their volunteer program, and similar (see Appendix B). This data source was helpful during analysis, as it allowed me to make a better sense of participants’ views and understandings of CSR based on their diverse backgrounds and experiences.

3.3.2.3.3 Interviews

Interviews are considered an important and one of the most common data sources in a case study (Yin, 2014). Prior to conducting the focus groups, I interviewed the company’s Communications Director in order to learn more about the company’s CSR strategy and specific programs that focus on employee engagement in CSR. In addition to several phone calls and emails exchanges, I also met with him in person at the company’s
headquarters when we were negotiating my access to the company. These conversations helped me to get a better understanding about the company’s decision making and communication processes when it comes to CSR. Additionally, I also learned about the history and development of CSR in the company at both local and global levels.

3.3.2.3.4 Documentation

Documentation typically consists of “excerpts from documents captured in a way that records and preserves the context” (Patton, 2015, p. 14). In CSR literature, there is a considerable amount of studies that have looked into CSR disclosure and CSR coverage in the media reports, using documentation as their primary (or only) data source. As noted previously, documentation analysis has often been used in case studies as an additional source, next to interviews and observations. While documentation can indeed be useful for almost every case study topic, Yin (2014) pointed out that one should be careful not to take documents at their face value. In his words, documents “should not be accepted as literal recordings of events that have taken place” (Yin, 2014, p. 107). Instead, the researcher should keep in mind that documents are always created with a specific purpose and for certain audience (Yin, 2014). For instance, CSR reports usually serve as tools that organizations use to communicate their CSR practices and initiatives to external audiences, such as shareholders, the media, local citizens, etc. On the other hand, newsletters may be more targeted to employees and corporate partners to update them on current events and developments within the organization.

Documents I collected and analyzed for this case study were CSR reports, media coverage on the organization’s CSR involvement, its corporate website, social media postings and videos, brochures, and other organizational texts that I was able to obtain.
This documentation yielded more than 740 pages. One of the strengths of collecting documents is that they are rather stable and allow for broad coverage of whatever the researcher is interested in (Yin, 2014). As such, this data source allowed me to gain a “bigger picture” about the company and what it does, how it communicates CSR in its official statements to various stakeholders, how its CSR involvement is perceived in the media, and similar. Importantly, documentation also helped me to better understand how employee understanding is reflecting what the company as a whole is communicating about its CSR (e.g., specific CSR practices and areas of involvement, corporate values, corporate CSR strategy, etc.), and what may be some of the underlying meanings and values that could influence the ways employees construct meanings of CSR.

3.3.2.4 Participants

Focus groups participants were recruited through the gatekeeper (i.e., the company’s Communication Director). I shared with him my study description as well as my invitation letter to potential participants to be shared with employees working at the company’s headquarters. We also discussed criteria used for participation requirement. Yin (2014) suggested that bounding the case is critical in using a case study as a strategy of inquiry. This concerns not only deciding upon where, when, and what type of data will be collected and how data analysis will be done, but it also concerns choosing and describing participants of my study (Yin, 2014). Therefore, given the focus of this study, it was important to define who “employees” would be in my study.

Together with the gatekeeper, we agreed to send an invitation to individuals across various departments, and in various functions, who work in non-managerial and non-leadership roles and who have previously took part in the company’s volunteering
activities. The rationale behind these specifics was to gain diverse perspectives of the company’s CSR efforts regardless one’s job and position. At the same time, I was able to capture interactions among individuals around a shared experience with CSR—that is, through employee volunteering which is one of the company’s core programs concerning CSR, and thus, a common way to get employees involved in CSR practices.

There were 19 participants in the two focus groups (see Table 2): 9 (6 females and 3 males) in the first, and 10 participants (6 females and 4 males) in the second. Their age ranged between 33 and 58 years. Among them, 6 individuals identified themselves as Caucasian, 4 individuals as white, 2 individuals as Asian, 2 individuals as black, 1 individual as African American, and 1 individual identifies as Asian/Indian. Other participants did not provide information about their ethnicity/race. Regarding the level of position within the company, 14 of them said they work at the staff/junior level and 2 participants noted that work in the middle management. Two participants shared that they work as consultants, while one participant did not specify her job level. Participants’ level of education varied from bachelor’s degree (6 participants) and professional diploma/course (2 participants) to master’s degree (10 participants) and doctoral degree (1 participant). To ensure greater anonymity of participants’ identities, in the final product of this study, I did not include a detailed list of each individual’s demographics beyond a general description.
Table 2 Focus group participant demographics

<table>
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<tr>
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<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Level of position</th>
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</table>

3.3.2.5 Procedures

I conducted two focus groups in early May 2017, after receiving the IRB’s permission to conduct this study. Each focus group was an hour long. I facilitated both focus groups in a conference room at the company’s headquarters on the same day, following the protocol that I created prior to data collection (see Appendix C). To help ensure that participants felt more comfortable to speak, the gatekeeper was not present in the room during the focus group discussions. However, he did provide brief welcoming
remarks prior to each focus group. Before each discussion, I shared with participants
more information about my research. They were also asked to sign an informed consent
form and to complete demographic information sheets. Gaining this information
beforehand allowed me to familiarize myself better with who my participants will be and
to avoid losing too much of valuable time during the focus group discussion.

Each focus group started with an open-ended question about participants’ views
of their company’s CSR. To keep the discussion going, I then read out loud the
company’s CSR statement written on its main corporate website and asked my
participants to comment on it. Finally, I directed the discussion towards specific topic
concerning the role of employees in CSR. Due to time constraints, I was only able to ask
a follow-up question about how participants viewed employee volunteering as part of
CSR in one of the two focus groups.

### 3.4 Role of the Researcher

One role the researcher can play in qualitative inquiry is learning and obtaining
knowledge together with participants as “an active sense maker” (Daymon & Holloway,
2011, pp. 7-8). The qualitative researcher is also “the instrument” in her or his study,
which means that the way she or he conducts the study depends largely on her or his
skills and competences (Patton, 2015). Furthermore, any interpretation that the researcher
makes, and any method that she or he uses, is shaped by her or his experiences,
background, and personal characteristics (Creswell, 2009; Denzin & Lincoln, 1998b).
This nevertheless also reflects in the use of the first person in her or his academic writing,
supporting “the notion that researchers do influence, exercise choices, and make
decisions about the directions of their research and the conclusions they draw” (Webb, 1992, p. 751) and that voice is given to all participants in the study (Ely, Vinz, Anzul, & Downing, 1997; Gough, 2008).

It is therefore important that one recognizes, acknowledges, and describes personal beliefs and biases in the early stages of research process in order to learn what may shape interpretations and decisions later on (Creswell & Miller, 2000). For Trinchero (2014), conducting research is “primarily a reflective activity” (p. 61). According to him, there is a need for an in-depth description on every step and in every phase of the qualitative research process (Trinchero, 2014). In a similar manner, Tracy (2010) talked about the importance of self-reflexivity, such as being frank and open about researcher’s own voice in relation to voices of participants. To facilitate such reflexivity, I kept a qualitative journal that helped me to document and reflect on my data collection and analysis processes, but also writing process itself (Ortlipp, 2008). Apart from using this journal as an important piece of my coding and analysis book, the journal was also a place where I could express my beliefs, assumptions, and biases, as well as thoughts on how I position myself as a qualitative researcher (Creswell & Miller, 2000). Although this qualitative journal (yielding 65 single-spaced typed pages and numerous pages of hand-written text) did not serve as my data source, it proved to be a valuable reflection tool that guided me through various stages of my research, including interpretation and writing phases (Ortlipp, 2008).
3.5 Data Analysis

According to Alasuutari (1996), “The main function of data collection and analysis is to make one’s own underlying premises as visible as possible and to challenge and develop the initial frameworks” (p. 372). Qualitative research assumes that reality is “constructed,” which means that there can be multiple interpretations of a single phenomenon or event (Merriam, 2009, p. 8). Therefore, it is important to acknowledge that, as a qualitative researcher, I took part in co-construction and not finding knowledge (Merriam, 2009).

A critical first step in a systematic, yet simple qualitative analysis is making sure that data is organized properly (Tracy, 2013). As suggested by Tracy (2013), taking the time to organize your data is important as it performs an “interpretive activity” (p. 185) where you are able to make links as well as disconnections across data. There are different ways of how one can go about organizing data (Patton, 2015). I used a chronological order, in combination with organization by data source and by data type (Tracy, 2013), which proved to be quite helpful considering having to work with multiple data sources. This step also involved removing all the names and other identifiable information from my data, masking them with pseudonyms.

The next step was to “marinate” myself in data (Putnam in Tarrow, 1995, p. 471) and absorb it by close and careful (re-)reading (Saldaña, 2016; Tracy, 2013). Each of my data sources required a unique analysis approach. To ease this process, I divided my data analysis process into two phases: discourse analysis phase and case study phase (see Table 3). These phases did not occur in fully separate time sequences but overlapped with one another over the same time period.
Table 3 Data analysis process of the two data corpuses

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Phase</th>
<th>Qualitative strategy</th>
<th>Data sources</th>
<th>Analytical procedure</th>
<th>Research questions</th>
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</thead>
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<tr>
<td>First</td>
<td>Discourse analysis</td>
<td>Interviews</td>
<td>Iterative analysis</td>
<td>RQ1: How do participants construct meanings of CSR?</td>
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<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>RQ2: How do agency and ownership emerge in employee CSR talk?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Second</td>
<td>Case study</td>
<td>Focus groups</td>
<td>Thematic analysis</td>
<td>RQ3: How do participants co-construct meanings of their company’s CSR vis-à-vis their roles?</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Interviews, Documents</td>
<td></td>
<td>RQ4: How are employees constructed in corporate CSR talk?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

My writing begun as I was still analyzing data, as opposed to once all data was coded and interpreted. This writing process concerned regular journal reflections (as explained above) as well as creating analytical memos (Tracy, 2013). Through the entire analysis process, these entries helped to document and keep on track with any decisions I made along the way. I followed Saldaña’s (2016) advice to try to keep my memos open-ended, yet organized and focused. Not only did these journal entries and memos serve as an important element of my analysis process; after time, they also became a critical “analysis outcome” (Tracy, 2013, p. 196). In particular, they allowed me to think through and make sense of the relationships between various codes, before grouping them into larger categories and/or themes. Writing process was also a good opportunity to establish as well as reconsider my own relationship with the topic and data at hand (Richardson,
Thus, as noted by Richardson (1998), writing itself is “a method of inquiry” (p. 345). Before moving to broader comparisons and conclusions resulting from my analysis (Patton, 2015), I first provide a detailed description of each phase of this process.

### 3.5.1 First Phase

The first phase consisted of analyzing interviews with individuals from various organizations. I began my analysis as I was still collecting data. In fact, I followed Tracy’s (2013) suggestion to begin my analysis process after about one third of my data had been collected (i.e., 12 interviews). This step allowed me to think about possible patterns and themes early on, and to be more attentive to any possible gaps in the data that I wished to explore more while I was still in the field (Patton, 2015). Due to this reason, I aimed to transcribe all audio recordings of the interviews within 2-3 weeks after I had conducted them.

While I initially considered some of the interviews to be transcribed by a professional transcriber, I ended up completing all transcriptions by myself. I draw on Loftland’s (1971) conclusions that there are several benefits of transcriptions being done by the researcher. First, listening to audio recordings and transcribing them can stimulate analysis.

> When a distinction, a concept, or an idea occurs to me, write it into the transcriptions as a note on analysis. It if out of these bits and pieces of analysis that one will be able to build a larger analysis during the period of constructing and writing the final analysis. (Loftland, 1971, p. 91)

Second, while transcribing the researcher has the opportunity to ask new questions or recognize any perplexities concerning data (Loftland, 1971). This can be useful not only
for the analysis stage, but also considerations about additional questions or probes that
could be asked in upcoming interviews (Loftland, 1971). Third, immediate reading
through and studying of transcriptions offers the opportunity to think about whether any
of participants would need to be re-interviewed on a specific topic (Loftland, 1971).

I used Tracy’s (2013) iterative analysis approach to analyze my data. She
described this approach as one that “alternates between emic, or emergent, readings of
the data and use an etic use of existing models, explanations, and theories” (p. 184). As
such, it is different from a grounded approach\(^{13}\) in that it “encourages reflection upon the
active interests, current literature, granted priorities, and various theories that the
researcher brings to the data” (p. 184). Iterative analysis approach also invites the
researcher to reflect upon, revise, and refine the focus of her or his study and ways she or
he makes sense of it (Tracy, 2013).

After conducting and transcribing a sufficient number of interviews to begin my
analysis process, I read and cleaned up all my data. Following Tracy (2013), I began my
initial jotting and coding in analytical software NVivo starting with most interesting and
typical interviews, and leaving more deviant interviews for the end. After coding 12
interviews, I coded all subsequent interviews in a chronological order in which they were
conducted. In my initial coding step, I used primarily a combination of in vivo and
descriptive coding (Saldaña, 2016). This helped me to get a better sense of specific words
and phrases that people used when sharing their views, insights, and experiences, but also
to get a better idea of various topics that participants conversed about. Analytical memos
were a useful way of keeping track of more than 200 codes that I created in this initial

\(^{13}\) Grounded theory approach aims to develop theory that emerges from data, as opposed to building on the
existing literature and/or being guided by research questions (Tracy, 2013).
stage. Additionally, these memos were an insightful source of data comparison across the interviews. Constant comparative analysis helped me to learn about differences and similarities in the data, and to take a closer look into what might be the factors for such differences and/or similarities (Patton, 2015). Such an analysis technique is common in qualitative studies on CSR and employees (e.g., Garriga, 2014; Nisim & Benjamin, 2008; Powell, Elving, Dodd, & Sloan, 2009; Rodrigo & Arenas, 2008).

After revisiting and reflecting upon my initial coding, I re-considered ways in which I could proceed with my second cycle of coding using more “focused” codes (Saldaña, 2016). I also went back to the literature and my research questions to determinate which coding method would be most appropriate for my study (Saldaña, 2016). I decided to employ primarily values coding which is a “meaning-driven method” (p. 102) used to explore what attributes participants use to describe values, perspectives, and worldviews in relation to ideas, other people, and themselves (Saldaña, 2016). According to Saldaña (2016), this method is particularly useful for qualitative studies that explore questions related to participants’ experiences and actions, including agency, motivation, and belief systems. During this step of extensive “lumping” and “fracturing” of my initial codes, I also created a codebook with detailed code descriptions and illustrative examples that aided my further analysis and helped map “how the codes emerged and changed over time” (Tracy, 2013, pp. 190-191).

Finally, I proceeded with the third cycle of coding where my aim was to “explain, theorize, and synthesize” relevant codes in a way that they would be systematically grouped into hierarchical categories to “conceptually [make] sense” of my data (Tracy, 2013, p. 195).
findings proved to be helpful (Tracy, 2013). In line with Tracy’s (2013) iterative approach, I again employed several rounds of re-reading the data, combined with reviewing the existing theories and explanations, to come up with large categories and themes. These findings are presented in Chapters Four and Five.

3.5.2 Second Phase

The second phase included analysis of data obtained through the case study. I analyzed this data using thematic analysis. Braun and Clarke (2006) described thematic analysis as “a method for identifying, analyzing and reporting patterns (themes) within data” that “minimally organizes and describes your data set in (rich) detail” (p. 79). Thematic analysis is flexible in that it invites for both inductive and deductive analytical approaches, and in that it can aid us in exploring both explicit (semantic) and implicit (latent) meanings of our data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Moreover, it is commonly used in CSR research employing case studies or interviews as their primary strategies or data sources (e.g., Egels-Zanden & Hyllman, 2007; Hillenbrand, Money, & Pavelin, 2012; Humphreys & Brown, 2008; McShane & Cunningham, 2012; Pajo & Lee, 2011). As such, thematic analysis allowed me to look for common patterns of meaning constructions of CSR in my data, inductively, through open coding (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Patton, 2015).

My analysis process consisted of several steps. I began the analysis with initial readings of the interview and focus groups transcripts in order to familiarize myself with the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Like with one-on-one interviews in the first phase of analysis, I transcribed all audio recordings for the case study by myself. I then proceeded with the first cycle of coding, starting with the interview first, before coding each focus
group separately, one at the time. I approached the data using in vivo coding procedure (Saldaña, 2016), while also looking for topics that participants conversed with respect to their company’s CSR. This step resulted in a list of topics and other responses that I found most interesting and compelling for my study.

The next step involved going back to this list, next to other reflection and observation notes, in order to identify topics and themes that occurred in both focus groups. I also reviewed demographic sheets and interview transcripts to make a better sense of participants’ backgrounds and formal roles within their company as well as the company’s CSR initiatives and strategy. Based on this review, I revisited and reworked my research question and finalized my codebook for the second cycle of coding.

I came up with five broad categories of CSR constructions that “lumped” (Tracy, 2013) together my initial codes, and thus, helped me in the process of re-coding the data: opportunity, visibility, reach, expectation, support, and longevity. In addition to analyzing transcripts, I simultaneously carried out documentation analysis that too aided me in this process. I followed Daymon and Holloway (2011) in that analyzing multiple data sources (focus groups, interviews, documents) is a way to “cross-reference” between them in order to look for both similarities and differences (p. 320). Such approach allowed me to identify new and emerging patterns and categories within and across the entire case study data (Daymon & Holloway, 2011).

Finally, after generating these larger categories, I proceeded with collating them into themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Saldaña, 2016). I used a thematic map (see Figure 1), which enabled me to review, refine, and visualize the themes that resulted from my analysis process (Braun & Clarke, 2006). These findings are presented in Chapter Six.
Figure 1 Thematic map of the case study findings
CHAPTER 4: EMPLOYEE MEANING CONSTRUCTIONS OF CSR

It’s a really important subject, but it’s kind of, it’s kind of hard to define, isn’t it? Have you found that in your research? (Heather)

Throughout this study, I have followed Schultz et al.’s (2013) communication view on CSR. Seeing communication as symbolic, I have acknowledged that CSR communication is almost always ambiguous and contested (Christensen et al., 2015b). In this chapter, I discuss, based on empirical data, how CSR as an ambiguous and contested concept and practice emerges in and through organizational members’ talk. In doing so, I respond to my first research question: How do participants construct meanings of CSR?

I begin by discussing ambiguity around CSR, whereby I distinguish between conceptual ambiguity and ambiguity around practice. Indeed, the findings from the individual interviews suggest that participants often deal with ambiguity around CSR. I then provide examples of participants’ constructions of CSR as “value-laden” (Deetz, 2003, 2007) as a response to such ambiguity. Drawing on Sheth, Newman, and Gross’s (1991) classification of values previously adopted by Gurney and Humphreys (2006), I present the ways in which participants attribute specific values to CSR. As such, CSR does not only become a symbolic (Schultz et al., 2013) but also value-laden resource (Deetz, 2007; Gurney & Humphreys, 2006). Together, the findings from the interviews suggest that participants respond to ambiguity around CSR by negotiating multiple values, which are not only polyphonic but also contested (Gurney & Humphreys, 2006).
4.1 CSR as Perplexing and Convoluted

In the previous chapters, I have discussed that CSR is a perplexing and convoluted concept, whereby questions such as what counts as CSR, to whom or what companies should be responsible, and to what extent contextual nuances matter in CSR remain to be critical points of discussion among scholars and practitioners. The findings from the individual interviews suggest that ambiguity around CSR can be observed at two levels: conceptual and practice.

4.1.1 Conceptual Ambiguity

From the interviews, I have learned that organizational members often struggle with understanding the meaning of the term CSR. Such perceived lack of “clear-cut” or “univocal” definition of CSR is referred here as conceptual ambiguity (Christensen et al., 2015a). Indeed, many participants admitted that they were not familiar with the term CSR. George, who works as an engineer with an architecture firm, asked: “Corporate social responsibility. Never heard the term. I don’t know what it means. (laugh) How would you define it?” George was not the only participant who was wondering what CSR means and therefore sought to find the answer from the researcher. Several participants were unsure whether their understanding of CSR was “good enough” or sufficient for the study, and thus displaying their need for (greater) clarity (Eisenberg, 1984). Sam, a project coordinator in a consulting industry, also wondered what this term could stand for. He asked: “Corporate social responsibility. Hmm, it’s a good question. (laugh) Hmm, corporate social responsibility … Is that just like, is that kind of like an ethics question, is
that what that means?” Jill, a marketing manager working at an architecture firm, struggled with this “a little bit nebulous” term herself:

It’s hard to know if those actions are actually, you know, altruistic. I don’t know that I really believe in a true altruism. Because all of it sort of serves to put your name out there on the streets and show that you do care, which is sort of, it’s still self-serving, even if you are helping the community. So I’m not really clear on what, what exactly that would mean.

Negotiating possible meanings of CSR, and questioning her own beliefs against different interpretations, Jill considered the purpose and interests behind CSR that appeared to be in conflict (Guthey & Morsing, 2014).

Like George, other participants also asked for a definition at the very beginning of the interview. This speaks to a general tendency (or even expectation) among stakeholders such as employees to seek for “clarity, consistency, and discursive closure” in CSR (Guthey & Morsing, 2014, p. 120). To be in line with this study’s research design, participant were reassured there is no single, or correct, way to define this phenomenon. If asked to provide a definition, I did not share my thoughts until after the interview. This allowed participants not to be concerned whether their answers fit a specific framework, terminology, or an “objective” scholarly definition (McShane & Cunningham, 2012). Rather, they were free to make any meaning of CSR. Thus, the questions that followed were open enough so that participants could elaborate on their initial interpretations of this term, or seek for new ones, without being pushed in a specific direction. Moreover, participants were able to consider different facets and interpretations of CSR in the very moment (that is, during the actual interview), while their understandings of CSR emerged (Tracy, 2013).
Indeed, it is important to note that individual sensemaking of CSR was also stimulated by the interview process (the interview guide) itself (Tracy, 2013). For instance, Monica, who works as a management consultant, posed the following questions when making sense of CSR:

Well, that’s a good question, […] I was like gonna learn from you what exactly does that mean. I know there’s, I have some involvement in that, but I’m not sure what that definition really means. And I was gonna look it up ahead of time and I thought, no, that’s probably not fair, to do any research ahead of time. So I guess I need like more, corporate social responsibility … That’s a lot of, so is it, as far as our company, and when you say social responsibility, what does that mean? Does that mean how we interact with others? The impact that we have on, you know, business in general? Or society in general? Or, you know, our outreach programs to, you know, get people involved in the community? Like what, what defines social responsibility?

While Monica decided not to look up this term ahead of time, Leslie, another employee with the same consulting company, admitted that she did some research prior to the interview. However, Leslie shared that she still did not know what CSR means: “what I googled didn’t really made a whole lot of sense to me. So I’m thinking it’s more companies doing the right thing. Both, I guess, for their employees and then for their customers.” Leslie’s comment shows, again, how ambiguity around this concept allowed her to rethink and reconsider her existing knowledge of CSR, continuously enacting its meanings (Eisenberg, 1998; Weick, 1995). Put differently, her response speaks to an interesting interplay between “looking back” at what she had learned about this term, and the ways such interpretation and cues were influencing her sensemaking of CSR in the present moment, or moments to come in the interview process, with new meanings yet to be unfold (Weick, 1995).
Furthermore, it is important to note that ambiguity may not be in attribute(s) of this concept as such—or what Eisenberg (1984) would name a “message”—, but in multiple “possible interpretative contexts” (p. 229) that participants corresponded to through a certain medium (i.e., interviews) with an attempt to come up with tenable meanings of CSR (Weick, 1995). In line with Weick’s (1995) notion that equivocality in the sensemaking process in not in lack of or ignorance of meanings but in confusion over “multiple interpretations of the same event” (Miller, 2005, p. 211), examples from the interviews show that conceptual ambiguity may not only be in finding an univocal meaning of the term CSR as such. Rather, participants navigated through various possible interpretations of CSR to come up with those meanings that allowed them “to carry on” in our conversations (Eisenberg, 1998, p. 100; see also Weick et al., 2005). Senior consultant Priscilla’s notion of CSR as both perplexing and multifaceted concept helps to illustrate this very aspect of the employee sensemaking process:

So social responsibility to me has a lot of different facets. It has one facet of doing no harm. It has another facet of trying to find ways to the interaction with society and the corporation. It has the facet of looking at how your people and your resources can help individuals, and how they can help improve some of those things for individuals or organizations, and you fit into organization. It’s kinda convoluted, but to me it’s a lot of different facets to it.

Interestingly, for some participants and their respective organizations, CSR was not only “a fairly new term” (as referred to by Priscilla), but also a less known synonym for ideas, values, or practices that they were more familiar with, or that they had previously been involved in. Again, referring to Eisenberg (1998), these examples may speak to the ways in which conceptual ambiguity may work as “an opportunity to challenge, skirt, and reinvent” (p. 97) knowledge and experiences already enacted (Weick
et al., 2005). Nora, an employee at a design strategy company, shared that CSR is not a terminology that her company would use. Therefore, she was not sure whether she had a really “good understanding” of it. Here, the fact that some of the participating organizations used different wording or terminology to refer to their social or environmental responsibilities is worthwhile to mention, as they seem to had provided particular cues in participants’ understanding of CSR. Mitchell, an attorney and a partner with a law company, commented that while his company prefers to use the term “community involvement,” the word “CSR” might better capture his company’s commitment to the local community. In this sense, the concept of CSR provided a discursive opening for re-enacting participants’ experiences and meanings that they would otherwise use to describe (solely) their company’s involvement in community (Christensen et al., 2015a; Eisenberg, 1984; Weick, 1995).

Taking such findings into account is interesting, as they might suggest that ambiguity may not be so much about what socially responsible corporate practices or behaviors may (or may not) include, but it may rather occur due to unfamiliarity with, or confusion over, interpretations of the very term CSR. Observing her CSR involvement, Anne, an owner of an advertising firm, thought that many companies do not understand what CSR could mean. She admitted that, at first, she did not either: “I was just doing it, you know? Doing things in the space.” Here, Anne’s response poses an important question about whether a prior understanding and/or definition of CSR is needed for individuals (and their respective organizations) in order to construct certain corporate practices, policies, programs, etc. as part of their company’s CSR. In a similar manner, speaking of employee involvement in CSR, Sophia, a community manager with a
beverage production company, suggested that their employees might be more familiar with the term “community outreach:”

I mean, honestly, if you were to be like, what do you guys, how do you guys [understand] CSR, they would probably be like, what’s CSR? (laugh) You know, it’s kind of newer term to them, but you know, if you’d kind of have asked them, you know, how do you feel about, you know, your community outreach here, I think they would all say that they think it’s amazing work, they believe in it.

