How employees shape CSR transparency: A sensemaking perspective

Tina Sendlhofer [a,b,*], Daniel Tolstoy [b]

[a] Stockholm Environment Institute, Linnégatan 87D, 104 51 Stockholm, SE, Sweden
[b] Stockholm School of Economics, Sveavägen 65, 113 83 Stockholm, SE, Sweden

ABSTRACT

Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) transparency has predominantly been treated as an organizational outcome in previous literature. Drawing on rich qualitative data, we find that CSR transparency can emerge through sensemaking processes where employees are instrumental in exercising moral judgements, engaging with stakeholders, and creating shared narratives. The study contributes to our understanding of CSR transparency by showing that the phenomenon is reflected by social processes and should not be narrowly conceptualized as an outcome of information disclosure at the corporate level. The study also provides fine