Sophia added that this aspect is something her company is “still are working on explaining to everybody,” which may speak to rather unstable, changing interpretations of CSR among organizational members (Mitra & Buzzanell, 2015).

In addition, despite general ambiguity around the term, Sophia’s response also suggests that there appears to be some “sense of unity” (Eisenberg, 1984) among employees in terms of what such corporate efforts may involve or look like. Such need for unity is seen from Anita’s response, too. In fact, Anita’s view was similar in that she thought that employees do not always understand what the concept of CSR means. Describing CSR as a “fluffy thing out there,” Anita, who works as a project manager at an architecture firm, was thinking about the ways in which some companies are “able to take that fluffy idea and actually create something that the everyday employee, you know, down to […] your intern, is capable of embodying and understands what it is and how to do it.” Her response corresponds with Eisenberg’s (1984) idea of using ambiguity strategically in order for an organization to accomplish its goals; namely, by enabling the development of new (refined) interpretative schemes that can initiate organizational processes aimed to achieving CSR goals and/or fostering organizational and social change (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991).
Yet another finding from participants’ constructions of CSR is worthwhile to mention here. That is, the ambiguous nature of the term CSR can also be explained in terms of specific areas or topics that participants considered falling under the umbrella of CSR. This involves concrete practices and policies that they talked about as part of their company’s CSR. For instance, Mandy, a CEO of a marketing and public relations firm, spoke about the parental leave policy that her company implemented. While she was unsure whether other people would see it as such, she counted such policy as being part of her organization’s social responsibility:

So we really just try to think about things like that, in terms of like treatment of our employees. I don’t know if that would be defined as CSR necessarily, coz it’s more about environment we create for them every day, as oppose to then our extension into the community, but it’s important to us.

Mandy’s comment also points to the contextual nature of the sensemaking process (Mills et al., 2010) through which she dealt with conceptual ambiguity. She used available “contextual cues” (Eisenberg, 1984) to interpret parental leave as CSR policy (e.g., most companies in the US are not legally required to offer parental leave, while in some other countries they are). Moreover, her response illustrates the aspect of “identity construction” in which her sensemaking is grounded (Weick, 1995). Emphasizing organizational values (e.g., what is “important to us”), Mandy constructed meanings of CSR that might not apply to all companies, but that identify who they are as a company and what is important to them.

Examples like these not only speak to participants’ unfamiliarity with, or confusion over, the CSR concept, but also indicate, discursively, how such conceptual ambiguity may affect the ways in which individuals make sense of CSR as well as their
selves (Eisenberg, 1998; Weick, 1995). Importantly, such discursive traces point to ambiguity around CSR at practice level—that is, how participants deal with perplexing and convoluted nature of CSR when it comes to their own (organizational) involvement in CSR. This construction of ambiguity is further explained in the following section.

4.1.2 Ambiguity Around Practice

The findings suggest that there is ambiguity around CSR not only in terms of the concept as such, but also in regard to the criteria that identify what counts as CSR with respect to participants’ organizational contexts and their involvement in CSR. I term these discursive traces as ambiguity around CSR practice, distinguishing them from conceptual ambiguity in that the former are more explicitly concerned with individual and/or company identity constructions (Weick, 1995; Weick et al., 2005) as being socially responsible, and implications of such constructions for CSR involvement. Unpacking ambiguity around CSR, as it discursively appears at two distinct, yet interdependent levels, helps us to delve deeper into situations where ambiguity both restricts and invites employees to get involved in CSR in(action), thereby, shaping their sense of self with respect to CSR (Eisenberg, 1998; Weick et al., 2005).

From the analysis, I learned that participants coped with ambiguity around CSR at practice level in various ways. One way was by retrospectively thinking back of their past work experiences (Weick et al., 2005). Here, ambiguity appears to be coming from the existing cues which participants used to make sense of both their current and future job experiences (Weick, 1995). Paul, who works at a consulting company, compared his current and former employers using the following words:
Because this is the first company that I’ve ever seen really getting involved with that type of responsibility, it’s hard for me to judge what other companies should or shouldn’t do. Right now I think it’s important. Like I said, it’s a sense of pride for me that I can point to my company and say, “We’re socially responsible.” But the level of [how] important it is to me, I don’t know if I can put a value to that. I can’t say, on a value of 0 to 9, or 1 to 10, I don’t know if I could actually value that.

Uncertainty, and a perceived lack of experience and knowledge of CSR, allowed Paul to be open to re-constructing his sense of organizational identity (“We’re socially responsible”), while also accepting the fact that these meanings may not be fixed or stable (“Right now I think it’s important”) (Eisenberg, 1998).

However, while one would expect that ambiguity around CSR at the conceptual level was the reason why some participants struggled to explain to what extent they considered their company socially responsible, this was not the case with all participants. Antonio, a lawyer, suggested that his company does not have a clear way of measuring or defining CSR: “I think that we are very socially responsible. I don’t think we have a very clear system for measuring it. Or defining it, actually.” In a similar manner, Oscar, who works as a research manager, offered:

I mean, I would say that the overarching, you know, mission is, you know, we want to be a 100 percent involved. So I don’t know, you know, [have] specific metrics or statistics to say like how much of that we’re actually living up to [CSR] at this point. But the vision and the overarching goal of what we do is to be as socially responsible as we possibly can.

Such examples point to the fact that, while there might not be a specific criterion or a way of measuring companies’ CSR, this does not mean that participants do not view their companies as being socially responsible. In this sense, ambiguity may not necessarily be
seen as restricting but rather welcoming so that there are different interpretations of what CSR may (or may not) mean at a more practical level (Eisenberg, 1984).

Interestingly, Oscar’s comment also illustrates that there might be corporate texts (such as statements of organizational vision, goals, standards, etc.) that provide cues in dealing with ambiguity around CSR at practice level. Tim, a researcher at an information services company, also spoke about his company’s CSR in regard to certification that they decided to obtain in order to be recognized as a socially and environmentally conscious company. However, he admitted that he was unsure about the extent to which his organization actually “succeeded” in the certification assessment process: “I don’t know had we gotten to that level, we’re still pretty fresh with it.” Oscar, who works with the same company, also questioned the firm’s CSR, and the role employees play in it. He said: “Yeah, I don’t know, […] it’s difficult because, as of now, like our formal, you know, contributions are somewhat limited. Because we’re still trying to figure out the, yeah, the community and the like what our role is, I guess, in terms of [CSR].” Again, these discursive nuances hint to an underlying belief that shared meaning and clarity are something that employees and their respective companies strive to achieve, and work toward, through a continuous reenactment of what CSR might look like in practice (Eisenberg, 1984; Weick, 1995). At the same time, such findings speak to Eisenberg’s (1984) argument that meanings are not “inherent in discourse” but essentially “constituted by individuals” (p. 229) involved in the sensemaking process. In other words, it is organizational members who co-construct, negotiate among, and ascribe meanings of CSR within a particular social (organizational) context (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991).
Yet, a further elaboration is needed with this respect. As with conceptual ambiguity, ambiguity at organizational practice level may not necessarily pose constraints to organizations, for the concern is not in detailed, literal, or precise understanding of CSR, where the idea is to narrow interpretations and move “toward the same views” (Eisenberg, 1984, p. 231). Rather, ambiguity can mean “fostering agreement on abstractions without limiting specific interpretations” (Eisenberg, 1984, p. 231). Peter, a CEO of a research information company, shared that while not everybody within his firm might be familiar with every detail of their CSR assessment process, together they would come up with a common conclusion:

Yeah, I feel like, you know, everybody here knows that we are a benefits corporation. Not everybody here knows the specifics. And I, to be truly honest, I don’t think that I could, if you’d quizzed me on every single aspect of it, I don’t know that I’d get it all right. But I know that collectively we would all get it right. That’s how much people influence the specifics.

Discursively, Peter’s answer poses important questions regarding the role of employees influencing “the specifics” of organizational CSR, and what that means in terms of dealing with ambiguity around CSR practice. In addition, his response suggests that it is the openness to “co-construction through communication with others” (Eisenberg, 1998, p. 101) that is helping his company cope with ambiguity around CSR practice.

However, it is important to note that ambiguity concerning what counts as CSR, and how CSR can be measured and implemented, seemed to present a challenge to some participants. Anita shared that she is sometimes unsure about the results of her work in an architecture firm: “But if I don’t have any action items, if I don’t have any data at the end of the day to fill, how do I, how do I prove that I’m doing it?” For Anita, such ambiguity can be a “struggle.” She wondered:
How do I know I’ve been sustainably responsible? You know, I’ve pulled, I have, I’m saving this much energy and I, you know, have my little numbers, I’ve saved this much stuff from land, […] there’s a checklist, there’s a way you design to check things, that you’ve designed that way. How, how do I know that I’m meeting the corporate, that I’m being responsible in a way? What’s that, what is that? What am I doing? Yeah. They’re supposed to be taking about it and doing it, sometimes it’s huge. Sometimes I feel that that can be, you know, the struggle. Is, OK, you want me to do these things, but [...] how to do them and what that looks like [...] sometimes is the hard part.

Here, discursive traces of having no “way to track that” and little understanding of “what that is they’re wanting” suggest that Anita struggled with implementation of CSR as an employee. However, despite such perceived constraints, she was hopeful that this might change in the future:

So hopefully, here, in the next couple of months, [...] I’ll have a table that will be in my drawings, that I will be able to fill out and that it will answer that. It will be hard data to that question, am I being corporate responsible to the level that we want to be? And I’ll have, it’ll be right there. And I can out that on all my projects. Some may or may not get there, just the nature of the projects. But I should be on the majority, at least to have that benchmark to kind of make sure that I’m really asking the right questions and doing it in my everyday.

For Anita, being able to “go through the process to deliver, to make it tangible, to make it real” was important. She suggested: “It’s a tangible piece then at that point.”

Interestingly, responses like this may speak to “existing interpretive schemes” (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991, p. 446), or other “material conditions” (Mitra & Buzzanell, 2015, p. 132), that individuals’ ongoing meaning constructions of CSR are depended upon, providing an opportunity to not only sustain but also improve their CSR actions over time (Koep, 2017; Weick et al., 2005).
4.2 CSR as Value-Laden and Contested

This study also looked beyond ambiguity around CSR to study how meanings of CSR emerge through participants’ negotiation of multiple values that they attributed to CSR. Discursive constructions of CSR as a corporate value, or its outcome, that gets communicated—both explicitly and implicitly (O’Connor et al., 2016)—through organizations’ daily operations were common in the interviews. Heather, a management consultant, spoke about the importance of values and how they get communicated. According to her, “a socially responsible company puts their values right out there.” She described how such communication process occurs within her company:

If you look at our website, you’ll see the core principles that are embodied by the company. So honesty, integrity, you know, those types of things. And those are right on our website, and not only are they on our website, but if you go into our office […] you see these hanging on the walls. And you also, if you hang around long enough, you’ll hear about them too.

Brian, who works as a corporate recruiter at a consulting company, referred to CSR differently as something that “rises from” his company’s values. For him, values are “critical” and more than just words on a paper:

So, you know, I think that to understand our values, to understand that they’re not just words on a page, but they’re a thing we actually try to live on the daily basis. And you know, we [fail] from time to time, but I think for the most part we’re pretty honest with ourselves and pretty true to what we believe. I mean, to me, that’s the most important piece, right, because you wanna act in the way that’s consistent with the way you present yourself. And I think that, in most cases, when you interact with people, if you’re not doing that, it becomes obvious pretty quickly.
Here, Brain’s emphasis was on words and actions, or the ways his company communicates about values and how those values get acted out in their everyday work, that need to be in alignment with one another. The findings like these point to participants’ sensemaking as a process of negotiation between “stated” and “practiced” values that tie to CSR (O’Connor et al., 2016, p. 46), and what difference does it make when values are enacted in everyday talk and interactions (Weick et al., 2005).

Furthermore, participants spoke about values and their alignment at an individual level. Such constructions suggest their perceived importance of value consistency in CSR (Christensen et al., 2015b; O’Connor et al., 2016). Again, Brian’s response comes to mind. He talked about challenges around value mismatch in that “Either you believe the values that the organization you belong to espouses, or you don’t. And […] if you don’t, you can probably owe it to yourself and the company to find another organization to work for.” Rather differently, Tina’s response suggests that CSR may also be seen as some sort of “quest for value” (Gurney & Humphreys, 2006). Sharing her previous work experiences and struggles with finding a job, Tina talked about how, in her current role as an orders manager at an information services company, CSR has “really developed my mind into what value does this have for other people.” She added: “It’s very important. It’s become a basis of my life.” Such responses provide important insights into how participants positioned themselves against values that drive, or derive from, CSR in distinct ways. In this sense, again, CSR can be regarded essentially as a “manifestation of values” (O’Connor et al., 2016, p. 47) that inform and shape individual sensemaking of CSR and participants’ selves.
The findings also speak to the polyphony and multiplicity of values that participants attached to CSR, confirming that communication pertaining to CSR is essentially symbolic (Christensen et al., 2015b; Schultz et al., 2013). Employing a meaning-driven analysis with a focus on value attributions (Saldaña, 2016), I approached CSR as a “value-laden” resource (Deetz, 2003, 2007). Indeed, I followed Deetz (2003) in questioning not just whether CSR is discursively described as a value, but also what (and whose) values matter in participants’ constructions of CSR. From consumer behavior literature, I borrowed Sheth et al.’s (1991) classification of values as functional, social, emotional, conditional, and epistemic. This classification was previously used to study employees searching for interrelated values in regard to CSR (see Gurney & Humphreys, 2006). In addition to these categories, the political value was identified in this study as another meaning attribution to CSR. The findings that respond to this part of the analysis are presented in the following paragraphs.

4.2.1 Functional Value

Functional value describes functional, utilitarian, or physical attributes to CSR (Sheth et al., 1991). As previously discussed by Gurney and Humphreys (2006), this value “resonates with the instrumental or economic perspective on CSR” (p. 89) in that it emphasizes value of CSR from the functionality and measurement point of view (Sheth et al., 1991). In studying participants’ constructions of CSR, the functional value was used as an attribute to make sense of CSR in three different ways: value for and beyond profit, value of communication, and value of positive work environment.
4.2.1.1 For and Beyond Profit as a Value

In constructing meanings of CSR, participants used the functional value to make sense of CSR in terms of both the value that CSR can bring in making profit as well as value of CSR beyond making profit. Dominic, who works at an architecture company, shared that CSR is “a responsibility corporations have beyond making profit.” Such a response, seeing CSR as more than solely profit making, was common among participants. Researcher Matt’s answer was similar in that he stressed that CSR goes beyond just doing business:

[…] not to sound […] superficial but it does, I think it’s used not only to make our company more appealing to do business with but also kind of shows that we’re not just an average capital building company. You know what I mean? That we care about what we do. And I think that that’s pretty strong.

Functional value can also be seen in the ways participants talked about what companies have to provide to their employees, including worker retention and recruitment. Sam, a project coordinator at a consulting company, shared that CSR is important to him, because “you don’t wanna work at a company that just turns on a product and it’s like a job […] this is what you do, and then you can leave.” Emphasizing that being socially responsible means more than just doing a “job,” he went on, suggesting:

I think being socially responsibility, like, you take into account that people are human, and people have needs outside of. You know, making money and, like, you know, working on like a project that really doesn’t mean much […] So to me, you know, a socially responsible company will take into account, I think, that […] they treat you as humans. And humans needs breaks, humans need, you know, time to […] process things.
Again, instrumentality of CSR was highlighted (Gurney & Humphreys, 2006).

Similarly, for Anita, CSR meant the ability of her company to provide a safe environment and enhance wellbeing of her as an employee. She too listed things, such as being allowed to take a break during work hours and being compensated for her work, to illustrate how her employer performs its CSR. Anita also spoke about prioritizing quality work over profit while ensuring that all relevant resources are there in order for employees to be able to do their work:

So as a licensed architect, I’m responsible for the welfare and life safety of others. So part of that is also, you know, the corporation here making sure that I’m equipped with the tools and the resources. And to create safe spaces, that they’re not asking me to cut corners and do things that I shouldn’t be doing […] to make a profit, that would reduce safe environment that I am creating and designing.

Anita pointed to her company’s responsibility to set right expectations and provide needed resources, but also her own responsibility in making sure that she does so. In this sense, meanings of CSR that emerged through participants’ talk speak to “instrumental reasons” for such practice (Haack et al., 2012) enacted at the company level as well as individually.

4.2.1.2 Value of Communication

Participants also attributed the functional value to talk about CSR as a communication tool that contributes to better the image and reputation of their respective companies. Such a view aligns with the transmission view of CSR communication (e.g., Golob et al., 2013; Schoeneborn & Trittin, 2013) discussed previously. Matt shared that CSR can be a good tool that his company can use to “represent” itself in a good light, such as through marketing or its presence at conferences and trade shows. He explained:
“I think it helps […] us move through this industry with a little bit […] more grace I think is a good way to put it. […] but that grace is effortless. (laugh)” In his words, such representation is not only “attractive,” but also “right thing to do.” Sebastian, an information researcher, too spoke about CSR as a way his company can market itself at conferences. He added: “you know, we wanna be seen as a progressive, forward minded, conscious company.”

Functional value attribution was also seen in participants’ constructions of CSR when making sense of what such communication efforts can bring, for example, in terms of their benefits. Dominic’s answer speaks to this:

And frankly, when you are competing for work, and if there’re comparing prices for two different firms, you know, it’s things that get cut if a client doesn’t want it. But if we can get to them outside of that negotiation competition, kind of environment, you know, as a marketing event or at a nonprofit social responsible event or something like that, that’s where […] it does open up that discussion a little bit sooner. And maybe keeps them from making that verbose choice.

Other participants also framed CSR as what makes “good PR” and as a “great marketing tool.” Mitchell explained how CSR helps retain or gain new clients:

So if we can do a little bit of good PR from the good work we’re doing, people say […] I like that law firm because they are, you know, they are [a socially responsible] company, I’d rather go to them than go to, you know, that other law firm down the road. Because you know what? I like what they’re doing.

Katelyn, who works in human resources at a social services company, was of similar thoughts: “It’s you know, selfishly, it’s, it’s a good PR thing for us to do. But I think it also just helps re-interrogate the commitment that we have to what we do, and that although we are receiving we’re also giving back.” She talked about CSR as being
beneficial not only to the community as such but also for her company to strengthen its community relationships.

Despite these and other benefits, participants also expressed concerns with such value, thereby, showing that CSR practice is indeed contested (Okoye, 2009). Donna, a bookkeeper at a law firm, shared that her company is perhaps too concerned with “the marketing aspect of it” rather than “actually doing it.” She thought that due to marketing being “the main goal,” this may be “the turn off for some of the employees” being willing to engage in such corporate efforts. Donna supported her views with a story when her company helped a local nonprofit:

Well, OK, so when we did the [food bank] thing and, you know, it was kind of fun, and you know, but they want to make sure we’ll get this on Facebook. So in a way, it seemed more important to them that everybody else knows than the importance of actually doing it. Which, I can see both sides. But to me sometimes giving should be satisfaction in itself. I don’t know.

Responses like this nonetheless point to tensions in such value negotiation process, while suggesting that values that pertain to CSR are also bound to conflict and are competing (Deetz, 2003).

**4.2.1.3 Positive Work Environment as a Value**

Functional value of CSR was also constructed in regard to companies creating a work environment where employees feel good, happy, safe, and healthy. Such findings correspond with previous research that emphasizes functionality of CSR as a tool to attract as well as retain employees (e.g., Bhattacharya et al., 2008). Cody, a founder of a cosmetics production company, commented that this aspect helps with his firm’s productivity. He shared that “if people are happy at work […] they’ll produce a 100
percent quality product.” For him, it is important for companies to realize that one of the key returns on investment, with CSR, is your workforce: “And then, I mean, you can keep in institutional knowledge, you have low turnover, you have people that are happy at work. It’s really, I mean, that’s, that’s the key component to have a successful company that grows.”

Furthermore, such constructions speak to an underlying meaning that these values are something that employees may, indeed, be searching for when CSR is of concern (Gurney & Humphreys, 2006). For instance, Peter emphasized the importance of keeping employees happy and healthy, and making sure that they do not leave the organization. He provided an example of his company supporting employees by offering them a half-paid gym membership:

Like, I don’t wanna store 500 dollars out there, I want you to use it, and not because I’m just throwing 500 dollars out there, but because it will be a benefit for you. You’ll feel better about yourself, you’ll live a healthier, happier lifestyle. It’s something that you’ve chosen to pursue, so I don’t want money to get into the way of it right. We wanna assist in any way possible.

Peter also highlighted the importance of employees recognizing and taking advantage of such opportunities. His response suggests that CSR is constructed as an investment that his company makes—or an utilitarian value that can help employees accomplish certain goals (Gurney & Humphreys, 2006).

On the other hand, Mandy spoke about the overall culture that her company is trying to create for its employees in order for them to feel good, while at the same time contributing to corporate success. She gave the following answer when talking about what her company has to offer to its employees:
And so for us that means providing our staff with the place [with], you know, a vibrant community feel, a place where they like to come to work, where they feel like they have the flexibility and autonomy to really be themselves, while also working together towards our firm’s greater mission, which is to help change making organizations rise to the top.

Again, such discursive constructions indicate the value of functionality (e.g., worker retention) and measurement (e.g., feeling good) in participants’ sensemaking of CSR. Moreover, responses like these also speak to the ways in which specific organizational policies and practices (for instance, employee benefits) inform and shape meanings of CSR among participants in distinct ways (O’Connor et al., 2016).

4.2.2 Social Value

Social value can be identified as an attribute for “one or more specific social groups,” or ways to associate “positively or negatively stereotyped demographic, socioeconomic, and cultural–ethnic groups” (Sheth et al., 1991, p. 161). Without an exception, participants associated CSR with value of giving back, helping, or in other ways supporting others, particularly the communities in which their companies operate, as well as their own employees. Below, I present discursive constructions of CSR around the values of giving, caring, and respect.

4.2.2.1 Value of Giving

Giving back to the community—either through monetary donations, time, or other means and resources—was common among participants when making sense of CSR. Mitchell’s definition of CSR helps to illustrate such findings: “I believe that each of us have a responsibility to give back. And so that would be giving back to the community in
various ways. So to me, just like the name sounds, [CSR] is just being able to give back, whether it’s monetarily, time treasures, and talents.” Similarly, Suzy, a CEO of a communications firm, emphasized the importance of giving back in that “we wanna really be very conscious and aware of the fact that we’re part of a broader community, and making sure that we’re giving back to that community.” In this respect, a wider impact of CSR on the community was being emphasized (Gurney & Humphreys, 2006).

Discursively, the value of giving back was also talked about as something companies should or need to do, suggesting a rather normative framing of CSR with emphasis on the companies’ ethical and/or moral obligations (Garriga & Melé, 2004).

Sophia’s response comes to mind when thinking of such discursive constructions: “I just always think that it’s good, if you can; you should always give back, if you’re able. And there’s so many people that need it. So I think it’s just important all around, and you never know when you might be one of those people that need it one day.” Jill’s response illustrates a similar discursive nuance used, namely, CSR as “part of what is moral.” She stated:

Right, you don’t have to be a kind person or responsible to your neighbors. You don’t have to give back to your community as a company, but it’s the right thing to do, so to speak. I mean, you might call it karma or balance or, you know, putting positive things out is how you get positive things back.

What one can note from this response are ethical and moral cues that Jill, like other participants, used in making sense of CSR from a “giving back” perspective (Weick, 1995).

Participants also talked about different ways in which companies can give back and support their communities. Such findings speak to an interesting interplay among
multiple meanings of CSR, as they relate to decision making (Deetz, 2003) and relationship management (Dhanesh, 2014), whereby interpersonal relationships between the company and various social groups are also put forward. Spencer, who works as a researcher, shared that companies need to think about potential harm that they might be doing to the environment in which they operate:

I think that a socially responsible company is one […] [that] makes investments and business decisions around with consideration to how it might impact negatively the environment or the social community that it’s a part of. I think it is also company that makes decisions or just even sacrifices which are intended to benefit the community that it’s part of.

Spencer did not only talk about CSR practices and initiatives as such, but also the decision making process that takes place within the company as a springboard for enacting socially responsible behavior (Deetz, 2003; Weick et al., 2005).

Rather differently, for Elizabeth, a community relations manager at a beverage company, giving back was important both from the relationships standpoint and in terms of making connections among other organizations and individuals. She described how a socially responsible company would be perceived by her: “they’re actually putting in time and research, and finding out what’s going on, and, you know, what resources and needs are really out there […] and also I think it’s a company that can help connect.”

Here, Elizabeth’s answer speaks to broader implications of giving back, going beyond her company as such. This can also be seen from Oscar’s response, however, reversely. He explained:

Because if you can’t do that, then you really, you know, don’t care that much. At least that’s how I see it. You know, if you don’t care enough to make sure that your employees and your immediate stakeholders are taken care of, and have their
needs met or, you know, whatever, then I don’t necessarily trust that you’re gonna be out there making sure that the community around you is benefiting from your business operations either.

Importantly, such responses also part with the findings around the value of caring (which I present next), confirming multiplicity of values and meanings that come into play in participants’ constructions of CSR (Gurney & Humphreys, 2006).

4.2.2.2 Value of Care

While the value of giving back was constructed as a response to what the company is taking away from community, the value of caring was identified here as broadly as a “one-way” taking care of a specific social group. Next to community, participants spoke about care for environment, employees, and clients. Mary, who works as a case manager, focused primarily on volunteering as part of her company’s CSR:

“You want to know that we are resource and we are supporting [community] as much as possible. And that we care about what we’re doing. It’s not just a job, where we’re just through the 9 to 5. We’re here to support with anything that we can do.”

As opposed to Sam’s expression noted previously of “a job” being more than just making products (i.e., functional value of CSR), Mary used a similar discursive feature (“not just a job”) to make sense of CSR as support to the community. Such value attribution can also be seen from Peter’s response, when he talked about his company’s care for environment:

I think that one of the offshoot benefits is being able to tell your friends about your job, and one of the things they like about their job is that we’re not just a company, we’re also involved in the community, we’re involved in the environment. And that there’s no real cost to doing that. You know, there’s
probably some mental cost, but I don’t see that as being really a cost. It’s more about how we all see our role in our communities and on this Earth.

Making sense of his company’s role against, or as part of, other social groups, Peter suggested that they are “not just a company” but part of something larger (“Earth”). Examples like these help illustrate participants’ constructions of CSR as perceived “necessity to achieve a good society” (Garriga & Melé, 2004, p. 60).

However, the value of care was also constructed more narrowly—that is, around work environment. For Mitchell, you have to “look inwards” and take into account “how can you be good corporate stewards to your own people, your own employees.” He also spoke about limitations around this very aspect of CSR, which may speak to the idea that CSR is, indeed, contextual:

You know, we can’t be to the level of the googles, you know, where they can, you know, give you six months off paid. Well, we don’t have that luxury. But what we can do is we institute like early out Friday. So from Memorial Day to Labor Day we close the office at three with the philosophy, we want you to spend more time with your family. So go home, you know, enjoy a little bit longer weekend in the summer time, you know, and early fall. And so that tries to help instill that, you know, we do care about everyone, you know, in their family relationships, or what they do outside of the office.

To illustrate such care for their own employees, Mitchell referred to institutionalized policies and practices that his company had installed.

Rather differently, Jill discussed the importance of taking care of yourself before you take care of others. She shared the following thoughts:

I think that taking care of yourself is important so that, you know, it’s your responsibility – how do I say this one – it’s your responsibility to care of yourself, so that you can be a high functioning member of society. And if you don’t take
care of yourself and you’re not able to give the gifts that you have, the things that are important skills to you, back to the world, then you’re not only like doing yourself a disservice. You’re doing disservice to your community.

Jill used the analogy of relationships to explain the importance of such value: “you know, you see that played out on a lot of different levels. Even in relationships, right, if you don’t love yourself, you can’t love someone else.” Beyond the social value, this example also indicates meaning construction of CSR in regard to the functional value (“functioning member of society,” “effective”), while it also speaks to the emotional attribute (indirectly) attached to CSR (“love”). Such discursive constructions correspond with Gurney and Humphrey’s (2006) notion of CSR facilitating “the coexistence of a plurality of values that are relativistically constructed and narrativised by organizational stakeholders” (p. 83).

### 4.2.2.3 Value of Respect

With regard to the social value, participants also spoke about respect for others, most notably, employees and clients. In this sense, participants’ constructions of this term and practice shifted from broader orientation of CSR (community, society) toward a narrower orientation of CSR (employees, clients) that, again, helped participants in enacting their organizational identities of what it means to be a socially responsible company (Weick et al., 2005). Cody shared his experience working for companies where he felt that respect was lacking:

I’ve been in a lot of different kinds of working environments and so, you know, we gotta set a tone at work where, you know, there’s not, we’re not gonna tolerate jokes about, you know, religion, politics, you know, sexual orientation, gender identity. You know, we’re not gonna tolerate any, you know, any kind of like
that, you know. [...] We’re not giving each other nicknames, you know, but we’re gonna create, you know, a level of respect amongst everyone. And that there’s gonna be a zero tolerance.

Speaking about this issue, he explained that he “had to let people go because [...] of the inappropriate remark.” In a similar manner, Sam framed respect as an expectation and a core value his company has put in place that would guide employees in their daily work: “we’re all expected to kind of follow these guidelines, and I think a lot of it just kind of translates into how we, you know, interact with costumers, each other. You know, you wanna be respectful, you don’t wanna lie.” Sam went on to suggest that this value, together with other corporate values, “ties into social responsibility” because it is “something that you want and need to follow.”

Consultant manager Jeremy’s response too comes to mind when studying participants’ constructions of CSR around the value of respect. He shared a story about the leader of his company walking away from a meeting, when a female colleague was treated with disrespect by one of their clients:

[...] he was in a meeting and one of the customers, you know, people that pay us money to do work was disrespecting, you know, was saying something disrespectful to one of our fellow female employees. And you know, he said, I was done with it, and we got up and I walked out, and we left [...] coz it wasn’t right. And I did respect that, I though that was really bold and the right thing to do, and most people wouldn’t do it, right.

The above examples help illustrate how participants spoke of the value of respect as something that is derived both by the company and its employees (Gurney & Humphreys, 2006).
In a similar manner, Courtney, who works as a consultant, linked CSR with respect when it comes to her company’s social responsibility. She spoke about CSR from an aspect of how “employees interact with each other and with customer.” She thought that while “definitely everybody has a role in that […] some people carry it out more so than others.” She explained:

Unfortunately, I’ve seen like some bad like, I don’t know, I’ve seen the way that some people treat other people is not what I would have expected [in] this company. And so that was kind of discouraging to see, especially, like in the first couple of months, and after like having all these, like, really high expectations, you know? So it was disappointing to see some people who weren’t really treating others with a lot of respect.

While Courtney added “that’s not the norm for the company” and that “those people are in a minority,” words like “discouraging” and “disappointing” also indicate ways she tried to position herself against such events, emotionally. Such findings align with Gurney and Humphreys’s (2006) study in that the social value of respect is “conveyed in conjunction with an emotional reaction to this value” (p. 90)—or the emotional value.

Interestingly, participants’ constructions of CSR around the value of respect also went beyond relationships as such. For Mandy, being respectful to own employees can also be seen in ways her company goes about employee work time. She shared that allowing employees to work remotely is one way that her company displays such value of respect. Acknowledging that “some might not say [this] is CSR,” Mandy said that in her company they “really believe in treating our employees with respect and letting them determine how and when and where to spend their time.” She explained that as long as employees are getting their jobs done, they have the autonomy to work flexible hours.

Here, the social value of respect overlaps with the functional value of positive work
environment that enables employees to be satisfied with their job schedule, while receiving organizational support to perform their work effectively and efficiently.

4.2.3 Emotional Value

Participants’ constructions of CSR can also be traced in terms of emotions, feelings, or affective states that CSR evokes (Sheth et al., 1991). Such “emotional language” (p. 10) was commonly used by participants to express appreciation for CSR, either at the company level or for one’s own sake (Gurney & Humphreys, 2006). Heather’s comment helps to illustrate the emotional value from a more general viewpoint, when she shared: “you know, it’s kind of like, do I look at the numbers, or do I look at the emotion and the intent behind the numbers. And there’s a vast difference. And that’s corporate responsibility to me.” Looking into specific emotions and feelings that participants attributed to CSR, the values of happiness, comfort, and pride were most common.

4.2.3.1 Value of Happiness

Apart from the examples shared previously in regard to positive work environment as a functional value of CSR, the value of happiness was also a common discursive feature used to make sense of CSR as it relates to evoked feelings and emotions concerning workplace. Tim explained that he learned about CSR only recently, but that he expects this area to be “growing quite heavily.” When asked to provide reasons for his excitement about CSR development, he responded:

A general love and care for humans. (laugh) And everyone, there’s no reason for you to just be a huge gross money grabbing machine. There’s no reason for
people to do that, and I’m happy to be part of the company that is not, really, its primary function is to make money […] not to amass a huge amounts of wealth that it does not redistribute to other people.

Tim used the words “love” and “happy” to describe his feelings, while also negotiating other values (functional, social) to come up with meanings of CSR. Other participants too spoke about their emotions as they pertain to CSR. Leslie shared that she feels “lucky” to work for a company that is socially responsible:

I feel really glad that I work at a company that does care and does try to be responsible. So it is important to me, I mean obviously, you know, people don’t necessarily have the ability to always pick and choose where they work. So I do feel really lucky that I work at a company that does seem to take their responsibility seriously.

Both appreciation and happiness—evoked by social responsibility of her company (Sheth et al., 1991)—were used by Leslie in her sensemaking process.

However, participants did not only converse about positive but also negative emotions with respect to social responsibility of their organization. Jill argued that it is important for her that her employer continues “to develop ways that we can be responsible.” She explained:

There are some people here who are very frustrated, and I think their sense of morale, my sense of the company morale is that […] it has declined. Maybe not for everyone, but there are people who work here because they really do care about sustainability, about working for the community, and they feel like they that things are sort of misaligned. So it’s important that we actually follow through on these more noble principles in order to keep our organization as a whole uplifted, and people feeling good about the work that they’re producing.

According to Jill, when you “have happy people who feel like they’re part of something better than just what they can do on their own […] you get better work, you have happier
individuals and society.” Thereby, she also pointed to the functional value of CSR practice. Such responses, again, speak to CSR as a manifestation of multiple, polyphonic values (Christensen et al., 2015b; O’Connor et al., 2016; Gurney & Humphreys, 2006).

Discursive traces of such value and their overlap with constructions of other value types can also be seen from instances when participants spoke about their leadership. Tina shared that CSR is “mostly powered” by her company’s CEO who she sees as an “illuminating” and “positive source.” She spoke about her leader bringing together people who all are caring. Experiencing that with her current employer made Tina realize “how negative I was as a person” before she joined the company. She added: “And I feel like I really changed for the better. So […] that puts pressure on me to be positive and to give back as much as I can.” Paul too spoke about the leadership of his company being caring and recognizing “a need.” Similar to the examples shared previously, he used the word “love” to describe emotions and feelings that pertain to CSR (emotional value), combined with phrases, such as “caring,” indicating the social value of CSR as well:

I think they may have even been there at one time. They understand that the only [way] people that are gonna be making a change are the people making changes, and they’re one of those. And they’re interested in evolving their area, their responsibilities, their living conditions, and they know that it only could be done one individual by the time and people getting involved. So I think they definitely have, they show love for the people that they work for, they care about them, it’s saddens them when anything happens to them, and they’re joyful when good things happen to those people. It starts with really caring about other things than just money.


4.2.3.2 Value of Pride

A closely related finding was the value of pride that participants attached to CSR. Jill’s comment about CSR giving “employees a sense of pride to be part of an organization that cares about the community” helps illustrate such construction. Jeremy’s response comes to mind as well. While he thought CSR was important, he did not think his company not practicing CSR would affect whether he takes on his current job:

I guess it’s one way or another. It wouldn’t turned me away, if they didn’t do any of that. The fact they do do it, that’s great. I mean, yeah, to me personally it wouldn’t be a decision maker, oh, I’m not gonna go there because they don’t do these activities. But the fact that they do, I guess it makes me a little proud to see that they take that care and […] actually promoting that type of thoughts.

Another participant, Paul, too shared that he is “proud to work for a company that has social responsibility ingrained in it.” He added: “it’s a sense of pride, it’s a sense that they are doing something, and they’re getting employees involved in doing something.” As it was often the case with other participants, Paul compared his previous job experiences with the current one in order to negotiate meanings of his company’s CSR, retrospectively (Weick, 1995). He explained:

Because this is the first company that I’ve ever seen really getting involved with that type of responsibility, it’s hard for me to judge what other companies should or shouldn’t do. Right now I think it’s important. Like I said, it’s a sense of pride for me that I can point to my company and say, we’re socially responsible.

Value of pride was also constructed in terms of how companies communicate their CSR commitment and CSR practices. Anne pointed to the fact that her company has been publicly recognized for being socially and environmentally conscious: “We were pretty thrilled, and I was proud. And I’m not one to be like, oh, look at us, we’re great.
But I felt like it would help others. Because like me, I didn’t know what the heck it was.”

In a similar manner, Kirsten, who works as a project manager, spoke about her company communicating that it is being CSR certified: “We’re proud, we’ll put that on our site, we’re proud to have it on our door.” Both examples indicate pride that CSR evokes for participants and their companies.

Participants also spoke of being proud when referring to concrete corporate practices that their companies identify with as well as the outcomes of their work. Brain described an initiative of donating professional clothing that his company takes pride in:

[…] we live in an era where a lot of companies let people come to work looking however they wanna look. But in [our company] people dress professionally. And there’s a couple of reasons for that. One is that, you know, we need to convey to our clients, to our potential clients, that we are professional. And professionals dress is certain way. So, you know, we take a great deal of pride in that.

Brian’s response suggests that this initiative might be something around which his company is able to (re-)construct its corporate identity; namely, as “professionals” in their respective industry. Similar in this regard, Jill spoke about individuals in her company’s being proud of their work:

So the architecture profession is full of some very strong personalities. People who study for years and years, and before they can even get their lives insured, you have to be a subject matter expert. And when you stamp your name, you have that stamp because you have demonstrated, over a number of years and many exams, […] that you’re proficient in what you do. And it’s legally binding, right. If you stamp something, something happens with the building, then things can come back to you or to your firm. And they can say, hey, was this actually designed properly, because this person slipped and hurt [himself], or this building collapsed, or whatever. And I think along with that, you tend to get personalities
that start to take a lot of pride in their work. People who believe that they know better than anyone else.

Here, Jill’s construction of CSR also speaks to responsibility that comes with being an “expert” in a certain subject area, which overlaps with the epistemic value of CSR (explained in later paragraphs).

4.2.3.3 Value of Comfort

Among specific emotional values that could be discursively traced in participants’ sensemaking of CSR was also the value of comfort. While such value attribution may as well correspond with the functional value (e.g., being comfortable or ensuring comfort within one’s work environment), this particular value type is used here to illustrate constructions of CSR as being “associated with specific feelings” (Sheth et al., 1991, p. 161) pertaining to participants’ comfort. Like examples shared previously, the findings show how sensemaking process in, and through, which employees negotiate meanings of CSR evolves in retrospection of their previous experiences and observations (Weick et al., 2005). Thinking of her current and past work experiences, Kirsten shared that she feels “really comfortable” with her current job:

I feel like if anybody is slipping in any way in corporate responsibility or social responsibility, or not living [it] up, it would be really obvious. And I like that we’re all held really accountable in our review process that we’re living up to these ideas into how we feel responsible to carry that forward.

Such responses also speak to identity construction—that is, what it means to be socially responsible—both at individual and organizational (collective) levels (Weick, 1995). For instance, Brain reflected upon his previous jobs in order to make sense of her current CSR experience: “So social responsibility wasn’t part of who we were. And even then,
you know, 30 years ago, I was very uncomfortable with that [and] I ended up leaving [that company] pretty quickly and go and work for [another company].” When asked whether he would like to change anything in regard to his current company’s CSR, Brian responded with “not really.” He said that he likes the way his company approaches CSR, and the fact that he has an opportunity “to influence, you know, where we contribute and how we engage with the community.” Negotiating the values of happiness and pride in order to make sense of his company’s CSR, he added:

[If] I didn’t feel that way, this is something that is pretty important to me, I probably wouldn’t be there. […] And I’m very comfortable with [this company], I’m very comfortable with what [our owner] believes, and I think that we do a great job in that area. So it’s something that makes me very happy.

Value of comfort was also used when employees talked about feeling comfortable or not engaging in specific aspects of CSR. Consultant Jon’s response comes to mind. He talked about comfort regarding specific causes that employees feel they want, or do not want, to get involved with. According to him, such feelings have to do with “personal preference” of an individual employee:

I just think some people are probably more comfortable […] in specific areas and things that they feel comfortable doing, whether it be, you know, helping out at their church, or helping out at a food pantry, as opposed [to] […] they may not feel comfortable with that and would rather do something that’s more general, like, oh, you know, I’ll volunteer to go clean up a road side, or something like that. They may not wanna get into any specific, you know, the role that […] they may not feel comfortable with.

Discursive constructions likes these suggest that participants attached the value of comfort to particular aspects of CSR while not necessarily to others. Moreover, such discursive nuances show that value construction may affect organizational members and
how they conduct themselves at, and feel about, their work (e.g., feeling of discomfort, leaving the company, etc.).

4.2.4 Epistemic Value

According to Sheth et al. (1991), epistemic value describes “capacity to arouse curiosity, provide novelty, and/or satisfy a desire of knowledge” (p. 162). In this study, this value concerns participants’ expressions of new experiences and knowledge that CSR can either provide or lead to (Gurney & Humphreys, 2006). The interviews suggest that the epistemic values of awareness and education, and leading by example as a value were the most common ways in which participants constructed meanings of CSR.

4.2.4.1 Value of Awareness

Participants often conversed about the value of spreading awareness of CSR to contribute to the growth of such practice. Oscar shared his views on the importance of communicating CSR “to the outside world,” for it “helps grow the awareness around corporate social responsibility and can encourage other companies who may want to, you know, go down that road, but aren’t sure that it’s gonna be beneficial to their business.” He also referred to the functional value (“beneficial” to business). He contended that companies should take CSR “seriously.” He went on to suggest that it is important that as a company you:

[…] don’t just view yourself as an island that is operating independently of anything, because in reality, like, you have impacts. What you, what your business does, impacts everything around you from start to finish. And so just, you know, communicating publicly and making this commitment, I feel has the
potential to encourage others and kind of grow the movement exponentially through that.

Similarly, Matt also thought that it is also important “to be aware what you’re doing.” Thus, it is a corporation’s “responsibility to understand that what they do has an effect with the whole chain of responsibility.” He added: “it’s very much like dominos, you know. We’re all connected to a certain extent.” Here, Matt did not only talk about the benefits of being aware of CSR as such, but he also framed it as a “responsibility” of companies in that they should understand its importance. In addition, he pointed out the education aspect of CSR:

And once again, I always end up falling back to education. That if the client is aware of what you do, and how you do, and the accuracy, but also your motive behind doing it, I think that that’s the majority of my day-to-day interaction as far as my responsibility, both socially and also professionally. I mean, they kind of go hand in hand, I think.

Educating clients and making sure that they have an understanding was framed as a responsibility, in this case, Matt’s own.

Next to clients, another way of spreading awareness that participants conversed about was within the networks in which their respective companies operate. Sarah, a president of a public relations and marketing firm, spoke about the importance of making connections with other organizations and learning about CSR. She shared that being part of a larger community of companies that are committed to social and environmental responsibility helped her own organization “be side by side with other business leaders who care about the same things and are pursuing and prioritizing the same things at their companies.” Sarah explained that this has given her company “a lot of new ideas, a lot of new contacts, meet some people [who] have become clients.” Here, the epistemic value
of awareness that Sarah used to make sense of CSR also overlapped with the social value, as she spoke about value of CSR for other social groups.

Participants’ constructions of CSR also reveal the value of spreading awareness within the company—that is, among employees. Mitchell’s response illustrates such discursive nuance. Referring to himself as “a big advocate of communication,” he suggested that, like in other spheres in life, communication in CSR was “key.” He explained: “If you have a successful marriage, a successful business, a successful friendship, it all involves communication. So if there is a lack of communication in any of those, you know, family, friendship, business, it’s not a good thing.” Thinking about communicating CSR, he offered his views on spreading awareness: “I do feel it’s good to talk about things and to keep everybody aware. It makes people feel good. Coz when you don’t […] people think that there’s problems or that there may be issues. When there really isn’t.”

On the other hand, Sophia talked about younger colleagues in her company being more aware of what is happening around the world, and are generally more open to new ideas on what else the company could undertake in regard to its CSR. She explained: “I think [younger] people are more creative and think outside the box.” Her answer speaks to creativity and novelty that comes with such awareness. Similarly, Brian commented that with more awareness people are more open to think about ways to get involved. He shared: “I think that that awareness has brought us to point where people realize that, hey, you know, we can use the profits that we make, and we can use the collective energy of our organization to be a force for good.” Like in other responses presented above, Brian
framed the value of spreading awareness as a way to encourage others to engage in CSR, thereby, making a change.

**4.2.4.2 Value of Education**

Another way of epistemic value attribution was participants emphasizing the importance of knowledge. One example of such value construction comes from Tim, who admitted that he was not familiar with the term of CSR and was personally less involved with his company’s CSR. He shared: “I didn’t have a whole lot to offer, for sure, but I don’t have a whole lot of experience [with] the term. I’ve just learned [it].” However, Tim acknowledged that CSR is on the rise, therefore, education too is important: “Well, we need someone who knows more than I do. (laugh) For sure. […] we’ll need someone who is, you know, a full drive is to interpret it, and then distribute that knowledge, and then have it affect the company in the way it operates.”

Ongoing educating and understanding what her company has to offer to its clients was important to Anita as well. She framed education as a critical part of her company’s CSR: “corporate responsibility too is, you know, […] educating yourselves and making sure we understand safe spaces. That we’re creating safe environments for patients.” Anita went on explaining what education means for her company, and how leadership goes about supporting employee education and training:

I feel that we are an extremely responsible company. You know, we do have the one owner and he is very engaged in training and education. […] I’ve been at other companies where they were nervous about training and education and investing in that because if […] you get that expertise in that training, then you can leave. And then you take that knowledge with you. Owner here, it doesn’t
matter, even if you have that knowledge and you take it someplace else, you’re still taking that knowledge out to the community and you have that to give. Here, Anita also made a comparison with the companies that she had previously worked with in order to make sense of how her current employer goes about educating people as an aspect of CSR.

Dominic, who works with the same company, agreed that they do “well in helping our employees advance them professionally and in their professional knowledge.” He shared that his company supports such efforts, despite the fact that “getting your own professional certifications doesn’t help the company so much.” He went on, explaining:

Sometimes some certifications are required […] to be able to go over that kind of jobs. But once you have a few people with it within the office, it’s not really, no longer really a need. But we still encourage all of our employees to take those tests and do the studying and reimburse, we reimburse them for the tests, generally, or pay for their conference attendance, education sessions, and things like that. So that is a good thing. (laugh)

Like Dominic, other participants too talked about different ways in which their companies support education, such as by setting learning goals that can help employees grow professionally as well as personally.

4.2.4.3 Leading by Example as a Value

Leading by example was another value that participants attached to CSR. They constructed such epistemic value in various ways, most commonly in regard to being a leader within the industry as well as concerning leadership of their company. Sarah shared that it is important that her company shows to others that it is socially responsible, despite its small size:
You know, I think again it’s back to this concept of leading by example. And showing that even a small company with eight people can do these things. You don’t have to wait until you have 10 million of dollars in revenue to implement some of these programs, or to give your employees paid time off to volunteer, and things like that.

In a similar manner, Katelyn spoke about her company being “the leader among similar companies.” She explained: “So I think that probably the most basic thing that I would say is that we have an obligation to communicate it and to participate in it, because we have a lot of people that look to us to be the leader in that area.” As opposed to Sarah, who spoke about leading by example in a more general sense, Katelyn used the word “obligation” to explain the responsibility that comes with being an industry leader. For her, it is “important to set a good example. To show that, you know, we are dedicated to what we do in many different ways.”

Leading by example as a value when it comes to leadership can also be illustrated with Mitchell’s response. Suggesting that CSR “needs to come from the top,” he argued that “it’s up to that leader to instill that philosophy to all the attorneys, to all the staff from every single position.” Mitchell used the following example to support his views: “Just like when you’re raising kids. You gotta lead by example.” Similarly, Trevor, who works as a project manager, talked about the importance of leadership putting CSR at the forefront of his company:

[…] since the partners have made it a priority, and I think that it’s important they’ve kind of made that priority for everybody else. But they also lead by example, I would say. So they kind of, they don’t make it a priority and walk away and do their own thing, they live and breath it too to make sure that everybody’s kind of doing the same thing.
Differently, Heather spoke about this value as it pertains to company as a whole. She used a recent story concerning the United Airlines where a passenger was violently dragged off a plane by this company’s employees:

[…] those decisions that […] employees make in that moment tell you a lot about their stance on social responsibility. I can tell you that if it was [our company’s] airline that would have never happened. We wouldn’t even though about doing something like that, there are so many other options. So I do think it is very important. And it’s so important to build that culture, and that culture [comes] from leaders of demonstrating this is the behavior that we expect. This is the behavior that we communicate. Now does everybody always do it perfectly? No. We’re humans and we have tempers and short pulses and make bad decisions. But can you can you lead by example? Yes, you can.

Yet another example of such value is in spreading, or otherwise satisfying the need for, (new) knowledge. Anita’s response helps illustrate such discursive constructions. She spoke about her professional role being an example to her younger colleagues: “I’m an example. I know that [they] look to me, I’m leading those meetings and stuff, and if I’m being a good example and I’m bringing tools to the table, they’re gonna learn that.” She continued: “And they’re gonna be able to take that with them, you know, if they, at some point, they’re gonna be leading their own meetings. They’re gonna be that guide. If they go somewhere else, they’ll have those ideals embodied in how they do things so.” This example also points to her identity construction (“I’m an example”) vis-à-vis other employees.

4.2.5 Conditional Value

Sheth et al. (1991) referred to conditional value as “perceived utility acquired by an alternative as the result of the specific situation or set of circumstances facing the
choice maker” (p. 162). I used the term conditional value to explore participants’ constructions of CSR when values were situational; in other words, dependable on other contexts or factors (whether social, functional, physical, or else) that appeared to be explicitly influencing them (Gurney & Humphreys, 2006; Sheth et al., 1991). Based on the interviews, I identified two such value attributions in participants’ CSR talk: value of risk avoidance and value of security.

4.2.5.1 Value of Risk Avoidance

When making sense of CSR, participants referred to the value of risk avoidance in various ways. One common way concerned the circumstances upon which their company’s involvement in CSR is dependable. Mitchell’s response concerning his company’s support for various social causes is worthy of mention. He shared a story when his company was approached in order to help with an anti-abortion organization:

[…] their method was showing more graphic details and things, and you know […] anti-abortion or pro-life, we didn’t feel that was the appropriate way to communicate that. So they asked us to do some work for them […] and we declined it. So you know, on some of those controversial areas, abortion is very controversial on both sides, we just need to be very careful. Because we don’t, we have our personal values, but we don’t want any of that to reflect poorly on the law firm as a whole.

Mitchell explained the circumstances they found themselves in as well as specific factors that determined the company’s decision not to get involved in helping that organization (“method,” “controversial on both sides”). In this sense, CSR, and values that pertain to it, were conditional in that, as a company, you “need to be very careful” about what you do or do not support. His response also speaks to other values (functional, political,
emotional) that come into play in his CSR meaning negotiation. Heather’s answer was similar in this regard. She noted that “when you take a public stand, you take a risk because not everybody not all corporations not all people like that or stand for that.”

Heather went on, explaining:

And you could lose business, you could lose relationships over that. But I think it also says, I want to encourage likeminded people to do the same thing and stand out for free speech and stand up for, you know, promoting opportunities for people [of] all, you know, race, religion, gender, you know, sexual orientation. I think that’s really important.

She did not only speak about risk when taking a stand as an aspect of CSR, but she also constructed CSR in attributing the values of awareness (“encourage likeminded people”) and for and beyond profit (“business”).

Priscilla and Jeremy’s responses suggest another way of meaning constructions of CSR as they pertain to risk avoidance. Jeremy noted that choosing a “safer option” to get employees engaged in CSR was common among large corporations: “That’s probably why they have to go the generic route. […] they give to the United Way and give to the American Heart [Association]. It’s just […] a nice safe option that everybody, nobody can argue with that, oh, geez.” Priscilla was of similar opinion. She used the example of Habitat For Humanity as a common way for companies to get involved in CSR, which helps with “mitigating risk:”

I also think that they try to limit those because if they get too many it deludes what’s going on within the organization. And so they will tend to choose the ones that are either near or dear to the executive’s heart, or they will choose things that have limited risk that are very broad reaching within the organization and the world or the United States. Again, […] Habitat For Humanity comes to mind for
For Priscilla, risk around CSR can also be in situations when companies “promote something and their staff goes out and they get hurt.” Again, such discursive constructions speak to the conditional value in making sense of CSR.

4.2.5.2 Value of Security

When making sense of CSR, participants also spoke about security, primarily a financial one, and how it impacts the ways companies and their employees engage in CSR. Mandy talked about how clients that they work with speak to her company’s CSR:

“I think […] for us it’s about the types of clients that we work with. And we are fortunate, we sort of know the struggle between love and money […] That we have to have clients that help us create this internal community and help us keep the lights on, but also that these clients also are doing good in it themselves, so an extension of our work is the work our clients do.

Referring to “the struggle between love and money,” she described the circumstances and conditions that shaped her company’s CSR. In addition, Mandy explained how such “struggle” affects whom one chooses, or is able, to work with. Describing the work with socially responsible clients as her company’s “niche,” she added: “it’s something that, as we were growing, it was harder to own in the very beginning. […] We are now for the first time at three years of age in a position where can say we’re exclusive working with these types of companies and nonprofits.”

Spencer’s response was similar in that financial security plays a role in his company getting more engaged in CSR: “we had a successful five years, and this year we made some changes. […] So we wouldn’t have done that, if we didn’t have a successful
five years that preceded that. It just wouldn’t have been, it just wouldn’t have been a priority for us.” Explaining the conditions that allowed his company to get more involved in CSR, Spencer also spoke about changes they were able to implement: “And I don’t think that we would be concerned or have interest in doing that, if we didn’t feel comfortable that like the position of that company itself was in.”

Participants also spoke about security at a more individual level. Tina shared that having some sense of security was critical for both her company and herself to get involved in CSR:

I do believe that if you have your basis covered, and that work–life balance is achieved, and if your company really makes that important to [employees] of course, the employees are going to lean in and invest more, not just in themselves but in the company, and then of course the world.

Tina also reflected upon her experiences with the organizations that she used to work for: “they just never had enough money, and the life was just choked out of them, so we all felt stupid for trying to do good. Look at us, like, we can’t even pay, like we’re working like dogs and we’re making like minimum money. How is that right?” Similarly, Oscar too offered a personal story that speaks to such conditional value:

[…] this is my fifth job, I think, since [graduation]. And everywhere else I’ve worked has been like, I don’t know. Especially in my last position I was working, I was the only employee at this like business consulting firm. And I just went into work every day with a sense of anxiety over like, if I screw something up, am I gonna get fired, am I like … You know, I didn’t have any health benefits, I didn’t have this, that, or the other. I got paid and that’s it. And so there was, there was nothing like keeping me grounded or secure in my position. […] Here the shift has been just so dramatic.
Oscar went on with his story, suggesting that greater sense of security gives him more energy to be involved with the community:

I come into work and I’m not, you know, anxious about anything. I’m not worried about what’s gonna happen, if I make a mistake or anything. I know I have unlimited time off, if I need that. I know that I can, I mean, our health benefits are paid for a 100 percent, like [our company] covers the full premium. And so through that, through that lessening of the anxiety that I feel from not having these things taken care of, then frees up my time, my mental energy, and my even emotional energy to be more positive, and like reach out to other people who don’t have the same privileges that I have been given.

Again, responses like these suggest that constructions of CSR, and values that participants attach to such corporate practice, depend on the context and conditions which organization members find themselves in. Further, such discursive nuances suggest that employee involvement in CSR practices may be depended upon, and influenced by, the extent that individuals are able to, or feel secured, to carry out their company’s CSR (Gurney & Humphreys, 2006; Sheth et al., 1991).

4.2.6 Political Value

Finally, I also identified political value as an attribute that participants commonly used in order to construct meanings of CSR. The findings suggest that there were two distinct values that participants referred to when navigating through multiple meanings and interpretations of CSR: taking a stand as value and value of diversity.

4.2.6.1 Taking a Stand as a Value

Participants conversed about their companies, and their respective leaders, in terms of taking a stand (such as through addressing various social issues publicly, getting
involved in other like-minded organizations, or through lobbying) when trying to come up with meanings of CSR. For instance, Heather’s response concerning the company leadership helps illustrate such meaning construction:

So they’re public about it. You know, they’re not just working in background, and a lot of people these days are criticized for that kind of a stand. There’s a lot of feeling against that sort of the stand. But I applaud them for the courage and saying, “I stand for this, and I am very public about it, and I’m going to do it.” Not everybody does that.

According to Heather, the latter is part of CSR, for “it communicates who you are and what your values are.” She explained: “You’re putting your time and your money into other organizations that, you know, are taking a stand. And I think that’s very much part of corporate responsibility.”

Political value of CSR was also constructed in regard to encouraging others (employees, community members, etc.) to join, or be otherwise familiar with, such corporate efforts. Tim shared that “there are a lot of people that are just going to be out there in the cold without any kind of anyone reaching out to them.” Therefore, he believed that “it’s important […] that people know that your company has a stand, where it stands, and a way for people to reach out to them, so that they can become involved with each other.” Rather differently, Judy, who works for a CSR consulting firm, framed companies taking a stand as a way of fostering “culture of change,” by suggesting:

So not just putting this strategy on the table and say, “This is important,” but more so, you know, kind of putting their money where they’re [able] to say, “This is what we stand for as a company and […] everything that we do as a company.” And so you can really foster real culture of change and […] agents of change, where your employees believe in your cause and what you do, and everybody is behind that.
For Kirsten, “to take politics, to change, or to take things that are happening around us in all contexts in all areas into consideration” was also important. She offered the following take on this very aspect of CSR:

I think we have a responsibility to lift up other businesses and to help people do what’s right, even on the political level, even though that can get really, so it can get really touchy. But there are some things [...] you can’t fight and [...] there isn’t very clear right wrong. And I think it’s our responsibility as an organization that stands for social innovation, social justice, and equality to stand up for those things.

However, Kirsten said that one has to be “really careful” when dealing with political stuff, thereby, suggesting that there is some sense of risk involved when taking a public stand on something. In fact, not all participants made sense of such political value as positive, or framed it as an aspect of CSR. For instance, Jon expresses his hesitations about “taking a side or taking or supporting certain social issues that are out in the world” being part of CSR. For him, this may be “a right that an organization has” or “a choice,” but he does not see it as a “responsibility.” Such responses show that employees, indeed, may have different understandings of how a socially responsible company might look like (and do), and react to their company’s established CSR practices and policies differently.

Constructions of CSR concerning the political value also suggest that, as a “value-laden” construct (Deetz, 2003, 2007), CSR is indeed contested and conflicting (Okoye, 2009). Again, Jon’s response comes to mind, when he shared that he does not necessarily agree with his company taking a public stand on certain political issues, such as opposing the current administration. According to him, when companies take such a stand, “they are at risk when they do.” He added: “Because their people are not gonna necessarily on
the same side as them coz there’s always different sides to a social issue. […] You not only can alienate people in the outside, but you can alienate your own employees.”

Discursive nuances like this not only speak to the notion that the ways an organization constructs, and carries out, its CSR may impact other people, but also indicate what difference does this make for its own organizational members (employees). In addition, such responses also suggest that multiple values may be in conflict (for instance, next to solely political also conditional and functional values) (Guthey & Morsing, 2014).

### 4.2.6.2 Value of Diversity

Next to taking a stand on diverse social issues, participants also conversed about diversity specifically when making sense of CSR. Such constructions varied among participants, from pertaining to organizational practices and behaviors to concerning public involvement in diversity issues (overlapping with value of taking a stand). For Samantha, who works as a case manager, diversity was something that she thought of immediately when asked to provide a definition of CSR: “probably one of the first things that comes to mind would be diversity and being accepting of people of all different backgrounds. And threatening all different backgrounds fairly.” She went on to suggest that her company is rather diverse: “I would think very much so. We, of course, I don’t have any idea of statistics as far as diversity, but when we’re all together twice a year, we’re all together. (laugh) We look pretty diverse.”

Rather differently, Sarah spoke about diversity in terms of organizational policies. For her, thinking proactively about policies concerning diversity was important. She shared that, at her company, they do not have a paternity policy, since all employees are women. However, she thought it was important to implement such policy despite this
fact: “And if we ever have a male employee, that’s really important to us from a diversity […] perspective. So it opened my eyes that we really should have that, even though it doesn’t feel like it applies today.”

Heather’s response was similar in that she too thought it was important that her company strives towards diversity. However, she noted an important distinction between diversity as a “regulatory requirement” and diversity as a “welcoming environment:”

That is a very important value in our company and, you know, what company does is, you know, a 100 percent, a 110 percent. But so many companies don’t even strive. They’re like, I’m gonna meet the regulatory requirement and that’s it. They don’t create a welcoming environment, they might create, you know, there’s a quote, you know, hostile environment that you can’t create, but that’s different than creating a welcoming environment. And I think we create a welcoming environment.

As suggested previously, the above examples also illustrate negotiation among multiple values and meanings pertaining to CSR that spread beyond diversity.

4.3 Summary of the Findings

In summary, the findings from the interviews with organizational members working in various SMEs in the US suggest that there are two overall constructions of CSR: (1) CSR as a convoluted and perplexing concept and practice, and (2) CSR as a value-laden resource that is multifaceted, polyphonic, and conflicting. First, a closer look into employee sensemaking of CSR shows that participants coped with ambiguity around CSR at two distinct, yet interrelated levels: conceptual and practice. The findings speak to both positive and negative aspects of dealing with such ambiguity. On the one hand, uncertainty presented a challenge for participants in terms of not knowing what counts as
CSR, and how one could get involved in carrying out CSR practices and policies. Yet, on the other hand, rather the openness of this term helped participants re-consider and re-construct their understandings of the company’s role in the community, or in society at large, and their own identities vis-à-vis such corporate efforts.

Second, by identifying six broad categories of values (i.e., functional, social, emotional, epistemic, conditional, and political), I delved deeper into specific values within each category to further illustrate such complex meanings interplay (Gurney & Humphreys, 2006; Sheth et al., 1991). The findings indicate that there are multiple, and often contested, values that co-emerge as individuals make sense of CSR. As such, value negotiation can be seen as an essential part of employee sensemaking process in, and through, which CSR comes to being (Weick, 1995; Weick et al., 2005).
CHAPTER 5: AGENCY AND OWNERSHIP IN EMPLOYEE CSR

TALK

You’re on a bus trip. And the bus driver’s driving to Florida. And you’re happy, you’re on the bus […] All the sudden your bus driver takes the right turn and says, “You know, instead of going to Florida, we’re now gonna go to California.” That changes your destination, it changes your ideas of where you’re going and what you’re doing, but there’s that commitment. That bus driver’s driving. And you’re, you’re on it. […] if you don’t like where the bus is going, you have every chance to get off and do your own thing. And I think that people have to make that choice with the organization they work with. You have to align yourself with where your bus is going. If you can’t do that, you’re gonna end of somewhere you don’t wanna be, you’re gonna end up unhappy, you’re not gonna have a good time. […] You’ve got a group of people who are really happy to be on that bus and it just creates this really passionate environment where, if something is not done right, if somebody’s unhappy, a client isn’t happy, it really matters to us. It really really does. And I think it makes us better at what we do, when we are passionate like that. (Kirsten)

In the previous chapters, I have noted that employees have been commonly regarded as ambassadors for CSR (Theofilou & Watson, 2014), who have the capacity and/or ability to carry out their company’s CSR practices. However, there has been little research addressing employee role in CSR concerning the questions of *agency* and *ownership*. These questions are important because they help us to explore where the importance of employees may lie when it comes to viewing (employee) communication as constitutive of CSR (Schoeneborn & Trittin, 2013). In addition, these questions help us to better understand how employees construct their identities vis-à-vis their company’s
CSR. Accordingly, in this chapter, I address the following research question: *How do agency and ownership emerge in employee CSR talk?*

First, I present the empirical findings suggesting how participants construct agency in CSR. The findings suggest that participants make sense of agency in terms of employees as advocates of their organization and its CSR, and a respect for nonhuman agents. Employees are then not only agents who act out organizational CSR, but they are also acted upon other agencies (organizational policies, nature of work, etc.) that too make a difference concerning social responsibility of their company. Second, I present the empirical findings showing participants’ constructions of ownership of CSR. Empirically, I approach this question based on previous conceptualizations in communication and psychology literature of ownership as a two-fold construct, consisting of sense of responsibility and sense of self. The findings are further presented below.

### 5.1 Sense of Agency

While action and agency can both be defined as making a difference, agency in this study refers to acting on behalf of, or in the name of, somebody else (Cooren, 2010; Taylor & Van Every, 2000). The findings of this study suggest participants commonly see employees as agents of CSR, whereby their actions can make difference in various ways. However, the findings also suggest that there are nonhuman agencies (e.g., organizational texts) that play a role in CSR, and thus, act upon employees as much as they themselves act (Cooren, 2010). In other words, there are other agencies at play that make a difference in terms of the ways employees get involved, and carry out, CSR.
practices. These are the following: nature of work, organizational policies, standards and certificates, and organizational space.

5.1.1 Employees

Findings from the interviews align with previous literature that views employees as advocates for their company’s CSR. Following Latour (1987), employees can be seen as “advocates” who act on behalf of their organization. Participants often described employees (themselves) as individuals who represent the company through their CSR involvement. While they spoke of various ways employees can do so, many participants acknowledged the benefits of involving employees in CSR, such as through employee volunteering. For instance, Elizabeth explained: “we want our employees to believe in what we do as well. You know, they can be your biggest advocates and your biggest believers.”

According to several participants, there are different ways in which employees can make a difference. Jessica, a marketing manager, shared that employee involvement in CSR helps with her daily job: “Being involved in our communities […] gives me content, which is (laugh) what I need. A lot of, all the time.” As she explained, through such means, her company is “able to interact with different organizations and talk about events and things.” Jessica also suggested that employee CSR involvement contributes to being able to communicate her company’s culture:

[…] we say like, “Oh, we are caring, we are advocates.” But if I can show like an example how we are caring and are advocate for our causes and our clients in our community, then, you know, being active in corporate social responsibility is just, you know, it backs that up.
Katelyn’s response was similar in that employees are representatives of her company and its social responsibility: “Well, I mean they are the face of the company. So they are the ones that are in the field every day. So they are the ones that our clients or potential clients see frequently.” Her emphasis was on the employee presence, and how such presence can make a difference. She continued that it is employees’ role “to actually put their name and their face in the community, and so people can see what it is that we do.” Katelyn’s response also indicates an underlying expectation in that employees are willing and ready to become company’s representative through their presence in the community. Such response was common among participants.

Beyond making a difference in terms of how the company is seen by others, the findings also suggest that such corporate efforts can make a difference in terms of the emotional states of employees. Such findings correspond partly with the previous findings of this research in that organizational CSR practice and commitment may evoke certain feelings and emotions among participants (Gurney & Humphreys, 2006). George used the following words to describe the role that employees play in his company when it comes to CSR: “I mean, they’re supporting it, they’re on committees and boards for certain organizations, and they carry [our company’s] name with them. And they’re proud to be worked, you know, to be here for us.” He suggested that such representation makes a difference in how employees feel about the organization. Anne’s response too suggests that there is some emotional attachment involved in such agency:

I think too it helps them to feel good about the company they work for. Whether they are participating in the certain aspect of the CSR or not, I think that they feel like it’s a meaningful company and they’re proud to be here. Which is hugely
important to me, because there’s no better brand advocate than somebody who can speak highly of the company that they work for.

Again, her answer also speaks to the difference CSR involvement makes for her.

Indeed, examples of participants’ own CSR involvement too further the idea of employees being advocates of their respective companies. Mitchell described serving on boards as a common way through which organizational members at his law firm get involved in CSR. According to him, such activities can be seen as both individual responsibility and corporate responsibility, and are overlapping in the sense that, “I could serve on a board, but my face is the law firm. So it really is kind of a dual relationship.” Discursive nuances like these may speak to Taylor and Van Every’s (2000) argument that an individual always acts as both agent and actor; meaning, on one’s own as well as on her or his company’s behalf.

5.1.2 Nature of Work

Nature of work was commonly constructed as what makes a difference in the ways participants and their respective companies practice CSR. In fact, the type of work that companies do, as well as the industry sectors that they are in, were commonly framed by participants as a limitation to their CSR involvement and practice. For Anita, “[the] communication you go through with your services” was essential part of her company’s social responsibility. However, it was important for her that one understands, and tries to reconcile, different pieces of a work process:

Asking [clients] questions that they relate to, creating a vocabulary, and then you can start asking them more design type questions in a vocabulary that it’s a little different, but they may give you a completely different answer. You know, what are their goals. You know, and you have different people. You may have the
leadership team and their goals are gonna be like, “Well, we need this space to cost this much money.”

Anita’s response suggests that employee agency in CSR is shared rather than autonomous (Cooren, 2010; Latour, 1987; Schoeneborn & Trittin, 2013), for it is often clients and leadership who have the power to make a final decision, and thus, make a difference in how the final product will look like. Similarly, Jill suggested that the type of work that they do, and clients who they work with, too impact the extent to which she believes their final work would align with CSR parameters in the industry:

It is more difficult to see that happening with our buildings. That’s really where our bread and butter come from. And so we won’t push our clients too much to go for a more sustainable design because we don’t want to piss off our clients. So maybe we know that we have experts here who may know what is the most energy efficient way of designing a building. And we propose that to a client and they say, “Well, yeah, but actually it’s less expensive for us upfront, so let’s not worry about that too much.” […] But if the clients didn’t want to spend that much on glass or renovating the entire floor, then we can’t push that much.

Jill pointed to tensions between prioritizing CSR versus making money, and what difference does it make: “It’s really difficult to say that we are really responsible in that way, in a genuine way.”

Interestingly, agency of work may also act upon employees, evoking certain emotions and attitudes (Gurney & Humphreys, 2006; van Vuuren & Cooren, 2010), such as frustration. Again, Jill’s response comes to mind, when she spoke to emotional effects of such tension on employees. She said: “It’s not necessarily really progressive, and I think that frustrated people here want to be progressive and sort of push the boundaries in ways that we don’t always have opportunities for.” Such perceived difference in terms of “what else” the company can and cannot do concerning CSR was also conversed about at
a more personal level. Reflecting upon his own involvement in CSR, Dominic suggested that, due to the ways work is being done at his firm, he does not feel that he can make much difference in later phases of the work that they do:

> And frankly, sometimes, when they do bring me in, they bring me in for the initial stage or the pursuit, but then the details and negotiation and contracting change things, and what I get on the other end isn’t what I’ve signed on for the beginning. And so I feel like some of the, a lot of the decisions are probably suffer from that too.

Again, from this comment, we can learn that employee agency alone may be somewhat limited due to other agencies, such as nature of work, that come into play and make a difference in how CSR is being carried out.

### 5.1.3 Organizational Policies

Next to nature of work, organizational policies, particularly concerning employee benefits, were framed as making a difference. Such findings align with the abovementioned premises about CSR action as emergent primarily in multiple interpretations of texts and conversations pertaining to CSR (Taylor et al., 1996). For instance, one way in which participants talked about how organizational policies can contribute to making a change was by emphasizing tangibility and functionality of such policies. Sebastian explained how CSR policies concerning employee wellbeing had impacted him. He talked about personal goals that he set for himself as a result of such policy implementation:

> So some of the things were like fitness goals or like, you know, what have you. And there are various ways that like, you know, the company sort of tries to encourage that, you know. So like last year […] I was like, “I’m gonna go to gym
“this many times,” and “I’m gonna try to bike to work this many times,” you know, or something. If we meet these goals that’s like, you know, maybe it means like a bonus or maybe it means something, you know, just like build off that, you know.

Other participants too conversed about the ways in which organizational policies pertaining to CSR get played out and make a difference for employees. For example, Anne described the work-from-home policy at her company. She stated that not every employee takes advantage of it: “Not everybody works from home, it kind of depends on what’s going on that week or month or whatever. And some people just don’t because they like to come to the office because they know they can’t focus at home. (laugh)"

Furthermore, Anne referred to this example when considering how important she thinks CSR is for their employees:

I’ll be honest, to some of them it’s just important they get from home Monday. And I’m pretty sure that they’re shopping, maybe seeing a movie in the middle of the day, maybe not working from home that day. I’m not stupid. But I know that they’re getting their job done or we wouldn’t have work from home Mondays. They just might be doing it at the different time or working a longer day in other week. We’re not monitoring it […] But, you know, you notice things. Like you send an email at 10, you don’t hear back until 6 pm. You know? So to some of them that’s what matters. […] which is fine, if that’s what matters, because if they’re good employee and that makes them stay, then, you know, I’ve got them. Others, they just eat up the volunteer hours with a spoon, you know?

Whether in support of such CSR policy or not, Anne’s response suggests that employees may enact (make sense of) and react to such organizational policy differently (Latour, 2010; Weick et al., 2005), thereby constituting their organization and its CSR in rather distinct ways. Peter’s response was similar in this regard. He shared: “Nobody is forced to do it, there is no requirement. But I want them to know that […] you will never be
penalized with your salary or your time off or anything like that, if you decide to take time to do something like that.” While participants commonly stressed that these policies and practices are encouraged rather than required, for employees to participate in CSR, the findings also indicate that such policies are often part of the organizational structure and processes. As such, these policies may also act upon employees, and shape how they conduct themselves at work.

5.1.4 Certificates and Standards

Many participants spoke about certification and standards in that they make a difference in the ways employees and their respective companies get involved in CSR. Cody explained that his company is green certified, and described the effects of such certification on employees: “we’re conscious about our energy use, we recycle, we compost at work, we have an employee compost program, they compost, they can bring their scraps from home to work to be composted.” Other participants too spoke about benefits that certifications can bring to their company. Matt suggested that becoming a certified company made his company identify “what those [CSR] goals are.” He explained this further:

Like it specifically names things out, like, keeps us on track to a certain extent. […] I would say it’s been good just to in order to formulate, you know, steps and things along those lines. And also specific, like social outreach things that we’ve done previously, […] to put a name to that. And I think that that allowed us to, you know, stay in the course.

Sarah was of a similar opinion in that certification “gives you a set of standards to operate around.” She also spoke about the networking potential that such certification brings: “So the ability to be side by side with other business leaders who care about the same things,
and are pursing and prioritizing the same things at their companies, has given us a lot of new ideas, a lot of new contacts, meet some people [who] have become [our] clients.”

On the other hand, some participants were skeptical of the difference that being certified makes. Spencer’s response comes to mind. He said:

[...] we thought it was a good idea and we made some changes [...] that we thought were important and the good goal and effort. But like ultimately, we didn’t, I wouldn’t say that the morale or the interest was high enough to really go to like the extra mile to make us like a serious, a serious like corporate responsible enterprise.

Constructions like this suggest that certificates and standards make a difference in terms the extent to which employees get involved, and carry out, CSR practices. Moreover, such findings support previous notions about the dynamic and complex “interplay between symbolic and material aspects of standardization” (Haack et al., 2012, p. 815) in, and through, which an organization and its CSR come to be (Schoeneborn & Trittin, 2013).

5.1.5 Organizational Space

Finally, the findings also suggest a somewhat “limited” human agency in CSR when it comes to organizational space. Environmental concerns regarding space (as they pertain to CSR) where a common issue that participants talked about. For Peter, taking care of community was as important as taking care of the environment. However, he suggested that his company is somewhat limited in what they can do about the latter: “We try to do what we can about the environment, but we have no control over who provides us our, you know, energy because we’re in a building.” A similar issue was raised by Dominic, who shared: “we are trying to be responsible, but we recognize
there’s a lot of things that are assumed to be out of our hands.” He explained that because his company rents the space in which they work, they are not in control of every aspect of CSR. This makes a difference in how he views his company as socially responsible:

“some things like that […] are just, it’s out of our hands, we ignore them. And it’s not part of our core practice, but there are ways to work it in and to do more. So we’re, we’re doing a little. I guess we are a little bit responsible. (laugh) To put it on my scale.”

Nevertheless, the interviews also reveal that organizations respond to such issues by implementing solutions that can, then, make a difference. Mandy said that since the building they work in does not have a sink, they found an alternative so that they would still be environmentally friendly: “we don’t wanna use paper supplies so we bought (laugh) a transportable dishwasher.” Anne’s response too speaks to such concern, and how they dealt with it: “Environmentally it’s hard because we lease our space. So we can’t have solar panels. (laugh) But we do what we can. We have LED lights, we use recycled paper, we recycle. Everybody has a recycling thing at their desk, you know.”

Together, these responses suggest that organizational space too becomes a communicative source of agency (Wilhoit, 2015) that, together with human (employee) agency, forms a network of agencies (Cooren, 2010; Latour, 1987) that speak on behalf of the organization and its CSR.

### 5.2 Sense of Ownership

Participants often spoke about the ways in which employees can take greater ownership of CSR. Katelyn suggested that her company is trying to “encourage people to be involved in any way that they feel that they can be involved.” She explained that this
might contribute to greater ownership of her company’s CSR: “So really we leave it up to everyone to take the ownership of that piece and do what they can. I mean, we don’t force people, we don’t make people do it, but we encourage. And then leave it up to them to do what they feel comfortable doing.” Responses like this were common among participants. For instance, Peter’s answer was similar as he was trying to explain the benefits of involving employees in their corporate decision making:

I like to involve people too. […] you know, it’s one thing to make decision about simple things, but big strategies, big ideas […] I think it’s important to have people influence that decision. For two reasons, one, I think you get a better answer or better protocol for going forward. And there’s ownership that’s shared. So if I make the decision and I tell you what the decision is, is one thing. But if you and I made the decision and we come to the same conclusion, then you have a little bit of ownership as well as me.

Yet, the interviews also reveal instances when ownership of CSR was not guaranteed in all organizations and by every participant. Jeremy shared that he did not feel particularly involved in his company’s CSR. He offered the following explanation on why he thought so:

Coz it doesn’t impact me. I mean, I guess if they were into charities, navy, or causes that I felt are important, maybe it would. But it’s not been the things, it’s never been something that’s like, oh yeah, let’s, that’s my hot button, right? It’s always just, you know, it’s the same, it’s just not my hot buttons that I would think, oh yeah, that’s great, I really wanted to get on board with that.

Using the expression “not my hot buttons,” Jeremy suggested that there were no particular causes that his company focuses in pursuing its CSR that would make him feel especially part of it. In this respect, Jill’s response comes to mind too. She shared a story
of her company sending cards instead of giving gifts to their clients around Christmas time, with the aim to donate money to people in need:

This year was kind of funny. I wasn’t involved with putting that together. So or I would have probably said something cause I thought the messaging was a little bit off. It said: “In lieu of gifts, we have chosen to donate to several organizations.” Like, well, that just sounds like you’re making it up. Like, what organizations, what do they do, like, are you doing it in the name of the partner that you’re sending it to, or is it in our name – it’s probably in our name, and who knows. You know, I think we do actually donate, I know that but … It’s just sort of looks like white-washed message of like, “We’re, we’re doing good.” But how you’re gonna back that up? So I feel like it’s a little bit, I feel a little bit cynical about whether we’re actually responsible.

Next to negotiating ownership of this corporate effort, this example also indicates the impact this instance had on Jill, particularly in terms of her feeling of cynicism that it evoked. Beyond these general findings on how sense of ownership is being constructed by participants in their sensemaking of CSR, two core components of ownership (Cooren, 2010; Van Dyne & Pierce, 2004) are explored further: sense of responsibility and sense of self.

5.2.1 Sense of Responsibility

The findings from the interviews suggest two common ways in which participants constructed their sense of responsibility in carrying out CSR: individual and team responsibility.
5.2.1.1 Individual Responsibility

Regarding *individual responsibility*, participants often talked about their own role, position, and the work that they do. Their answers varied depending on feeling more (or less) responsible to actively take part in organizational CSR practices. Tina shared that being part of the team that takes care of CSR within the company is her personal responsibility. Indeed, she considered ways to get their employees more involved in such corporate practices:

So I think it would be better if I came up, because I do see this as my responsibility, if I came up with like non-invasive sort of way to check in and then if they wanted to consensually participate, it was as easy as possible for them. And to make it inviting that they would want to give up a Saturday or week night or even like during the day at work to go do something or volunteer.

Dominic also thought about the ways in which he sees his own role in carrying out organizational CSR. He was being critical in that “nobody is really advancing here,” and admitted that some of the responsibilities were “technically on my plate.” While he acknowledged his role, he thought that changes would need to be made at the leadership level:

But I’ve told them, I was, you know, these projects were too much, so I’m gonna have to put delegate or put things on hold, and that’s what happened. That was not seen as a problem, it was, well, we gotta get the work done, so it will go on hold. Because there’s not a client, there’s not a deadline. So it’s just, that’s prioritization problem that leadership should make.

As with participants’ constructions of agency in CSR, responses like these suggest that individual responsibility cannot be seen as independent but interdependend (Cooren, 2010) on other factors and entities that come into play as well (e.g., right leadership direction,
other employees willing to get involved, etc.). In this sense, individual responsibility in CSR appears to be rather dispersed among multiple agencies (Cooren, 2010).

Further, the findings also reveal interesting insights into the discursive constructions of individual responsibilities and activities (e.g., employee volunteering) being viewed by participants as part of CSR, or not its part. For Heather, if one uses their company’s name to take part in certain socially responsible efforts, this would count as CSR:

I think the fact that, you know, we’re allowed to, we have to get permission, of course, because you can’t put just anything out there, but we’re allowed to use, you know, company email to let people know about those events and, you know, donate if they wish and that kind of stuff. […] And I do think that’s part of social responsibility or corporate responsibility.

On the other hand, Paul commented that responsibility comes from each individual:

[Our company] allows us to take a day off full day off to do some of our own volunteer work. And I would say based on that, yes, it is a corporate responsibility. Coz they allow us to pick a non-for-profit that we’re supporting, and they give us time off to do that that’s paid.

Paul went on to suggest that such support “just makes me feel like they’re part. That they wanna be part of any social outreach that their employees are doing. So it’s really great.”

5.2.1.2 Team Responsibility

Participants also talked about team responsibility when trying to make sense of CSR. Trevor’s response comes to mind, as he shared his views on CSR as relationship building:

I think some people are just more introverted and secured and […] they don’t like to meet new people. You know what I mean? Like, they’re just awkward. So we
try to put them in a position to be successful, either A, we give them more training if they do desire it, and two, if we know that they’re not as excited to talk to other people, then we make sure that somebody else on their team that’s working with them is. So they can kind of share that responsibility.

Other participants too spoke to the idea of “make a difference together.” For instance, Monica shared a story when one of their employees was a team leader of a women initiative of a non-for-profit organization, and what impact has her colleague’s involvement in such activity made on Monica, personally:

And she got a team together and it was just her personally doing it but the company supported it and advertised it and I did it and really enjoyed it so I’m the team leader this year. OK, if that’s not part of social responsibility and how it works, then I’m not sure what is. So and then the company supported me, my team, financially. This year.

Monica suggested that due to the involvement of another employee and the support that she received from her company, she was more likely to be engaged in this initiative herself:

So, you know, […] if [my colleague] hadn’t done that […] and the company hadn’t gotten behind that, then I don’t know if I would have participated, you know? So I think that’s, you know, an example of how it keeps reaching out. And now I got people on my team that have nothing to do with [my company]. And so now it’s gone to twelve other women that are gonna participate, and then maybe next year one of them will be a team lead, you know, and that’s how you’re making a difference in the world, one person at the time.

Monica’s example not only indicates that responsibility is dispersed among organizational members, but also that agency (or making a difference) too is shared (Latour, 1987). Namely, it spreads from one organizational member to another within her company, but also to individuals and teams outside the company.
Yet another way that participants constructed their sense of responsibility was by referring to leadership. Again, in this sense, responsibility was framed as shared rather than solely dependent on a single person. Paul’s response helps illustrate this discursive nuance. He explained:

First of all, you have to have a cheerleader. Somebody that starts out at the top. So let’s say for instance [our CEO] really wants us to get involved in such and such. And so what she may look for is start trying to do the same thing that we would do, we try to recruit somebody. She can find somebody in the company that she can recruit and they get involved and they excited about it, that person can then be the cheerleader and to be the person that recruits in saying, “You guys, this is an awesome opportunity.”

Paul continued that “leadership can talk into they’re blue in the face but until they get and it starts spilling over into the rest of the organization, really didn’t go anywhere.”

Together, these findings speak to the notion that CSR is, indeed, communicatively constituted in, and through, networks of multiple agencies (Latour, 1987; Schoeneborn & Trittin, 2013; Schultz et al., 2013).

5.2.2 Sense of Self

This study also looked into how participants made sense of their self vis-à-vis CSR. The interviews reveal two ways in which participants had done so: with regard to the meaningfulness of their work, and their passion for the work that they do. Furthermore, participants also constructed CSR in terms of aspirations of what else they want to do in terms of CSR.
5.2.2.1 Meaningful Work

The idea of meaningful work—seen broadly as primarily positive assumptions about one’s work (Dempsey & Sanders, 2010; Mitra & Buzzanell, 2017)—was commonly used among participants in order to construct their own identities as employees of their respective companies, as well as identities of their companies as such. For instance, Anne used the expression of “it’s my thing” to explain why she believed CSR was important. She shared: “I can do the thing that I have control over, to try to make this crazy world make some sense. I’ve seen that it’s worth the time, I’ve seen the benefits of it.” Similarly, speaking of her job, Mary suggested that she is very much involved in CSR: “I mean, that’s just what we do. That’s our job.”

Interestingly, a common way in which participants tried to make sense of themselves with respect to their company’s CSR was also thinking retrospectively about their previous job experiences. Following Weick et al. (2005), this means that participants looked back “over earlier observations and seeing a pattern” (p. 412), which then allowed them to carry on with their process of “materializing meaning” (p. 409) of CSR. Oscar spoke about being “beaten down by the environment” that he was in in his last job position:

I felt like I need a lot more time to, you know, recuperate after a day is over. Whereas now I have the energy to, you know, [...] like spending time out on the street. Like I’ll, I take the train over here [...] every day, and three or four times a week I would just like sit outside and talk with people that are out there all day panhandling or whatever. And I would just sit and, you know, talk to them for 15, 20 minutes. And treat them like people and, you know, take the time to listen to their stories and empathize with them as individuals who have a difficult time in the city that they live in, and the current system that we live under.
Investing his own time and energy, Oscar tried to make sense of his relationships with others, and what such involvement meant to him. Like several other participants, Kirsten too said that CSR was "a big draw" for her to join her current company. Reflecting on her professional career, she shared:

At the end of the day, I’m not a doctor, I’m not a lawyer, I’m not in the Peace Corps, I’m not in the military, I’m not doing something that is day to day changing somebody’s life. So I wanted to do something where I knew I was making an impact. I was being as responsible as I could. I was doing things that spoke to a greater good and in the end had an impact to those that I’ve been touched in my role. So that’s what I was looking for. And then I found that here and it was just the perfect fit.

Rather differently, Jill’s reflection on her previous job suggests that she thought her current company was not as socially responsible as she would have hoped for. In this sense, she took the opportunity to “renegotiate” (p. 595) what she found (not) meaningful about the company she currently works for with respect to its CSR (Mitra & Buzzanell, 2017). Describing her previous employer, she commented: “So it’s hard for me to not compare that experience to what we have here. And I would say, knowing that and seeing like a very responsible organization and coming here, I don’t think that we, we’re really that engaged at all.” In the process of making sense of what her company is (not), Jill thereby tried to position herself vis-à-vis CSR, while also evaluated the impact of such organizational CSR (in)activity on employees.

5.2.2.2 Passion

Another way that participants tried to make sense of their selves in regard to CSR was through discursive constructions of passion. This speaks to Cooren’s (2010) notion
that passion is a critical component of any action or activity. Heather explained how employee involvement in CSR reflects passion that organizational members have for the social causes they get involved with:

[…] you know, we work really hard. We are consultants and that’s what consultants do. We don’t put in just 40 hours. […] So anything that we do, you know, like raising money, going to different meetings of organizations, trying to improve the society, those are things, that we have to do on our own time. And if you’ve been involved in anything like that, you know, that it’s not just showing up for the meeting. If you show up and you’re really passionate about it, somebody’s gonna give you an assignment. “Oh, organize this team,” or “Organize this group.” And I see our people take that on.

For Sam, passion “isn’t fueled by money, it’s fueled by like a love for something.” Like Heather, he too explained what makes organizational members to get involved in CSR practices:

[…] the guy who was doing the hackaton thing, he has genuinely loved, you know, big data. Like he loved it, he did it outside the work, he wasn’t getting paid for it, he just loved it. And so he would do this and like, you know, [our company] would sponsor it, you know. So to me that’s passion and wanting to just to kind of be better, just for the sake of like self-improvement, I think that’s, that’s what passion is to me. And I think that a lot of employees here are just very passionate people.

Participants also referred to passion when they spoke about the work that they do, and how such work reflects, or is reflected by, their understandings and views of CSR.

Mary shared how she feels about her company and the services that they provide:

Well, coz this community that we service, it is, you have to be passionate. It is definitely not about the money. It is about how can I support this community as best as possible. And you wanna make sure that they are well aware, that there are people out there that can really really support them. Can I change their lives over
night? No. It will be work, but I wanna be there to be that resource, at least. To get them on a right track, to go and be part of their community.

Regarding participants’ constructions of passion, Kirsten’s response comes to mind as well. According to her, passion for work makes employees take more ownership, and it makes them feel more empowered to “take the extra step to make something amazing.” Another participants Paul’s response too helps illustrate how employee passion gets played out in organizational CSR, and its effects. He stated: “People are naturally drawn to participate in ways that mean the most to them.” Paul added that “when you see somebody that has true passion for what they do and they’re a true believer in what they do, it makes all the difference in the world.” Taken together, passion is then constructed as both a driver of and a needed condition for employee involvement in CSR practices, whereby being passionate for one’s work, particular social causes, etc. also informs and shapes individuals’ ownership of, or appropriation for, CSR.

5.2.2.3 Aspirations

Finally, the interviews were a platform for participants to share their aspirations in terms of changes they would like to see in regard to their own as well as their company’s involvement in CSR. In this sense, their constructions went beyond solely talking about CSR aspirations of their respective company (Christensen et al., 2013; Koep, 2017). Rather, sensemaking process in which meanings of CSR emerged provided participants the opportunity to critically consider their past experiences while also re-negotiating their sense of “current” selves (Weick, 1995; Weick et al., 2005). For example, reflecting on his own involvement in CSR, Matt described it as “relatively thin.” He admitted that he would “like to be able to donate more of my time and energy
into that.” Thereby, he suggested: “And that’s basically a goal of mine for this for this upcoming year and then into the future, obviously.” In a similar manner, Tim said that he is “open to being involved” in CSR, but that he has not yet found his “personal side of it.” He shared: “I would probably need to figure out where I would fit in. Coz right now, I mean, as you can tell, probably, the tenet of my conversation is: It’s happening. It certainly is happening. Where am I? I don’t know.”

Participants also talked about the ways in which they could encourage more employee involvement in CSR. Again, this may speak to the aspect of the sensemaking process allowing participants to resume with negotiation among multiple interpretations of CSR, aimed toward coming up with rather stable meanings that would enable them to act responsibly in the future (Weick et al., 2005). For instance, Mitchell said he would like to encourage more discussion of CSR among their employees:

I’m actually gonna schedule a lunch and this is gonna be my topic. And I wanna have it with the whole office, and what can we do for CSR communication, right? You gotta open it up. So it’s opportunities like this, where you get to talk about it, like, oh, it’s just popped in my brain.

Jill’s answer helps illustrate this very aspect too. She shared her plans about spending more time to do CSR in her role as a marketing manager:

And I’m probably going to devote some time to looking into opportunities in ways that I might lead that. You know, I personally am looking for ways that I can take a more active leadership role in this organization. I mean, I’m fairly new to management and so this is probably the right time in my career to help see those changes. And that’s definitely one of the ways in which I’d like to see things evolved here.

Jill’s response does not only illustrate personal aspirations concerning CSR, but it also suggests what difference would such involvement make for her own career. Discursive
constructions like these then, again, offer insights into aspirational CSR talk beyond the
corporate level—that is, by unpacking aspirations concerning CSR at the individual
(employee) level (Christensen et al., 2013).

5.3 Summary of the Findings

In sum, the interviews with employees in a sample of SMEs in the US revealed
important discursive nuances in terms of how participants constructed their role in CSR
as it pertains to the questions of agency (i.e., making a difference) and ownership (i.e.,
appropriation of CSR). The findings suggest that employees were commonly talked about
as representatives of their organization and its CSR—that is, as “advocates” of their
employer’s CSR (Latour, 1987). However, a closer look into participants’ constructions
also suggest that there were other agencies (i.e., nature of work, organizational policies,
certificates and standards, and organizational space) that came into play and made a
difference in CSR, including how employees themselves made sense of, and carried out,
practices and initiatives pertaining to their company’s social responsibilities. Such
findings challenge the notion of employees’ individual, autonomous agency in CSR.
Rather, this study invites us, as researchers, to take into account the importance of
multiple agencies, both human and human, that can bring CSR into existence
(Schoeneborn & Trittin, 2013).

In addition, this study delved deeper into the question of employee constructions
of ownership of CSR. The findings showed that CSR ownership was constructed as two-
fold, consisting of participants’ sense of responsibility and their sense of self. First,
participants negotiated their individual and team responsibilities in CSR as
interdependent and dispersed (Cooren, 2010). Second, participants’ discursive constructions of CSR suggested that it is both in retrospection and in future aspirations that employees made sense of themselves vis-à-vis CSR. Such findings provide important insights into the issues of consistency and coherency in CSR talk (Schultz et al., 2013), while they also pose important questions regarding control in employee meaning negation processes.
CHAPTER 6: THE ROLE OF EMPLOYEES IN BRINGING CSR INTO ACTION

But this group, we all believe in it. I mean, we’re gonna gather, we’re here coz we feel something by it. But I don’t think we’re the norm. (other participants laugh) I mean, I’d like to think we are, and it’s growing. But [for] a lot of people, it’s a good job. It’s a great job in [this town] to have. And by the way, they have corporate responsibility. (Louise)

In this chapter, I further study the role of employees in bringing CSR into being. Drawing on Taylor et al.’s (1996) and Taylor and Van Every’s (2000) discussion on collective voices becoming “one” organizational voice, I delve deeper into the ascribed (e.g., what gets assigned and/or is expected through official roles, positions, tasks, programs, etc.) and achieved roles (e.g., what actually gets acted out, or makes a difference) that employees may employ with respect to CSR, and thereby help constitute their organization as socially responsible. This is followed by the premise discussed in the previous chapters that employees are not necessarily “chosen” to act on behalf of their organization through the roles and positions that are being ascribed to them (Taylor et al., 1996, p. 26). Rather, to become agents of their organization “is something to be achieved, not ascribed” (p. 26).

Specifically, I approach this topic by exploring the case of a global pharmaceutical company with its headquarters in the Midwestern part of the United States that strategically engages employees in its CSR efforts. Two research questions guided me in addressing this broader concern: (1) How are employees constructed in
I begin by briefly describing Pharma Company’s approach to CSR. Next, I discuss how employees are constructed in corporate CSR talk as well as how such ascribed employee role in CSR is reflected in participants’ (employee) talk. I identify three core themes that emerged from my data: (1) employees as drivers of, and driven by, CSR mission; (2) employee involvement in CSR as sustained effort; and (3) employee involvement in CSR as conditional. These findings are further presented below.

### 6.1 Pharma Company’s Approach to CSR

When it comes to philanthropy and corporate responsibility, Pharma Company is seen among the most reputable pharmaceutical companies in the United States. Its commitment and dedication to giving back to the community and driving positive social change in the areas such as global health, education, and diversity and inclusion has won Pharma Company many awards and recognitions. These include: being named one of the world’s most ethical companies, listed among top companies that strive for diversity, equality, and inclusion, and selected as best place to work within the industry.

The company’s commitment to CSR was described by its Communications Director, as a “continuum” from donating medical supplies and charitable giving in its early days, to creating value for society in “a very strategic and targeted way” while making business in more recent years. Pharma Company’s approach to CSR, as it evolved over time, is now rooted in Porter and Kramer’s (2006, 2011) concept of creating shared value (CSV) that ties together the business and society aspects of operating in the
global capitalist economy. According to Porter and Kramer (2017), CVS\(^\text{14}\) can be defined as “the practice of creating economic value in a way that also creates value for society by addressing its needs and challenges.” As one can learn from the company’s CSR report (2012-2013), Pharma Company embraces such approach in that, together with other players in the pharmaceutical industry, they “look to expand access to medicines and health care.” In other words, the company is committed to “harness the full range of [its] resources and expertise—human, scientific, and commercial—to help contribute long-lasting solutions to pressing global health challenges” (CSR report 2012-2013).

There are four core areas that Pharma Company strategically focuses on, and regularly communicates about, with respect to its CSR. Next to advancing knowledge and improving global health, which remain to be the company’s core mission, CSV approach is also exemplified through the ways the company operates responsibly on its day-to-day basis, as well as how it goes about its involvement in the communities in which it operates. Employees are at the center of such corporate efforts, both as a group whom the company is targeting its CSR practices and policies at, and as active individuals in carrying out various CSR initiatives.

To begin with, employees are described by the company as its “greatest assets” who ought to be provided with healthy, safe, and welcoming work environment (CSR report 2010). Such “operating in a responsible manner” ties back to the company’s core values—“integrity,” “respect,” and “excellence”—, and is being implemented through

\(^{14}\) While Pharma Company uses the term “corporate responsibility” to refer to its socially responsible efforts using CSV lens, Porter and Kramer (2011) argue that CSV goes beyond CSR and philanthropy in that it is “integral to a company’s profitability and competitive position,” and in that it “leverages the unique resources and expertise of the company to create economic value by creating social value” (p. 76). For these scholars, CSR then refers to corporate programs that are primarily (or solely) concerned with firm’s reputation, with little connection to its business (Porter & Kramer, 2011).
various policies and practices concerning issues, including employee privacy, workplace flexibility, diversity and inclusion, employee mentoring, wellness programs, etc. (Integrated report 2015).

At the same time, the company also positions its employees as playing a key role in enacting organizational CSR by using their treasures, time, and talents “to make a meaningful, measurable, and sustainable difference” in the communities (Integrated report 2015). For instance, the company offers several volunteering programs and initiatives through which employees are able to serve and give back to the community, both locally and globally. Collaborating and partnering with numerous organizations, like non-for-profits, research institutions, schools, etc., such opportunities expand from serving on local boards and helping solve problems in their local neighborhoods, to service trips to impoverished communities and places around the world. In addition, the company also provides employees with the opportunities to donate financially to a variety of charities targeted at different causes. Taken together, employee involvement in CSR practices appears to be rather strategic and institutionalized. Indeed, a closer look into corporate CSR talk suggests that the company constructs employees as drivers of, and being driven by, CSR mission and CSR practices.

6.2 Employees as Drivers of, and Driven by, CSR Mission

A common way in which employees are talked about in corporate CSR talk is being seen as part of the company’s overall mission. According to Fairhurst, Jordan, and Neuwirth (1997), a *mission statement* can be understood as “an ego ideal, a standard by which the corporation is supposed to measure itself and emulate, and whose demand for
perfection it should strive to fulfill” (p. 243). In corporate CSR talk, employees are constructed as both being driven by such mission as well as driving it. For instance, in one of the CSR reports (2011-2012), employees are portrayed as individuals who “play an indispensable role” in helping the company “to meet [its CSR] commitments.” What the company claims to be doing in turn is to “strive to encourage [employees] by maintaining a supportive and respectful working environment” (CSR report 2011-2012). Similarly, another CSR report (2010) projects employees as “essential” in accomplishing the corporate mission: “The early leaders of our company recognized that actions do speak louder than words—particularly where employees were concerned.” As these examples illustrate, CSR policies and programs (concerning wellness, diversity, safety, etc.) are targeted toward employees, while they also help employees to accomplish the mission. What this means in terms of employee wellbeing is that by offering compensation, benefits, work–life balance, and similar, the company claims to be providing “employees with opportunities to build careers that reward them personally and professionally, while helping [the] company advance its vision to improve patient outcomes” (CSR report 2011-2012).

Acknowledging the employee importance, it is not surprising that the company reports about its CSR practices and initiatives involving employees as a valuable investment: “Even in a challenging business environment, we believe it’s important to invest in employee development with programs such as [volunteering abroad]” (CSR report 2010). Indeed, the Communications Director’s response also speaks to finding value in the programs that encourage employee involvement in CSR practices: “getting out and involved is so important that even in the thought times we continue to fund the
employee engagement. So we’re really trying not to cut our corporate responsibility programs just because times are tight financially.” According to him, it is important that such value potential is well received and supported by the leadership:

So what that means is that you have to show the value of it, so that people, the senior leaders, decision makers, continue to value it in its company. And so we have to demonstrate the value of our programs all the time, because otherwise there’s a potential that we can’t get them funded. But our company views it as so important that we’ve really been very disciplined in making sure that we continue these efforts. Because, again, we think it’s right to have a good, striving community, we know that our employees wanna be engaged in this.

Such corporate talk aligns with the aforementioned CSV approach, emphasizing the interdependent relationship between “economic and societal progress” (Porter & Kramer, 2011). Offering a definition of CSR, the Communications Director described the benefits of a community-centered way of doing business:

Because we know that when communities are thriving that is good for business, it’s good for the community and it’s really, it’s an important factor in kind of creating a relationship with people in communities in which you work. Because it’s really about hoping to build trust and then strengthen the communities.

In addition, he explained that there are several reasons why getting employees involved in CSR initiatives is important for the company:

Because we can get far greater impacts, if we, you know, help and encourage our employees to go out, be part of their community or the global community. And also, people, people who feel good about the company they work for stay longer, are more committed, are more loyal to the work that they do.

Importantly, such corporate talk about employees as both driven by, and driving, the company’s CSR mission goes beyond referrals to its current workers. Namely, it also concerns the company’s future employees, such as with respect to talent attraction and
workplace diversity. According to the Communications Director, Pharma Company finds that new employees, especially younger generation, are “increasingly drawn to companies [that do] good work.” Therefore, the organization sees CSR as a useful “recruiting tool,” or “a way to make sure that, you know, that we live in a community where can do our business but also do good work.” The following excerpt from the CSR report (2011-2012) also speaks to this very aspect: “As a global company, we search around the world for talented individuals. To address the medical needs of millions of people, we must have a diverse group of employees who understand the varying needs of the people we serve.”

While employees are constructed in corporate CSR talk as both drivers of, and driven by, CSR mission, the findings from the focus groups discussions suggest that participants (who consisted of organizational members working primarily at the staff/junior (employee) level) made meanings of their company’s CSR vis-à-vis their roles in two specific ways: as sustained and conditional effort. Although participants’ answers correspond with the constructions of employees in corporate CSR talk, they also challenge such talk in that they point to other conditions that either enable or disable them to perform their role in furthering the company’s CSR mission. Interesting nuances of how organizational CSR, with respect to employees, is being accomplished or experienced (achieved) rather than solely described (ascribed) are thereby put forward (Ashcraft et al., 2009; Taylor et al., 1996; Taylor & Van Every, 2000).
6.3 Employee Involvement in CSR as “a Sustained Effort”

Employees are referred by the company as being “at the heart” of its CSR efforts, especially in strengthening and giving back to the community (CSR report 2012-2013). Through a number of opportunities for them to be able to get involved in such corporate practices, both locally and globally, the company encourages employees to actively be engaged in CSR initiatives. The Communications Director explained: “So we really encourage people to go out. We give our employees time, we give them permission […] and then we try to get them organized and structure the activity to go out and do volunteer work.” Moreover, such efforts are sustained through communication, which speaks to the idea of the ongoing nature of communication through which a socially responsible organization, and a consequent social change, can get constituted (Livesey & Graham, 2007; Schoeneborn & Trittin, 2013). This aspect can be seen from the following statement, which suggests that Pharma Company’s employees are asked to share their stories and experiences with others upon returning from their volunteer trips: “The goal is to help employees gain a deeper global perspective and spark new ideas and ways of thinking about patients, ultimately making [Pharma Company] a better company” (CSR report 2012-2013).

The findings from the focus groups partly correspond with such ascribed role (Taylor et al., 1996) of employees in corporate CSR talk. In particular, focus groups participants saw their role in carrying out their company’s CSR with respect to the following four aspects: variety of opportunities to be able to engage in CSR efforts, their visibility and reach, and longevity of CSR involvement.
6.3.1 Opportunities

The findings from the focus groups suggest that participants conversed about CSR as an opportunity that informs and shapes how they view their company as socially responsible as well as how they conduct themselves at work. For instance, Anika explained that she was “always amazed of how [Pharma Company] gets engaged and also encourage employees to volunteer and give back to the community.” She explained that she took “baby steps” in participating in CSR opportunities, starting with local volunteering initiatives first, which then motivated her to join the program to volunteer abroad. She reflected on these experiences by saying: “this is […] not just the job, but this is actually also giving me that fulfilling satisfaction that I am […] part of the company.” In a similar manner, Iris responded that for her CSR was an “amazing” opportunity that influenced her decision to stay with the company:

And you know, just some amazing opportunities and really fueling kind of the ongoing pieces of that, having also, you know, a huge opportunity, [was] probably one of the reasons that I’ve stayed at [Pharma Company], you know, from a long term perspective, because it was something that the company valued.

Beyond CSR being a source of employee motivation, satisfaction, and retention (Bhattacharya et al., 2008), another way focus group participants conversed about their company’s CSR was in relation to flexibility around, and convenience of, getting involved in such “opportunities.” Tom explained how even as a contractor he was able to get involved in corporate volunteering, which he described “remarkable.” Further, he explained: “I think that the corporate responsibility that I’m seeing here, even as a contractor, I was amaze at how much flexibility the company gives to employees to give
back to the communities in which they live.” Flexibility was important to other participants as well. For example, Sandra offered:

I totally agree, I think [Pharma Company] makes it easy, convenient, and makes you want to give back to the community. I mean once, you know, kind of understand the needs of our patients, our communities. For instances, I’ve done [the global volunteering program] too in South Africa, amazing experience. I don’t think I would have had an opportunity likely just about anywhere else. […] [Pharma Company] definitely makes it easy to do that.

Similarly, Maya spoke about her experiences in helping with the outreach in her local neighborhood: “I go ahead and volunteer for a reading program that I can do on the side. I don’t even have to leave, it’s just 30 minutes a week at my desk.”

However, with so many opportunities in place, finding time to participate was seen as challenging by some focus group participants. Tom said that “there’s so many opportunities (laugh) that’s is kind of hard to kind of pick what that you think are best for you, and sometimes I struggle with should I really get involved.” In a similar manner, Joe explained that it is important for him to find a balance between such opportunities and his personal life. Catherine’s response too speaks to this very issue of taking “advantage of opportunities” in order to “make individual and collective changes in this world that we live in” on the one hand, and balancing “our personal lives and our work against the opportunities that we have to […] serve within our community” on the other. Such findings then indicate tensions between CSR practices and initiatives as they are being described in corporate CSR talk, and the ways individual organizational members are actually able to enact, or react to, such corporate efforts in order to bring about social change (Ashcraft et al., 2009; Taylor et al., 1996).
6.3.2 Reach

Participants also talked about their company’s CSR vis-à-vis their roles with respect to reach of such corporate efforts. Max’s response helps to illustrate such construction, broadly: “we kind of walk that talk by keeping it going, and it’s more than that, and getting others to join us.” Indeed, one way in which participants conversed about their CSR involvement was with respect to reaching out to other social groups, locally. Derek spoke about the impact of CSR opportunities on both his personal and professional life, which he experiences daily: “So every day I almost get the opportunity to feel like I’m a part of corporate responsibility.” He reflected on his own role in carrying out CSR, seeing his personal outreach as part of CSR:

I’ll just say that I love all the opportunities that we’re given, and I think I see all of us, it sounds like part of our role has transitioned from not only participating but spreading a word and making sure that goes, whether that’s the colleagues, family, friends, whom ever that is. And so it’s been a real fun opportunity to be stretched and to grow to not only do what is presented as an opportunity or pursue an opportunity, but also encourage others to do the same. Because now we’re on the other side of seeing what it’s done for us and how it’s stretched us and changed us in both work and person. So we want that same opportunity for family, friends, and colleagues. And so teaching and encouraging others I think is a big part of my corporate responsibility path moving forward.

Simone offered a similar response, explaining how her own volunteering experience with the company encouraged her daughter to volunteer as well:

[…] with my volunteer work with [Pharma Company], I got my daughter to do some volunteer work with me, and now she’s moved out of the city, but now she loves volunteering, she’s volunteering where she lives. So I look at that as an
outreach, and hopefully, that’ll just keep going and going and going. Coz again, we’ve been given so much, we need to give back.

In this sense, participants re-negotiated the boundaries of their company and its CSR, thereby suggesting that the latter gets constituted beyond what occurs within the organization, and solely by its organizational members (Morsing & Schultz, 2006; Schoeneborn & Scherer, 2012; Schoeneborn & Trittin, 2013).

Focus group participants also talked about the global dimension of such reach. For instance, Simone spoke about how the company has made a shift from “just sending insulin and medical supplies” to “actually sending our people” to other countries, thereby, “making it more personal.” Another employee, Priyanka, offered a similar response: “Whether it is India or South Africa or Malaysia, or wherever we go, we’re trying to have a lasting impact in the community that we are working [in].” Moreover, in one of the focus groups, the idea of connectivity and synergies across various CSR programs came up in the discussion. Christina shared:

But what I’m starting to become really impressed with about our giving back is all the synergies that are happening. […] So all these things are kind of forming and starting to form like a true net, and in a lot of ways none of these efforts, even though I think they started to stand alone, they’re starting to be all these connections and synergies and expansions.

In a similar manner, Priyanka offered the following thoughts: “things are improving, as Christina was saying, the different initiatives that we are starting, whether it is on […] [Pharma Company] site or globally, […] now they’re able to make those connections. So the result is more impactful whatever we are doing.” Findings like these speak to the idea of the network of multiple, dynamic communicative events through which the company’s CSR comes into being across time and space (Schultz et al., 2013).
6.3.3 Visibility

Visibility was another aspect participants talked about in terms of CSR vis-à-vis their roles. In fact, in one of the focus groups, visibility was participants’ very first response when asked to tell more about their company and its CSR. Making CSR “real” and more than “just words on paper” were some of the common ways in which participants conversed about their company’s CSR among one another. For example, Jane explained how the company’s approach to CSR has changed in order to make such corporate efforts more visible: “We added more support and structure, so we’re more visible, but we’re also adding more support […] I think we formalized supporting employees being involved being part an active participant in our corporate social responsibility.” Similarly, Christina talked about the reason she joined this company was a high school outreach by the company. She said: “I don’t have a parent who worked here, but I grew up in [in this city] so the [Pharma Company] name was on everything. But I do see that progression, too, is not just being the money and the name on things, but the active engagement and volunteer hours and time.” Sandra, who works in middle management, also spoke about how “just having that name adds to the visibility.”

Further, she suggested:

[…] so just from the [Pharma Company] name, whether it’d be the foundation or, you know, our company, you have universities that have some affinity somewhere with the [Pharma Company] name, or hospital, what not, and that evokes certain feelings from the community of pride and just, you know, being […] aware of all the good that [Pharma Company] does.

Another topic that came up during the focus group discussions was visibility of CSR practices and initiatives that the company reaches through employees’ involvement
in their local community, who thereby become the company’s CSR representatives.

Simone shared that “overwhelmingly” people who volunteer in their community are Pharma Company’s employees:

Now you could say, well, arguably we’re one of the largest employers in the city, which may be true. But you know, there’s [other companies], there’s the government themselves, they have a lot of employees. But I’m telling you, I would say probably 6 out of the 10 times you’re gonna find a [Pharma Company] person there every single time.

Simone went on to suggest that, as employees, they are “personally taking the corporate mission” in order to help the community in which the company operates. She added:

Plus, I’m very conscious that when people say, where do you work, “I work at [Pharma Company],” I’m now the face of [Pharma Company], right? And so now I’m representing my company and I need to be on, you know, good terms with everybody, which I would be anyway, but I’m very conscious, I’ve made that statement, “Yes, I work at [Pharma Company], I represent [Pharma Company], I’m here because they gave me this opportunity today to volunteer.”

Findings like these help illustrate the locution (representation) and illocution (action) of corporate CSR talk (Taylor et al., 1996)—that is, the ways in which corporate texts describing employees as drivers of, and being driven by, CSR mission are made sense of, and thus enacted, through participants’ interactions (Weick, 1995). Indeed, Christian shared a similar view in that being involved in the opportunities, such as attending conferences and community service, makes an employee “the company representative.” He also constructed such representation as “a feeling that you have to have,” and explained his views by offering the following example:

[…] you go to the store and you yell at somebody and you have your [Pharma Company] shirt on, uhm, OK, that’s a bad representation of the company. But
every time that you go somewhere and you have your [Pharma Company] shirt on and you do something nice or, you know, you volunteer, that’s representative of the company as well. Everyone should have that at the forefront of everything that they do.

Beyond such general notions, focus groups participants also conversed about the impacts of such visibility on them. Max’s response helps illustrate such findings. He spoke about the diversity and inclusion initiatives that Pharma Company has been carrying out for several decades, which he framed as “a huge corporate responsibility.” He explained how such continuous corporate efforts have impacted him: “You know, forward thinking, 20 years before civil rights that company was doing it. So there’s just this history that we have of doing these things that I think is fantastic, and I feel responsibility for it and I wanna continue that torch.” Derek’s answer comes to mind with this respect as well. He offered: “But the more I went around town, the more I see just how many things our company is involved in, and that’s very motivating for me as an employee to continue to wanna do my best to give to back to a company that does that in the community.” He went on to explain how such corporate involvement plays out for him:

But when you really stop and take a count of that, and then you see the way that that ripples out, and other people see what you’ve done, that’s the best thing that we can do to try to change people’s perceptions. It’s not words that I’m gonna articulate to a friend, it’s the fact that I took my family with me to Africa and then, after we came back, I went into my son’s school and talked about Africa and what we did there, and then that leads to other opportunities and other conversations and is this cascade of things.

Importantly, Derek’s answer also suggests that visibility was not only conversed about among participants as an “enabler” of employee involvement in organizational
CSR, but it was also talked about as a way to sustain CSR actions by, and among, other parties—beyond organizational members themselves (Morsing & Schultz, 2006; Schoeneborn & Scherer, 2012). Another participant’s, Tom’s, answer also illustrates such constructive nuances, in particular, with respect to impacting policies as one of the company’s CSR initiatives:

Not only the opportunities to volunteer I think are very important as far as corporate responsibility, but also one thing that I’ve noticed more recently, probably the last eight to ten years or so, is [Pharma Company’s] voice in the political arena of issues that impact the employees. [...] I think I appreciate that they take the time to even consider that and not just be deciding on some of those issues that can impact us as employees, and how we feel and think about the community in which we live.

6.3.4 Longevity

Another way in which focus group participants made sense of their company’s CSR, including their own involvement in such practices, was with respect to their long-term impacts and continuity: longevity. In fact, the lasting effect of such corporate efforts was something that focus group participants considered when making sense of their own roles vis-à-vis CSR as well. A common emphasis was on the future generation, like one can see from the following comment by Neal:

So I see this from [Pharma Company], the whole change. It’s not just employees and the company anymore, it’s the whole, it’s not the current community anymore, it’s also the future that is gonna come up. And making sure that we have a better society as our kids grow. That’s what, you know, encourages me to stay here and get involved in it.
Tom explained that, for him, CSR goes “beyond just the medicines we produce but the society that we wanna live in.” He shared his views on how he sees employees’ role in serving the community as his employer’s CSR efforts:

Individuals that we think are very important and maybe left behind for all kind of reasons, but we believe as a corporation that they are important enough, that [Pharma Company] says, “I’m gonna, we’re gonna set aside our time for our employees to go help with this issue that has nothing to do with the medicines we produce, because we believe is good for society, the long term value is there.”

In a similar manner, Christina shared that the global volunteering programs are not only medical trips “someone goes on for two weeks and then the community is just left to try to figure it out. They’re planned, they’re sustained, they go over years, there’s funding, there’s NGO local community partners involvement.” She added: “I’m not just gonna go and then do something good and then leave. But [they’re] a sustained effort.” Similar to the findings showing visibility and reach as important aspects of how employees can help bring organizational CSR into being, these responses also point to the needed continuity of such corporate efforts spreading beyond the boundaries of the organization and its members (Morsing & Schultz, 2006; Schoeneborn & Trittin, 2013).

### 6.4 Conditional Employee Involvement in CSR

While informants generally agreed that many employees get involved in the company’s CSR initiatives (which, according to them, are not mandatory), in both focus groups participants talked about the two aspects that such involvement is conditional upon: (a) the degree to which CSR involvement is expected by the company, and (b) the extent to which CSR involvement is supported by management and leadership. Such
findings challenge the abovementioned constructions in corporate CSR talk in which the employee role in CSR is talked about as being encouraged and necessary for the organization and its members in order to accomplish the corporate (CSR) mission. In other words, the ascribed role of employees carrying out organizational CSR is thereby contended (Taylor et al., 1996).

6.4.1 Expectation

One way in which focus groups participants conversed about CSR was by framing it as an expectation. For example, Christian, who works as a manager, explained that he has expectations toward his colleagues engaging in CSR opportunities:

I have an expectation, and during my early planning of the year, you know, I tell everybody I have an expectation that you do internal kinds of things and you do external kinds of things. And I want you to put those on your performance management [reviews], and we talked about those as regular ones on one’s items. […] And it is an expectation that you do not necessarily both [internal and external], and not everybody does everything, but across the board there’s an expectation.

In a similar manner, reflecting upon her company’s CSR, an employee, Jane, shared:

There’s also very deliberate and intentional messaging to supervisors to make sure that they build in that capability for their direct reports, to take that time during work hours to contribute to their communities. And that ongoing messaging and support and, frankly, expectation that is supported I think it’s being is more visible and more intentional […] in more recent times than I recall when I first joined, and I think that’s very good progress.

Responses like these may suggest that some participants see their own roles, or the role of other employees, with respect to CSR as something that is either explicitly or implicitly
attributed to Pharma Company’s organizational members (Cooren, 2010; Taylor et al., 1996).

However, the findings from the focus groups also reveal tensions between expectations, encouragement, and support for employee involvement in carrying out CSR practices. Responding to the question of how participants viewed employee volunteering as part of their company’s CSR, Nick challenged this notion, suggesting that for him volunteering is “just who I am.” He explained: “I don’t see it so much as volunteering, as a part of what I’m supposed to be doing. I just see it as something that [Pharma Company] enables me to do, and it’s just a personal drive.” Responding to Nick’s comment, Jane offered a different view:

So I would challenge that a little bit. […] (laugh) Because we could, we could have a CSR strategy that was just financial, or it was just PR. I think we enable actual skin in the game, but I think we’re very intentional about it in expectation. I expect you to pick up trash, to go paint, to go read to elementary student. I honestly believe that we do that very intentionally, and I believe to go on a bus and go to the state house, (laugh) I mean to put a body and not just sit comfortably, go to a different country, you know, I honestly believe that. To your point, if you didn’t wanna do it, we would be forcing you to do it? No.

She also spoke about the expectations around the continuum of such CSR involvement among other employees, thereby, adding another aspect to the findings that employee CSR involvement is contested:

I think that with [the global volunteering day] it’s been kind of a double edge sword. I think for some people it really is this sense of global camaraderie, “Oh, that 24 hours of giving, that feels really great.” I mean, we’re giving back to our communities, but we also working together as a company. And it’s hard to feel that global connectivity all the time, so I think that’s great. And I cherish that. But
I think there is also, for some people, like, “I’ve checked the box, I’ve done my good deeds for the year, and I’m good now.” (laugh)

Jane went on to suggest that “this continual expectation of a give back may not necessarily always be continuously articulated throughout the year. So even though we might make it available, it might not necessarily be encouraged.”

Focus group participants also discussed the ways in which CSR opportunities “available” to employees may vary, and may be realized differently, depending on the type of work one does and the department in which one works. For instance, Max shared that in his team they “allow those opportunities to happen and grow, but don’t force it upon anybody.” He further explained how he sees such support:

You guys in finance might think differently, I don’t really. I think it’s up to individual in their job and, you know, what can and can’t work. In manufacturing, you have to be on the floor when we’re making things. And we have to know that you’re gonna be there. But in HR, you don’t. […] it gets into the specifics of the role, certainly.

The idea that employee involvement in CSR opportunities varies across the company was put forward by other focus group participants as well. Jacob reflected on his own involvement in a reading initiative, comparing the department in which he used to work with his current office team:

[…] it was like a fad, everybody did it. I mean it was, you all talked about it, we’re gonna, you know, where you’re going, whatever, you’re, you probably knew five or ten people that were doing it, you know. Where I work now, [nobody] does it. Nobody.

In this sense, the findings indicate that employees’ achieved role in carrying out CSR practices—that is, being able to sustain action grounded in corporate CSR talk as
“mission fulfillers” (Kopaneva & Sias, 2015, p. 362)—is essentially contextual (Heracleous & Marshak, 2004; Taylor et al., 1996).

While some participants referred to CSR involvement, such as in a form of employee volunteering, as an (underlying) “expectation” (while not formally mandated or required) that the company has toward its employees, some participants noted that involvement in CSR opportunities is not part of their jobs. For instance, in one of the focus group discussions, performance reviews and whether employees’ community service should be included in such reviewing process came up. Nick shared that one of the things he believes is being overlooked “when a lot of people go out and do corporate responsibility, especially if it’s kind of a self-initiated, is just the amount of […] development and kind of personal traits that showcases [that].” He described his experience working alone with 15 troublesome children on a project of building a doll house. According to him, such activities “should be something that might be more included in our performance reviews.” However, Nick noted that this might be difficult: “so here’s making life better, how am I doing that?” Jacob shared a similar view: “And that’s my struggle too exactly. And I think all of us in that function, it’s, it’s just not (laugh) our daily work, you know, it’s just not.”

Together such findings then, again, speak to the idea that despite employees being recognized in, and through, corporate CSR talk as “authorized agents” (Cooren, 2010; Taylor et al., 1996) who can become the voice of their company’s CSR, such notions are challenged by how participants (organizational members) themselves construct, experience, achieve, or otherwise account for such ascribed role (Taylor & Van Every, 2000).
6.4.2 Support

Relatedly, participants discussed that while employee involvement in CSR opportunities may be expected by some leaders and managers, the latter support for such involvement may not always be equally exhibited across the company. Such joint constructions by organizational members themselves, too, challenge the attributions made in corporate CSR talk, “authorizing” employees to act on behalf of, and being acted upon, organizational CSR (Cooren, 2010). Participants’ sensemaking of their individual roles vis-à-vis CSR varied with this respect. For instance, Tom spoke about his experiences with getting involved in one such opportunity outside his regular work hours:

I work with [the reading initiative] now and done that a couple years, and it’s one of the programs that you spend an hour [on], but the impact is so long term. And the fact that I can just, and when I told my boss about it, he was like, “Sure, just go and take the time off, don’t worry about it.” I was gonna make up the hours and all that type of [things], so he was like, “No, this is what we do.”

On the other hand, Iris shared a personal story of wanting to get involved in CSR initiatives, yet not always receiving support by her bosses. Thus, as she suggested, in certain areas supervisors “embrace [CSR] differently than others.” She explained this issue further:

I’ve had some supervisors that had been excited when I wanted to do [the reading initiative]. I had others that said, “That’s not your priority right now.” As well as even like applying to [the global volunteering program]. There were three years I was told, “We’re not gonna let you, we can’t let you go for two weeks, you’re on critical projects,” and things like that. So the tone does vary by supervisor and area quite a bit in terms of how much you can do it, and there is, you know, a portion of how much self, how much do you value it internally.
Unlike Tom’s experience, responses like the one from Iris suggest that the employee potential of bringing their company’s CSR into being may in some instances be “unrealized” (Taylor et al., 1996, p. 26).

The findings of this study also speak to tensions in terms of support for, and expectations toward, employee CSR involvement against their regular work. Again, Iris’s views are worthy of mention. She explained that she is involved in volunteering opportunities, but that she would engage in such activities “whether or not [Pharma Company] supported it or not, because that’s my own personal beliefs.” She added: “But, you know, it’s hard if you, you know, you’re expected to be here 60 hours a week and be visible. I mean, that all varies by your supervisor and what they value.” Nick’s words also speak to this issue. From his answer, one can learn about the ways the company is trying to encourage its young workers to get involved in, and help instill, the company’s volunteering culture:

So one of the things we’ve done in the early career professional […] we do an event that’s starts at maybe 4 or 4:30 or something like that, is, we immediately sent this out to the leaders in the organization and said, “Hey, please help push early career professionals to do these things. Don’t do make them feel like they need to be at work.” We recognize that those early group professionals are still in the spot where they wanna improve themselves, so taking up time from work doesn’t seem like a good idea to do that.

Both responses may then speak to the idea that in questioning how employees may bring organizational CSR into being, one needs to take into consideration other conditions and circumstances (beyond corporate texts) that authorize, allow, or permit them to carry out such role (Cooren, 2010).
6.5 Summary of the Findings

In summary, the findings from the case study suggested that the *ascribed* employee role in carrying out their company’s CSR was being challenged by how such role may actually get *achieved* in employees’ everyday work (Taylor et al., 1996). While participants’ joint sensemaking furthered the notion of employees as drivers of, and driven by, the company’s CSR that was presented in corporate CSR talk—such as in terms of the number of CSR opportunities available to them, along with their visibility, reach, and longevity—the findings from the focus group discussions suggested that such role was also complicated due to the (underlying) expectations toward, and potentially limited support for, their CSR involvement. Accordingly, this study shows that in considering the employee potential in “realizing” their company’s CSR mission as both being driven by as well as driving it, conditions such as expectations and support, along with contextual circumstances, need to be put forward (Taylor et al., 1996).
CHAPTER 7: DISCUSSION

This study adopted a social constructionist lens (Allen, 2005; Berger & Luckmann; Crotty, 1998) to address the broader question of the communicative nature of CSR, and its implications for CSR action. Viewing CSR as a social construct, I followed social constructionist thinking in studying how organizational members “come to describe, explain, or otherwise account” for themselves and the world surrounding them (Gergen, 1985, p. 266). Unlike the previous literature on CSR, I brought to focus employees as key constituents of an organization in order to learn about their importance and role in CSR. Specifically, three core arguments from Allen’s (2005) essay on social constructionism have guided this study.

Based on the premise that knowledge of CSR is not “out there” but rather constructed in social interactions among people (Gergen, 1985), it was contended here that it is only through and in communication that social phenomena such as CSR come to be about (Allen, 2005; Schoeneborn & Trittin, 2013). I adopted Taylor and Van Every’s (2000) definition of communication as an ongoing process through which people use language to make sense of themselves and the world they live in. Thereby, I followed recent calls to approach CSR as essentially a communication or discourse (e.g., Christensen, 2007; May, 2011; Schultz et al., 2013). I distinguished between the instrumental and constitutive orientations to communication where the latter highlights the constitutive role of communication in bringing organization and its CSR into being (Schoeneborn & Trittin, 2013). The overarching idea of this study was that CSR is a “symbolic resource” (Schultz et al., 2013), and as such, also “value-laden” (Deetz, 2007).
Based on these considerations, I looked closely into the complexities around employee CSR meaning construction to suggest that values are not only polyphonic, but also contested (Gurney & Humphreys, 2006; Deetz, 2007). In addition, I explored the ways in which values act upon participants as much as participants act upon them in the process of sensemaking (Cooren, 2010; Weick, 1995; Taylor & Van Every, 2000). Thereby, I discussed not only the constructive but also the constitutive nature of communication pertaining to CSR (Schoeneborn & Trittin, 2011; Schultz et al., 2013).

Second, a social constructionist lens helped me address taken for granted assumptions (Allen, 2005; Gergen, 1985) in CSR literature concerning both communication and employees. Following Schultz et al. (2013), I first discussed the main biases in CSR communication literature (i.e., consistency, control, and consensus), and the ways in which the three theoretical perspectives—sensemaking, speech act theory, and CCO—can help us address such concerns. In addition, I focused on the ambiguity bias by presenting the arguments why ambiguity is not necessarily bad or problematic for organizations, but often essential and needed part of communication in the context of CSR (Christensen et al., 2015a; Eisenberg, 1984).

I also addressed several assumptions in CSR literature concerning employees. I showed that despite the research on CSR and employees is scarce (Aguilera et al., 2007; Crane & Glozer, 2016; May, 2011; Rupp et al., 2006; Rupp & Mallory, 2015), interest in employees is growing among CSR scholars. However, I argued that the employee role in CSR communication is often taken for granted, particularly in regard to two aspects: (1) employees are commonly treated as speaking with homogenous voice (for instance, as one public, or one stakeholder group), whereby there is little consideration of
heterogeneity and complexities among them; and (2) employees’ role in CSR is often taken at their face value, with limited attention to critical questions, such as what and whose values matter in CSR (Deetz, 2003, 2007), and where is agency in CSR, communication wise (Schoeneborn & Trittin, 2013). Adopting a constitutive view of communication—and taking into account the formative potential of communication concerning CSR—, a social constructionist lens helped me challenge those assumptions by highlighting communication and language as critical in studying the nexus between CSR and employees.

Third, I adopted a social constructionist view of knowledge of CSR as contextual, and thus, culturally and historically situated (Allen, 2005). I followed Eisenberg’s (1984) argument that meanings are always contextual and constructed, and considered ways in which meanings of CSR may be culturally specific and situated (Dhanesh, 2015b; Sriramesh et al., 2007). While social and cultural origins of values pertaining to CSR were beyond my analysis, in this study, I acknowledged that construction of meanings, along with specific values, that participants attributed to CSR were “influenced and affected by the social and cultural networks” which they are part of (Saldaña, 2015, p. 134), in addition to other contextual nuances (e.g., company size, industry).

In the following sections, I present the main arguments of this study more thoroughly. In doing so, the proceeding discussion combines the major takeaways from the findings, as driven and supported by theory. Empirically, I used two separate data corpuses to explore my research questions (i.e., individual interviews with organizational members from various small and medium size companies, and a case study of a large pharmaceutical firm) to address specific questions concerning the role and importance of
employees in bringing CSR into being. The findings from both data corpuses are synthesized below.

First, this study suggests that ambiguity around CSR emerges at both the conceptual and practice levels, which affects how employees make sense of, and carry out, CSR. Second, it is contended that in order to cope with ambiguity around CSR, value negotiation appears to be a key process through which participants try to make sense of CSR. I then introduce my third proposition that suggests that agency in CSR is shared and dispersed. Employees’ role in CSR therefore cannot be studied but with respect to other agencies, both human and nonhuman, that can bring organization and its CSR into existence. Fourth, I focus on the theoretical underpinnings of studying employee ownership of CSR as a form of retrospections and aspirations of their extended self. Last but not least, I draw on the findings from a single case study of the company with an established CSR program and strategy to discuss how employees are constructed in corporate CSR talk. I compare these findings against employees’ joint constructions of the company’s CSR vis-à-vis their roles. Based on this discussion, I summarize the main theoretical and practical contributions of this research. After presenting the limitations of this study, I discuss my suggestions for future research. I conclude this chapter with a few final remarks.

7.1 Re-Enacting Ambiguity Around CSR

This study confirmed the foregoing considerations in the literature that CSR is an ambiguous concept that is contested, multifaceted, and polyphonic (e.g., Christensen & Cheney, 2011; Dahlsrud, 2008; Guthey & Morsing, 2014; Okoye, 2009). Not
surprisingly, given the symbolic nature of communication (Christensen et al., 2015b; Schultz et al., 2013), the findings of this study suggest that organizational members commonly deal with ambiguity around CSR. Indeed, many participants struggled to find words to describe what CSR may mean, and thus, used available cues (such as previous job experiences, organizational practices, internal policies, etc.) to try to come up with new (however, plausible) interpretations and meanings of CSR (Cornelissen et al., 2014; Weick et al., 2005). While some participants admitted that they had not heard of the concept of CSR before, or referred to other interchangeable terms that would explain such corporate efforts, they also questioned what counts as CSR with respect to both their company as well as their own involvement in CSR practices. As such, ambiguity indeed appeared to be an essential part of communication in, and through, which organizational members came to construct companies as socially responsible (or not).

There are several implications of ambiguity being a necessary (and perhaps, the only “certain” (Eisenberg, 2006)) part of employee sensemaking of CSR that need to be taken into consideration. At the outset, focusing on the ambiguity that employees have to cope with can help us explore fluidity and multiplicity of communication in CSR, as it relates to them (May, 2011). Previous literature suggested that companies should seek to avoid ambiguity by focusing on consistency, clarity, and consensus in CSR communication that targets their key stakeholders, such as employees (Schultz et al., 2013). In this study, I have taken into account the alternative arguments that the conceptual ambiguity of CSR can also be beneficial for organizations and their members (Eisenberg, 1984, 1998). Thus, it may provide greater flexibility and openness of the CSR term by allowing employees an opportunity to innovate and/or critique corporate
practices aimed to achieve sustainable organizational and social change (Christensen et al., 2015a; Schultz et al., 2013). I have shown that there is a multiplicity of meanings that participants attached to CSR, whereby these meanings, as participants see it, may or may not be aligned with what the organization does, or claims to be doing, in regard to its CSR. In other words, it is through multiple meanings that individuals came to construct their respective companies as socially responsible, negotiated the criteria of what counts as CSR, and critically accounted if, and how, their own work and involvement in CSR practices would live up to such constructions.

Important to note is that such meanings were not independent but *interdependent* on one another (May, 2011). Responding to the ambiguity of this term, and often having no set or unified understanding of CSR, participants in this study were able to construct their own meanings of CSR by negotiating among various interpretations of CSR simultaneously. These meanings were not only informed, and shaped, by organizational texts (e.g., organizational policies, corporate values, standards, etc.), but also by individual experiences of participants themselves (e.g., their previous jobs, their community involvement outside work, etc.). The analysis confirmed that meanings of CSR are therefore not “out there to be found” but rather (re-)emerge in an ongoing construction through and in employee talk—in the very moment, while also retrospectively (Gergen, 1985; Weick, 1995). As such, this study reveals interesting discursive nuances in employee constructions of CSR that are locally situated and constantly re-emerging (Deetz, 2001; May, 2011; Weick, 1995).

Furthermore, the openness of this concept offered organizational members the chance to reflect upon, oppose, or even resist organizational CSR by offering their own
interpretations, preferences, and views on CSR (May, 2011). This means that through such ongoing sensemaking process participants were able to question their own values and positions vis-à-vis CSR and their work. Thereby, participants also had an opportunity to construct and re-construct their own identities (Eisenberg, 1998; Weick, 1995); for instance, with respect to how their formal positions and roles within the company may be affected by, or affect, organizational CSR. This speaks to the idea that “discursive opening” of this term may indeed offer new opportunities to critique, innovate, or otherwise critically account for organizational CSR (Christensen et al., 2015a), including employees’ own involvement in CSR practices and initiatives.

Yet another argument needs to be put forward with respect to the question of how participants dealt with the ambiguity around CSR. In this study, I have shown that ambiguity essentially emerges with respect to two dimensions: concept and practice. Interestingly, much of the previous literature has focused on the conceptual ambiguity, and less so on how individual organizational members, such as employees, deal with ambiguity in their daily work, and the impact it has on them. While the aim of this study was not to threat conceptual and practice ambiguity as independent from one another, I argue that such analytical and empirical distinction can nevertheless provide important theoretical insights into how CSR ambiguity can be sustained (Weick et al., 2005)—and by whom or what.

Indeed, the findings of this study suggest that ambiguity at a practical level can be complicated due to a lack of detailed, specific instructions or guidance on how CSR may be carried out on the one hand, and a lack of precise understanding of what is expected or desired in regard to organizational CSR on the other (Eisenberg, 1984). Here, I refer back
to participant Anita’s description of CSR as “fluffy” in order to illustrate ways in which the convoluted and perplexing nature of the concept of CSR can present a challenge to organizational members, especially, in terms of how to actively take part in their company’s CSR. Anita questioned: “What’s that, what is that? What am I doing? Yeah. They’re supposed to be taking about it and doing it, sometimes it’s huge. Sometimes I feel that that can be, you know, the struggle.” Examples like these, that bring us closer to ambiguity at the practice level, can help us explore how ambiguity around this concept may as well impact “the day-to-day experiences of employees” (May, 2011, p. 95), both positive and negatively.

Taken together, these findings contribute to a better understanding of how ambiguity around CSR works at the individual employee level, taking into account the fluid, interdependent, and reflective nature of communication concerning CSR (Christensen, 2007; May, 2011). Moreover, such empirical insights help us fill the missing gap in the literature on how employees come to “understand their own sensemaking frameworks and practices” in CSR (May, 2011, p. 102).

### 7.2 Coping with Ambiguity Around CSR Through Values Negotiation

Beyond looking solely at ambiguity around CSR as a term and practice as such, this study also explored constructions of CSR employing a value-focused analysis. Indeed, approaching CSR as a “value-laden” resource (Deetz, 2003, 2007) turned out to be particularly relevant and insightful. Employing such meaning-driven analytical approach (Saldana, 2016), the findings of this study provide new insights into CSR as communication as essentially symbolic and value-laden (Deetz, 2003, 2007; Schultz et
al., 2013). Broadly speaking, participants often referred to CSR as a corporate or an individual value, or its outcome. Yet, this study also went beyond CSR as a value by looking closely into specific values in employee sensemaking of CSR. Thereby, I have responded to recent calls for greater exploration of what (and whose) values are at play in CSR (Deetz, 2003, 2007).

Adopting Sheth et al.’s (1991) categorization of value types previously used by Gurney and Humphreys (2006) in their research on employees as CSR consumers, the findings of this study suggest that participants made sense of CSR with respect to five types of values: functional, social, emotional, epistemic, and conditional. Next to these, I identified the political value as an attribute used by participants in order to describe political involvement as part of their companies’ CSR. While this study is not exclusive of all values that played out in the employee meaning negotiation process, such typology nevertheless proved to be helpful for it explored the multiplicity and polyphony of values in participants’ sensemaking of CSR, which are nevertheless contested (Christensen et al., 2015b; Gurney & Humphreys, 2006; Sheth et al., 1991).

Firstly, I was able to go beyond these broader categories to explore how specific values “speak” in line or against each other, bearing in mind different orientations toward CSR (e.g., Rupp, 2011). For instance, functional value was constructed with respect to the instrumentality and functionality of CSR, and thus, oriented towards the organization and/or its employees. As previously discussed by Gurney and Humphreys (2006), this value type aligns with the instrumental view of CSR whereby the emphasis is on CSR as a mechanism that helps build relationships within and outside the organization, making it a good business case. Specifically, participants often constructed CSR as a
communication tool that helps companies differentiate themselves in the competitive market, build their image and reputation, and serve as both marketing and public relations tools to gain profits and to build relationships with their most critical stakeholders. Beyond value for profit, participants also made sense of CSR with respect to how such corporate (communication) efforts can create and/or ensure a positive work environment, including helping to retain workers and attract new employees. What such constructions suggest is a shifting and overlapping orientation of CSR from the organization to both its internal and external stakeholders. At the same time, my analysis also illustrates participants’ constructions of specific values of one type against values of other types, and how they interrelate (e.g., the functional value for and beyond profit vis-à-vis the social value of giving).

Secondly, greater insights into how various meanings of CSR are co-created with respect to one another, as do the values that those meanings carry, is important, as thereby we are able to study meanings and values are necessarily contested. When participants negotiated among various values, and tried to position themselves against CSR of their companies, these values were sometimes contradictory and questioned. Participants’ constructions of the political value concerning CSR can be used as an illustration of such meaning negotiation processes. Referring to participant Jon’s response, he primarily weighted two value attributions, community involvement and taking a public stand, to construct his meanings of CSR. While he acknowledged that some individuals might see the latter as part of his company’s CSR, he did not see it as such: “I think it’s not a responsibility, really, it’s more of a choice.”
Such constructions were also common as participants navigated meanings around CSR in terms of its communication aspects (hereby, referred to as a transmission of CSR messages (see Schoeneborn & Trittin (2013)). Like suggested by another participant, Donna, when companies were too concerned with “the marketing aspect of it”—in the sense of, “oh, look at us, look what we’re doing”—, rather than “actually doing it.” To add more, such values also seemed to had informed and shaped the ways in which organizational members thought about CSR and ways they conduct themselves at work (e.g., suggesting that more emphasis should be on other values, accepting certain values the way they are, feeling unsure about how to respond to specific values, etc.). In sum, by delving deeper into specific values that participated attributed to CSR, I was able to grasp the complexities as well as tensions around organizational members’ meaning construction of CSR in response to ambiguity (or rather, ambiguities) that they cope with.

Thirdly, a closer look into employee constructions of CSR suggests that values are constructed—and as such, enacted (Weick, 1995)—by participants as much as those values act on participants. To illustrate this with an example, taking care of the community and the environment as a social value may evoke the emotional values (such as feelings of pride and happiness) among participants. These values can be talked about as both “favorable” or not toward the company. Namely, organizational members can also push against certain values that they personally might not agree with (e.g., when their company is taking a public stand in addressing certain social issues, when it is prioritizing marketing efforts over social or environmental benefits in corporate practices, etc.). Again, referring to latter examples, values may act upon participants in that they make a difference in their own interpretations and experiences of CSR (e.g., distancing
themselves from the company’s political involvement, feeling a sense of frustration in their daily work, etc.) (Cooren, 2010; Taylor et al., 1996). What this study then suggests is that not only do participants construct meanings and values of CSR, but that in the very sensemaking process participants are also acted upon values that pertain to CSR.

Critical to note here is that values may be, in one way of another, embedded in organizational texts, conversations, practices, and the like. A typical example seen from the interviews (as well as from the case study which I discuss later in this chapter) is employee volunteering as a common organizational practice institutionalized across participants’ respective companies that typically carries the values of giving and caring. Similarly, taking into consideration the value of knowledge as a common epistemic value that participants attributed to CSR may be embedded in corporate policies and practices that allow and/or expect from employees to get involved in educating clients, attending conferences, and similar. While sufficient answers to this question are beyond the scope of this study, these findings may bring us closer to understanding whose (and not only what) values are at play in CSR (Deetz, 2003, 2007). Such findings also force us to take into account the constitutive nature of communication—and to question control in individual interpretations of CSR—by acknowledging that there are different forms of communication (or different agencies) that can bring the company and its CSR into being (Schoeneborn & Trittin, 2013).

In sum, the findings of this study help tackle the nuances and complexities in employee CSR talk as they relate to the question of the very “locality” of CSR meanings and values, and their effects on CSR practice (May, 2011). They do so by suggesting that value negotiation is an essential part of the employee sensemaking process. Moreover,
This study contributes to the body of knowledge on CSR and employees by showing the implications of ambiguity in terms of how employees make sense as well as experience CSR of their respective companies. These findings are of critical importance, since they take into account the inconsistencies, complexities, and dissensus in organizational members’ interpretations of CSR that tend to be overlooked in the current literature (Deetz, 2003, 2007; May, 2011; Schultz et al., 2013).

Yet, beyond ambiguity and values, the relevance of exploring employee constructions of CSR is also to reveal how organizational members come to construct meanings of CSR in terms of agency (Taylor & Van Every, 2000). The findings that relate to this very aspect are discussed, and reflected upon, in the following paragraphs.

### 7.3 Employee CSR Agency as Shared—and Limited?

This study also delved deeper into the questions of agency and ownership as constructed in employee CSR talk. I studied how participants came to construct and negotiate meanings around CSR as they pertain to their own and their company’s involvement in such corporate efforts. Drawing on the CCO literature, I brought to focus the four main premises that can help explore the constitutive nature of CSR communication as it relates to employees. These arguments, as they reflect in and respond to my findings, are discussed below.

First, this study suggests that CSR action is first and the foremost emergent in interpretation of texts and conversations that pertain to CSR (Taylor et al., 1996). Participants in this study often referred to various organizational texts (policies, practices, standards, etc.) in order to make sense of CSR. In fact, the findings from the interviews
suggest that these texts affect the ways participants constructed meanings around CSR, including their own CSR involvement. For instance, participants talked about standards and certificates as important guidelines that define or impact how they conduct themselves at work with respect to CSR. At the same time, these texts served as tangible resources that organizational members could use in order to make sense of their involvement in CSR, including their lack of. In this sense, organizational texts informed and shaped participant meaning construction of CSR in distinct ways.

Beyond such texts, participants also referred to other materialities and nonmaterialities (Ashcraft et al., 2009) when trying to make sense of CSR. One such example was through the nature of their work. Indeed, participants often talked about their work processes and outcomes as what determines, or even limits, their corporate responsibility. Similarly, organizational space in which they work was also commonly constructed as being beyond one’s control, and as such, viewed by participants as a constraint to greater CSR involvement. Through such interpretations, participants were not only able to simultaneously “reconfirm their own positions” (Taylor et al., 1996, p. 4) vis-à-vis CSR; these insights also point to the idea that employees and their role in CSR cannot be studied independently but with respect to other agencies that bring CSR into being in a specific context (Mills et al., 2010; Schoeneborn & Trittin, 2013).

This leads to my next argument that, when studying employees vis-à-vis CSR, nonhumans (texts, processes, space, etc.) too need to be taken into consideration as having agency (Cooren, 2010; Schoeneborn & Trittin, 2013). Indeed, the findings of this study suggest that employees may act CSR as much as they may be acted upon organizational practices, polices, processes, texts, values, etc. that concern CSR. In this
sense, employees are not autonomous agents in CSR; rather, CSR agency is shared among both humans and nonhumans whereby these entities too make a difference in the ways employees themselves act responsibly (Cooren, 2010; Schoeneborn & Trittin, 2013).

Yet, it is important to note that CSR action concerns making a difference by those that have the capacity of appropriation of such action (Cooren, 2010). Despite shared (and thus, somewhat limited) agency discussed above, the findings of this study show that, generally speaking, employees are often seen as the ones who are able to make difference in CSR by representing the company through their presence in the community. The idea of an advocate is worthy of discussion here. According to Latour (1987), an advocate (who he refers to as a “spokesperson”) is “someone who speaks for others who, or which, do not speak” (p. 71). In line with such thinking, employees can indeed be seen as representatives of their company’s CSR. As this study suggests, next to constructing employees as critical representatives of companies’ CSR efforts, participants commonly reflected upon their individual experiences (both past and recent) to discuss the ways in which they are able and/or willing to perform such agency. However, if we follow Latour (1987) in that advocate’s strength “comes from the representatives’ word when they do not talk by and for themselves but in the presence of what they represent” (p. 72), such argument may also be challenged, to say at least.

Taken together, such findings then challenge the common assumptions made in the literature about the importance of employees in CSR by suggesting that studying the employee role in CSR requires a consideration of the interplay between multiple (rather than independent and individual) entities that too have agency and responsibility in CSR
(Cooren, 2010; Schoeneborn & Trittin, 2013). Thereby, this study also brings to focus more critical questions concerning control and power in communication as it pertains to CSR and employees. Thus, delving deeper into tensions and complexities in communication through which organizational members come to construct meanings of CSR, including their own involvement (May, 2011), may reveal critical insights into strength with which different agents in a specific context speak on behalf of others, and the extent to which both humans and nonhumans can actually make a difference in CSR (Latour, 1987; Mills et al., 2010).

To conclude, this study has made an attempt to show, empirically, that employees’ role in CSR cannot be studied but with respect to other agencies. As such, this research looks beyond employee CSR agency as autonomous, independent construct (Deetz, 2001). Rather, the findings show that such agency is shared and dispersed across the network of different agencies (Latour, 1987) that can too make a difference in ways employees perform their role as agents in CSR, simultaneously. Concerning the employee role as advocates of organizational CSR, I suggest that there are two constructions, sense of responsibility and sense of self, that may help us to further unpack employee appropriation or taking ownership in CSR. The findings concerning this very aspect are discussed in the following paragraphs.

### 7.4 CSR Ownership as Retrospections and Aspirations of the Extended Self

Regarding the question of ownership in employee CSR talk, the four overall findings in particular call for further debate. First, a closer look into how participants constructed responsibility suggests that there are two common ways in which
organizational members tried to make sense of their role: with respect to their individual responsibility, and with respect to responsibilities that they share with other organizational members (including leadership). While participants commonly talked about individual responsibility as was refers to their individual (formal) roles and positions, the findings of this study speak to the idea that such responsibility also depends on other conditions that come into play, such as having the opportunity and being allowed to carry out CSR practices (Taylor et al., 1996). From the constitutive point of view, individual responsibility (like team responsibility) then too appears to be dispersed and interdependent, rather than independent and autonomous (Cooren, 2010). Referring back to the idea of agency, this means that, along with responsibilities that come with one making a difference, each agent “contributes in its own way to what happens, which means […] that each of them does something” (Cooren, 2010, p. 23).

Second, moving to participants’ constructions of their selves (Weick, 1995), this study’s findings point to the complex interplay between meanings that participants negotiated and interpreted against organizational texts and (non-)materialities, and employee meaning constructions with respect to their previous job experiences as well as future aspirations. Indeed, my analysis points to an interesting aspect of the employee sensemaking process: retrospective re-enactment of previous job experiences and comparing them to the current ones. In other words, it is often in retrospection of former job experiences that participants in this study tried to make sense of their current company as socially responsible (or not), and to construct their work as either meaningful or not.
To add more, this study also addresses the dialectical complexities in regard to control in communication concerning CSR at both the individual (employee) and organizational (corporate) levels. Namely, it might be beyond corporate control to find or try to instill finite meanings of CSR, as these essentially depend on available cues and frames that employees re-enact by retrospectively making sense of their previous experiences (and thus, preceding interpretations) that stretch beyond the organization of concern (i.e., the current employer) (Mills et al., 2010; Weick, 1995). In a way, such findings correspond with Livesey and Graham’s (2007) claim—hereby, looking at “localities” in employee CSR talk (May, 2011)—that “language and symbolic action may have constitutive effects beyond what any particular agents—corporate communication departments, CEOs, other corporate rhetors, or their critics—can control” (p. 336).

In addition, this research brings to focus aspirational CSR talk at the individual (employee) level (Christensen et al., 2013; Koep, 2017). Participants also constructed their selves with respect to CSR when talking about things that they wish and/or plan to do more in the future (e.g., finding “personal side” of CSR, setting individual goals for greater CSR involvement, advancing their careers through encouraging CSR at the organizational level, etc.). Communicatively, participants then took up on their roles in carrying out organizational CSR—or “walking the CSR talk”—either collectively or individually. While the perlocution potential (Austin, 1962/1975) of such individual aspirations remains to be open for future debate, interestingly, the findings suggest that employees may also be speaking on the behalf of themselves rather than solely their organization’s behalf; meaning, not only as agents but actors who speak for themselves
(Taylor & Van Every, 2000). This speaks to Taylor and Van Every’s (2000) argument that “Every person is always being both actor and agent” (p. 232).

Fourth, discursive traces of passion in participants’ constructions of self need to be put forward as well. Participants in this study conversed about passion in three general ways: passion as what drives employees in getting involved in CSR; passion as a needed condition for individuals to be active in CSR; and consequences of being passionate for one’s ownership of, and empowerment, in CSR. While these constructions appear to be rather similar at the first glance, drawing on Cooren (2010), they enable us to capture differences when passion may work also as “passivity” (and not only solely as “activity”). Cooren (2010) noted that “any action (activity) involves in one way or another a form of passion (passivity)” (p. 58). He talked about passion, communication wise, as how one can “position herself or be positioned as animated, moved, motivated, led, inspired,enthused, stirred, forced, constrained, affected by” something or someone (p. 58). However, he made a claim that is the ways individuals are “describing what its happening” (p. 59) that one can delve deeper into instances when individuals are active (that is, being animated by passion), and when such actions occur precisely because passion is acting upon them (Cooren, 2010). The latter is, as Cooren (2010) would explain it, also making them “passive” in a way since they “cannot resist” to such passion (p. 59).

The implications of such discursive nuances concerning passion are critical in order to get a better understanding of when employees may appropriate for CSR actions. Namely, not only do such constructions help us understand what may trigger employees to act; rather, these constructions also speak to the notion that it may not be CSR of their
employer as such, but individuals’ passion that leads employees to make a difference (i.e., to act). In order words, such discursive traces can help unpack when employee may or may not be in the position to act (that is, being animated by passion that may work for (or against) specific activities or particular causes that the company focuses on with respect to its CSR). For instance, participants in this study spoke about personal motivations and emotions (such as “love”) that make employees want to get involved in carrying out activities and practices which speak to their company’s CSR. Several of them noted that the fact that their employer allows for such opportunities to happen in the company’s name, during working hours, and similar does not change the possibility of these individuals not wanting to get involved in those opportunities.

In line with such thinking, I argue that participants’ constructions concerning meaningful work may bring us to similar conclusions. The findings of this study suggest that participants made sense of CSR as an essential part of one’s work (“that’s just what we do”) as well as what working for a socially responsible company can lead to (“now I have the energy to […] like spending time out on the street”). Again, what these findings suggest is that employees may be more or less active in CSR, given the extent of passivity as an outcome of passion/meaningful work acting upon them—thereby, also impacting their CSR (in)actions.

In sum, looking closely into the idea of ownership as a social construction of one’s sense of responsibility and one’s sense of self, this study interrogates the employee role as speaking on behalf of organization and its CSR by suggesting that employees may work as both actors and agents when it comes to CSR (Taylor & Van Every, 2000).
While drawing on a different data corpus, employees’ role, as it pertains to CSR, is further explored below.

### 7.5 The Ascribed vs. the Achieved Employee Role in CSR

This study also aimed to get an in-depth understanding of what role do employees play in bringing CSR into being by moving from individuals’ internal conversations (i.e., obtained through one-on-one interviews) to collective sensemaking processes (i.e., obtained through multiple data sources, including focus group discussions)—that is, “how groups and organizations manage sensemaking in their discourse” (Barge & Fairhurst, 2008, p. 238). Looking at a single company with an established CSR program and strategy, I explored how employees’ role in CSR is being constructed in corporate talk against how such role is made sense of, collectively, by employees themselves.

To begin with, my analysis suggests that in corporate CSR talk employees are constructed in two interrelated ways: as drivers of, and as being driven by, the company’s CSR mission. First, many CSR practices and policies that Pharma Company communicates about in its corporate texts are targeted toward employees (e.g., wellbeing, safety, health, inclusion, etc.). At the same time, the company also provides many opportunities through which employees are able to get involved in CSR practices and initiatives. In this respect, employees are constructed as groups of individuals—often, with distinct abilities, talents, knowledge, and expertise—who can carry out the company’s CSR mission (e.g., through their community service) while also being driven by such mission in their day-to-day work (e.g., provided with a safe and diverse workplace). Such findings, indicating a two-way relationship between employees and
CSR (i.e., what CSR brings to employees, and vice versa), speak to the previous notions of employees as strategic constituents in CSR (e.g., Kim et al., 2016).

In this study, I looked beyond such general notions in corporate CSR talk, comparing them with organizational members’ own constructions of their company’s CSR, including how they viewed their roles with respect to organizational CSR. Thereby, I aimed to delve deeper into employees’ ascribed role in CSR versus their achieved role in such corporate efforts. As explained previously, such dichotomy draws on Taylor et al.’s (1996) and Taylor and Cooren (1997) essays on collective voices becoming “one” voice of the organization. Thus, as these scholars noted: “People are not always “chosen” [to act] through inheritance. Becoming the agent of the organization is something to be achieved, not ascribed” (Taylor et al., 1996, p. 26). What this argument suggests is that one needs to look further into conditions for collective employee agency (as it is being ascribed in corporate CSR talk) to be able to find an actual “expression” in speaking and acting on behalf of organization and its CSR (Taylor and Cooren, 1997, pp. 435-436).

In previous chapters, I noted that two conditions in particular are critical with this respect: having the opportunity and being authorized to do so (Taylor et al., 1996). In addition, Taylor and Cooren (1997) pointed out that in order for collective voices to become “organizational,” the actor ought to be “recognized by his or her community as a legitimate expression of such agency” (pp. 435-436; italics added). While due to the limited nature of the data the latter aspect was beyond this analysis, the findings from the case study do speak to opportunities and authorization through which Pharma Company’s employees are being ascribed their role as drivers of, and being driven by, its CSR mission. However, through conversations from organizational members themselves, one
can learn that the ways such ascribed role is being realized or achieved (Taylor et al., 1996) in participants’ daily work can also be contested.

Indeed, the findings from the focus groups suggest that employees are able to carry out their ascribed role through a number of opportunities that the company has put in place (e.g., volunteering abroad, serving on local boards, through corporate giving and donations, etc.). These opportunities are continuously re-enacted through and in communication (Taylor & Van Every, 2000; Weick et al., 2005), not only concerning the variety of initiatives and practices as “communicative events” (Schultz et al., 2013) that employees are able to get involved, but also in terms of their reach, visibility, and longevity. As shown in this study, employees CSR involvement is “talked into existence,” and thus re-enacted, across time and space, involving multiple entities beyond organizational members themselves and beyond corporate texts as such (Ashcraft et al., 2009; Livesey & Graham, 2007; Morsing & Schultz, 2006; Schoeneborn & Trittin, 2013).

Furthermore, it is contended here that it is through these very opportunities, and corporate CSR talk, that employees are “authorized” by their company to “speak” on behalf of its CSR mission. In other words, being recognized as both its drivers, and those who get driven by such mission, the company puts its employees as the very center of its social responsibility by “authorizing” them (again, through texts, practices, initiatives, policies, etc.) (Cooren, 2010; Taylor et al., 1996) to perform and sustain such role long-term and both locally and globally. While the findings from the focus groups correspond with such notions and recognitions, participants’ answers also point to important communication nuances that emerged through their interactions with one another that
complicate what it is being *ascribed* to them and *authorized* in, and through, corporate texts (Cooren, 2010; Taylor et al., 1996).

Specifically, participants’ constructions point to two factors upon which the employee role in carrying out CSR practices is conditional: (1) the extent to which employee involvement in CSR is actually *expected*; and (2) the extent to which employees are actually *supported* to get involved in such opportunities. As noted by several participants, individual preferences and priorities (particularly, of their immediate supervisors) often determine whether or not employees get involved in CSR practices and initiatives, thereby, going beyond the organization’s overall support for such involvement. While employees are, generally speaking, seen as being encouraged or even expected to involve in CSR opportunities, focus group participants also suggested that support for their involvement might differ among supervisors as well as across the departments. In this sense, as these findings suggest, the employee role in bringing CSR into being through their involvement in such corporate efforts is highly contextual and conditional upon *who*, or *what else*, “authorizes” *how* and *why* (Cooren, 2010; Taylor et al., 1996).

Last but not least, the findings also help illustrate the tensions between what is expected from employees on the one hand, and how much support employees actually receive for their CSR involvement on the other. While such constructive nuances remain to be open for future debate, this study contends that such findings may reveal important insights into the extent to which employees are actually involved in CSR initiatives and practices *against* what they are being communicated *about* CSR by their respective company (Coppa & Sriramesh 2013; Pastrana & Sriramesh, 2014; Sriramesh et al.,
2007), and implications of such processes for employees bringing CSR words into CSR actions (Christensen et al., 2013). In other words, a better understanding of such tensions may contribute to a broader understanding of employees as critical drivers of, and constituents in, CSR (Morsing & Schultz, 2006), and the ways in which employee communication (talk) can serve as “a springboard” for organizational and social change (Christensen et al., 2013; Haack et al., 2012; Schoeneborn & Trittin, 2013; Weick, 2012).

Together, the findings from the case study point to an interesting interplay between employees’ ascribed and achieved roles in bringing organizational CSR into being as seen in both corporate and employee CSR talk. As such, this study offers new theoretical and empirical insights concerning CSR talk and CSR action at both the individual (employee) and organizational (corporate) levels. This research’s contributions to theory and practice are presented below.

### 7.6 Contributions to Theory

Drawing on sensemaking, CCO, and speech act perspectives, I argued that CSR comes into being in, and through, communication (Schultz et al., 2013; Schoeneborn & Trittin, 2013). Employing a sensemaking perspective, I took a closer look into the process of sensemaking among organizational members, given its constructive and interpretive character (Weick et al., 2005; May, 2011). In addition, drawing on the ideas of speech act theory, I took into consideration the formative nature of CSR communication by exploring when CSR words may become CSR actions. Finally, I used the CCO perspective to consider the constitutive nature of CSR communication. Combined, these three perspectives aimed to address the guiding theme of this study about the importance
and relevance of employees in CSR—especially, in bringing CSR words into CSR actions—in order to advance the theory of CSR communication and beyond. Theoretical contributions of this study are summarized as following.

First of all, this study adheres to Deetz’s (2003) argument that the concern with CSR is not only issues concerning the environment, workforce, quality of products and services, etc. as such, but rather the ways in which people construct such corporate practices. When comparing individual responsibility—that is, “a personal act of courage and commitment to a calling” (p. 607)—and corporate responsibility, Deetz (2007) posed the following question that is relevant to this study: “What are the conditions that increase the likelihood of corporate responsiveness (answering to) the social” (p. 607). In other words, CSR is an issue of corporate governance and representation of values where the major concern is “not about whether values, but whose and what values, are represented in business decisions” (Deetz, 2007, p. 269; italics in original). Even though the focus of this study was not on decision making pertaining to CSR as such, this study does bring to light social constructions of CSR with respect to specific values that individuals attribute to such corporate practices.

In this study, I followed Gurney and Humphreys (2006) who noted that CSR can become “a source of value,” whereby the latter too is “a multifaceted and socially constructed concept” (p. 86). Indeed, my analysis has shown that employees constructions of CSR do not only concern multiple (Gurney & Humphreys, 2006) but also “competing values” (Deetz, 2003). Based on these findings, I suggested that a value perspective on CSR constructions not only helps us to better understand how employees construct meanings around organizational goals and objectives that pertain to CSR, but
also their personal ones, such as in their “search for meaning and self-fulfillment” in regard to their work (Gurney & Humphreys, 2006, p. 85). However, I also went beyond viewing employees as consumers who are in search for values when it comes to CSR (Gurney & Humphreys, 2006). While I agree with Gurney and Humphreys (2006) in that values that participants attributed to CSR were essentially “pluralistic and co-existent” (p. 84), I argue that, ontologically speaking, studying CSR through the lens of consumption is (yet still) instrumental in that it assumes CSR as a tool or mechanism through which certain values can accomplished or fulfilled.

Second, this study makes an attempt to advance the theoretical understanding of functional and dysfunctional aspects of ambiguity around CSR that employees cope with in their day-to-day work, and its implications. Distinguishing between ambiguity at the conceptual and practice levels, I noted that the latter can help us to identify and critically examine when and how uncertainty may be seen as disadvantageous by individual employees, and the ways in which ambiguity concerning what is expected, desired, etc. with respect to organizational CSR can be sustained (Weick et al., 2005). Such empirical insights help advance previous theorizing about benefits of, and concerns with, ambiguity in the context of CSR (e.g., Christensen et al., 2015a; Guthey & Morsing, 2014).

Third, this study contributes to the literature on the nexus between CSR and employees by showing, both theoretically and empirically, that the employee role in CSR cannot be studied but with respect to other agencies, both human and human, that too bring CSR into existence (Schoeneborn & Trittin, 2013). As such, this study exceeds our understanding of employee as autonomous, independent agents by acknowledging that CSR agency is essentially shared and dispersed across the network of different agencies.
(Latour, 1987) that too make a difference—even as employees perform their role as CSR agents, simultaneously (Cooren, 2010). While questions of power dynamics and control in such meaning negotiation process were beyond my analysis, this study nevertheless points to the fluid and dispersed nature of communication concerning CSR that, antithetically to this very research (!), challenges the employee-centered analysis of CSR talk (May, 2011).

Fourth, drawing on the literature concerning organizational ownership in psychology (e.g., Pierce & Rodgers, 2004; Van Dyne & Pierce, 2004), this study expands the idea of ownership as a social construction of one’s sense of responsibility and one’s sense of self. Thereby, I advance theoretical understandings of ownership in communication pertaining to CSR as a form of both retrospections and aspirations of the “extended self” (Pierce & Rodgers, 2004). To my own knowledge, there have been no studies in CSR literature that would specifically address whether, and how, employees take ownership of CSR—that is, beyond examining employee perceptions and attitudes toward CSR, generally. By showing that it is in both retrospection and aspirations that employees make sense of themselves vis-à-vis CSR, I provide insights into communication processes in which individual responsibilities too are negotiated as disperse and interdependent, rather than as autonomous and independent (Cooren, 2010). I also invite the possibility to study employee constructions of their current employer as either socially responsible or not (including their own involvement in such corporate efforts) with respect to other organizations that these individuals come in contact with and work for—and thus, give meaning of such actions (Wehmeier & Schultz, 2011).
Fifth, this study also explores employees as speaking, and acting, on behalf of the organization and its CSR, considering both their *ascribed* and *achieved* roles, as constructed in employee and corporate talk (Taylor et al., 1996; Taylor & Van Every, 2000). While there are a considerable number of essays in which the idea of collective voices becoming “one” organizational voice has been interrogated and theorized (e.g., Taylor et al., 1996; Taylor & Cooren, 1997; Taylor & Van Every, 2000), empirical research tackling this question in the context of CSR remains to be scarce. By comparing how employees get constructed in corporate CSR talk with organizational members’ own constructions of their company’s CSR vis-à-vis their roles, the case study of Pharma Company explored in this research offers important and relevant insights into “realized” and “unrealized” potentials of employees in CSR (Taylor et al., 1996) that yet need to be unfolded further.

Finally, and broadly speaking, this study also responds to recent calls for greater use of interpretive and dialogic approaches to study employee CSR discourses (May, 2011; May & Roper, 2014). By noting that the importance and role of employees in CSR should not be taken at their face value, this research opens up new theoretical possibilities to study *whether*, *why*, and *how* employees matter in CSR talk and CSR action. Next, this study’s contributions to practice are shared.

### 7.7 Contribution to Practice

Given that the popularity and demand for CSR is on the rise (e.g., Chong, 2017; Rangan, Chase, & Karim, 2015), this study is timely. When it comes to employees, practitioners and the popular press are increasingly concerned with finding the best ways
in which companies can use CSR strategically to attract new employees while also engaging their current workers (see Bhattacharya et al., 2008). In particular, the Millennial generation is commonly put in the spotlight for wishing, expecting, seeking, and demanding companies to perform in a socially and environmentally conscious manner. Not to say, companies are starting to realize that too. As recently noted by Lars Freuergaard Jorgensen, CEO of Novo Nordisk, one of the world’s most reputable companies when it comes to CSR: “Young people have a strong wish to be part of something meaningful. We all want to, of course, but it seems young people place increasing emphasis on this when making their choice of career” (Jørgensen, 2017). The interviews and focus groups conducted for this research confirm such interest and need.

In this study, I tried to address this broad topic of interest by focusing on “internal dimension” of CSR (May, 2011). Specifically, I sought to understand meanings that employees working for companies in the United States construct with respect to CSR, including their own involvement. In addition, I explored ways in which such sensemaking processes may be informed and shaped by specific programs, practices, policies, and the like, that their respective companies have put in place to enact CSR. There are several contributions that this empirical study brings to practice of CSR.

First, this study suggests that practitioners should embrace ambiguity around CSR, as it appears to be an essential part of the sensemaking processes in and through which employees come to understand meanings of CSR as well as their company’s role vis-à-vis CSR. In addition, ambiguity allows employees to reflect upon their own roles with respect to CSR, and to position themselves against specific practices and policies that their organization has put in place that pertain to CSR. The findings of this study
support such arguments. While the ambiguity and openness of such term may offer employees the opportunities to critically account for such questions (Christensen et al., 2015a), at the same time, ambiguity around CSR as it relates to the very practice of CSR may also reveal tensions and uncertainties around expectations toward, and responsibilities of, employees to take active part in CSR. Companies and practitioners working in this field should consider ways in which ambiguity, at both the concept and practice levels, can be used strategically to the organization’s best advantage in that it can bring more innovation and constructive feedback in implementing CSR (Christensen et al., 2015a; Eisenberg, 1984). In addition, they should search for ways in which ambiguity can work to advance organizational processes in order to foster sustainable organizational and social change (Christensen et al., 2015a; Eisenberg, 1984).

Second, this empirical study suggests that CSR is indeed “communicational,” and as such, rooted in “the interaction processes by which we incorporate values and make decisions” (Deetz, 2003, p. 607). The findings show that there is a multiplicity of values that are at play when employees try to understand CSR, generally, as well as their role in carrying out CSR practices. However, it is important for companies to realize that those meanings and values are not solely dependent on, and emergent within, organizational settings, but may also re-emerge with respect to employees’ previous job experiences. Given such findings, communication as it pertains to CSR and employees then cannot be controlled by the organization nor can it be fully consistent with messages that the organization does, or hopes to, portray on their internal and external stakeholders (Schultz et al., 2013). Rather than focusing on consensus and control, practitioners should therefore embrace the fact that in order for employees to “participate well” (Deetz, 2007,
p. 275) in CSR, the latter ought to be “found in fostering particular communicative micro practices in everyday work contexts” (Deetz, 2003, p. 610) that allow for such multiple values to come into existence and to be up for critical discussion. In other words, to paraphrase Deetz (2003), companies should work toward greater inclusivity of multiple values in corporate decisions making by fostering dissensus, conflict, and diversity in a creative and constructive manner.

7.8 Limitations

No study is without limitations. Beyond the data collection concerns already mentioned in Chapter Three, several limitations as they pertain to each data set of this study also are worthy of mention. First, the sample included interviews with organizational members from various positions, including leadership, management, and staff. Given that my sample included only small to medium size companies, distinguishing between lower-ranked employees and lower/upper management and leadership proved to be difficult. More often than not, participants worked in various positions across hierarchical levels within their respective companies. I also acknowledge that participants had diverse experiences in carrying out CSR, and a different level of knowledge about CSR, that may or may not be depended on their formal positions and/or responsibilities within their respective companies. To overcome such challenge, I distinguished between owner–manager/founder positions and the rest, and have listed individuals’ job positions as provided by participants themselves. Relatedly, it would be helpful if my study were to include approximately the same number of organizational members from all companies that I interviewed with. While I was not interested in
studying employee CSR constructions within a specific industry sector, or in companies of more distinct sizes, narrowing my sample could have provided more nuances in such constructions as they relate to industry and/or company size in question.

Second, the data for the case study included in this study were limited. I was able to conduct only two focus groups with 19 participants. Given the global scope of this company, this sample is small and not representative of a greater number of employees who work for this company. In addition, I had little time to go deeper into conversations within the time frame given. Next to more focus groups, additional interviews with organizational members across the organization at different hierarchical levels would be helpful in this regard. I also acknowledge the fact that among participants were organizational members who showed some personal interest and/or care for this topic. In fact, during and after the focus groups, participants themselves admitted that their views and experiences were “not the norm” and that they were “bias” with respect to their company’s CSR. A sample that would include organizational members who are less interested in and/or willing to participate in such corporate efforts could enrich this study.

7.9 Future Research

One of the main theoretical implications of this study is based on the premise that social action cannot be observed but in multiple interpretations that people make in various social contexts (Taylor et al., 1996). In this study, I have followed the argument that focusing on dissensus rather than consensus offers us the opportunity to study employees as agents in CSR as “socially situated” rather than “autonomous” (Deetz, 2001, p. 14). By studying multiplicity and complexities in employee constructions of
CSR, this study has aimed to do so by revealing how agency in CSR gets played out and makes a difference with respect to employees’ role in CSR. Doing so, I have allowed the possibility to approach employee CSR agency as shared and dispersed rather than individual and independent (Cooren, 2010). As such, this study opens up new possibilities to study employee role in “walking CSR talk” (May, 2011).

Several questions remain open for further debate. First of all, future research might consider looking into whether and how roles and responsibilities of actants (such as employees) might shift when action is shared (Cooren, 2010). One way to do so could be by looking closely into how multiple employee voices may work collectively—and thereby, help constitute organization as socially responsible (Taylor et al., 1996; Taylor & Cooren, 1997; Weick, 2012). In particular, scholars might want to take into account two conditions for multiple and diffused employee voices being able to give voice to organization: (1) becoming authorized agents to speak in organization’s behalf, and (2) having the opportunity to do so (Taylor et al., 1996). Such “symbolic construction” could nevertheless provide interesting insights into how an organization can not only becomes “the scene” of CSR action, but also “an actor” itself (Taylor & Van Every, 2000, p. 210).

Future research might want to consider ways to explore when and how individual employee identities that act in the name of organization and its CSR may not only be (formally) authorized but recognized by others to do so (Taylor & Cooren, 1997); namely, with the help of other forms of agencies (human, nonhuman) that too speak. For example, as illustrated by one of the participants in the focus groups, what happens to the organization and its “CSR voice” when an employee is behaving inappropriately in a store while wearing a company T-shirt? Such considerations could provide interesting
and relevant insights into employees’ ascribed and achieved roles in bringing CSR into being beyond solely looking at corporate discourses in a form of texts.

Next to the theoretical implications of this study, it is also worthwhile to note its methodological implications with respect to future research. To begin with, I acknowledge that theoretical framework used in this study, as in any other research, is a “way of seeing” (Deetz, 1992, 2001). As such, this study did not seek to look for generalizations in understanding employee CSR communication nor did it suggest that the lens adopted here was able to capture a full complexity of this phenomenon. Rather, my aim was to employ a rather unique perspective that would allow me to unpack organizational communication processes that are essentially local, situated, and ongoing in nature (May, 2011). The findings of this qualitative inquiry can therefore never be an actual or full representation of data but rather my own (researcher’s) constructions of what participants had to say in regard to CSR in specific situations and contexts. As Geertz (1973) would say: “what we call our data are really our own constructions of other people’s constructions of what they and their compatriots are up to […] Winks upon winks upon winks” (p. 9).

Given such lens, this study also poses compelling questions about the ways in which such qualitative inquiries get conducted methodologically, and their ethical implications. Drawing on Cooren (in Schoeneborn et al., 2014), it is important to take into consideration that researchers using constitutive perspective on communication act on subjects/objects of their study as much as these subjects/objects act on them. In line with Tracy’s (2013) iterative approach, an ongoing reflection is then a critical component of qualitative study using constitutive lens. While reflections that I made throughout the
process of writing this study are not included in this final product, an important takeaway of this study was a reflective exercise in which, as a researcher, I was acting on this study (e.g., while collecting and analyzing data) as much as this study has acted on me throughout all its stages. Such reflexivity, along with ethical implications, would be worthy to address in future research.

### 7.10 Concluding Remarks

This study aimed to challenge some of the common assumptions in the current literature about the importance of employees in CSR. There is, generally speaking, still little discussion on whether and why employees can be seen as one of the most important organizational constituencies when it comes to CSR, and what role do employees play in CSR given both the constructive and constitutive potential of their talk. This study contended that one attempt to address such gap is by critically addressing how employees construct meaning of CSR, both individually and collectively, with respect to the questions of agency and ownership in CSR. Furthermore, this study brought to light employees’ ascribed and achieved roles in CSR, and implications of such roles for bringing the organization and its CSR into being. My hope is that greater theoretical and empirical insights into “everyday” dimensions of employee CSR talk and CSR actions, with respect to other agencies that come into play in constituting social change, not only contribute to a better understanding of the nexus between employees and CSR, but also enrich the body of knowledge and practice of CSR beyond this link.
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Hello,
Thank you for meeting with me. As you have learned from our correspondence, I am conducting a study on corporate social responsibility, also known as CSR, and employees. I will ask you some questions regarding your understanding and knowledge of CSR, generally, as well as about your views of and experiences with CSR in your company. If you do not mind, I would like to record our conversation. Please note that all identifiable information (such as your name, the name of your company, etc.) will be kept confidential. Audio recordings of this conversation will be used for research purposes only. Participation in this study is voluntary. If you would like to stop this interview or leave this study at any point, please let me know. None of the questions should make you feel uncomfortable. If for some reason you do not want to answer a specific question, we can skip that question and move to the next one. I hope you feel comfortable to speak freely. Do you have any questions before we begin?

Questions for managers:

**Demographics**
- Could you please tell me your name?
- What is your age and gender that you identify with?
- Could you tell me the name of your company and what your company does?
- What is your current position in the company?
- Could you shortly describe what do you do in this position?
- How long have you worked for this company?

**General understanding and knowledge of CSR**
- How would you define corporate social responsibility (CSR)?
- Tell me how a socially responsible company might look like.
  - Can you think of any concrete examples of the ideal socially responsible company?
  - Why do you think this company (or companies) is socially responsible?
- Tell me about whether you think a company should be involved in CSR?
  - Why do you think a company should (or should not) be involved in CSR?
- Based on what you have just discussed, to what extent do you consider your company socially responsible?
  - Can you provide some concrete examples or activities that can help illustrate why you believe your company is (or is not) socially responsible?

**CSR at the company level**
- Tell me about what your company does in regard to CSR.
  - Could you describe specific activities or initiatives that your company does in regard to CSR?
- Tell me about the importance of your company to be involved in CSR.
  - In your view, how important it is for your company to be involved in CSR?
- How would you describe your organizational structure?
• Tell me about how decisions are made in your company in regard to CSR.
  o Who makes decisions in your company in regard to CSR?
  o Who is involved in this decision-making process?
• Tell me about employee involvement in CSR in your company.
  o In your view, how important it is for employees to be involved in your company’s CSR?
• Tell me about employee commitment in CSR in your company.
  o In your view, how important it is for employees to be committed to your company’s CSR?
• Who sets the strategy for CSR in your company?
  o Tell me about the extent to which employees are involved in setting your company’s CSR strategy.

**CSR communication**
• How would you define communication?
• Tell me about the importance of communication CSR, in general.
  o In your view, to what extent should (or should not) companies communicate their CSR?
  o Tell me about the importance of communication in CSR in your company.
• Could you describe how your company communicates CSR? (both internally and externally)
• Could you describe how your company communicates CSR with its employees?
  o What does your company communicate with employees regarding CSR?
  o Through which channels does your company communicate CSR to employees?
  o Who in your organizational structure communicates CSR to employees?
  o In your view, to what extent should (or should not) your company communicate CSR to employees?
  o What more would you rather have your company communicate with employees regarding its CSR?

**CSR practice**
• If you were to describe what your company communicates in regard to CSR and what your company does in regard to CSR, what would you say?
• Who do you think has the ability to enact your company’s CSR activities and practices?
  o Why do you think these individuals have the ability to carry out your company’s CSR activities and practices?
• Tell me about the role you think employees currently have in carrying out CSR activities and practices in your company.
• Would you like to see any changes in the way employees are currently harnessed vis-à-vis CSR practice in your company?
• Is there anything else that you would like to add?

**Questions for employees:**

**Demographics**
• Could you please tell me your name?
• What is your age and gender that you identify with?
• Could you tell me the name of your company and what your company does?
• What is your current position in the company?
• Could you shortly describe what do you do in this position?
• How long have you worked for this company?

**General understanding and knowledge of CSR**

• How would you define corporate social responsibility (CSR)?
• Tell me how a socially responsible company might look like.
  o Can you think of any concrete examples of the ideal socially responsible company?
  o Why do you think this company (or companies) is socially responsible?
• Tell me about whether you think a company should be involved in CSR?
  o Why do you think a company should (or should not) be involved in CSR?
• Based on what you just discussed, to what extent do you consider your company socially responsible?
  o Can you provide some concrete examples or activities that can help illustrate why you believe your company is (or is not) socially responsible?

**CSR practice**

• Tell me about what your company does in regard to CSR.
  o Could you describe specific activities or initiatives that your company does in regard to CSR?
  o Tell me about specific activities or initiatives that your company does in regard to CSR that you personally find particularly meaningful.
• Tell me about how much you personally feel part of what your company does in regard to its CSR.
  o What aspects of what your company does in regard to its CSR do you (or don’t you) feel part of?
  o Why do you (or don’t you) feel part of these aspects that you have just talked about?
• To what extent would you say your company gets you involved in its CSR activities or initiatives?
• How important it is to you what your company does CSR?
  o Why do you (or don’t you) find it important that your company does CSR?

**CSR communication**

• Tell me about how your company communicates about its CSR. (both internally and externally)
  o Could you describe what specific aspects or initiatives does your company communicates in regard to CSR?
  o Tell me about specific activities or initiatives that your company communicates in regard to CSR that you personally find particularly meaningful.
• Tell me about how much you personally feel part what your company communicates in regard to its CSR. (both internally and externally)
  o What aspects of what your company communicates about its CSR do you (or don’t you) feel part of?
  o Why do you don’t you feel part of these aspects that you have just talked about?
• To what extent would you say your company gets you involved in its CSR communication?
• How important it is to you personally that your company communicates (or doesn’t communicate) about its CSR?
  o Why do you (or don’t you) find it important that your company communicates about its CSR?

Employee involvement in CSR
• Tell me about your involvement in CSR activities and practices in your company.
  o Can you think of concrete examples or situations of your involvement in CSR activities and practices in your company?
  o What made you want (or don’t want) to take part in these CSR activities and practices?
  o Can you think of concrete examples or situations of your involvement in such CSR activities and practices that you found particularly meaningful?
  o If you have not been involved, what made you don’t want to take part in CSR activities and practices?
• When (or in what situations, instances, etc.) are you (or would you be) more likely to take part in CSR activities and practices in your company?
• Tell me about how your company’s communication about CSR affects your involvement in CSR activities and practices in your company (if at all).
• Can you think of any examples or instances when you personally communicated about what your company does in regard to CSR?
  o Could you tell me more about these examples or instances?
  o What made you want to communicate about your company’s CSR?
  o If you haven’t communicated about your company’s CSR, can you think of instances or situations when you might be willing to communicate about your company’s CSR?
• If you were to describe what your company communicates in regard to CSR and what your company does in regard to CSR, what would you say?
• Is there anything else that you would like to add?
APPENDIX B: DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION SHEET

Thank you for agreeing to participate in our study. In addition to taking part in the focus group discussions, we would kindly like to ask you to answer the following questions concerning your demographics and your involvement in the global volunteering program with your company.

- What is your name?
- What is your age?
- What is your gender?
  - Male
  - Female
  - Other (please specify)
- What is your ethnicity/race?
- What is your level of education?
  - High school diploma
  - Bachelor’s degree
  - Professional diploma/course
  - Master’s degree
  - Doctoral degree
  - Other (please specify)
- Please name the location where you currently work (i.e., name of the city and country where your position is based).
- What is your current job title?
- Please briefly describe what you do in your current position within the company.
- What is the level of your position within the company?
  - Staff/junior-level
  - Middle management
  - Upper management
  - Leadership
  - Other (please specify)
- What year did you join the global volunteering program with your company?
- How long did you participated in this program?
- Where were you located during this program (i.e., name of the city and country where you volunteered)?
- What work/project did you do as a volunteer in this program?
APPENDIX C: FOCUS GROUP PROTOCOL

Hello,
Thank you for agreeing to participate in this focus group. As you have learned, I am conducting a study on corporate social responsibility, also known as CSR, and employees. I will ask you some questions regarding your views of and experiences with CSR in your company. If you do not mind, I would like to record this focus group. Please note that all identifiable information (such as your name, the name of your company, etc.) will be kept confidential. Audio recordings of this conversation will be used for research purposes only. Participation in this study is voluntary. If you would like to stop or leave this focus group at any point, please let me know. None of the questions should make you feel uncomfortable. If for some reason you do not want to answer a specific question, we can skip that question and move to the next one. I hope you feel comfortable to speak freely. Do you have any questions before we begin?

Questions for participants:
• Tell me about your company and its social responsibility.
• [The researcher reads the company’s CSR statement.] Tell me about what you think of this statement.
• How much do you feel part of your company’s social responsibility?
• To what extent would you consider employee volunteering as part of your company’s social responsibility?
• Is there anything else that you would like to add?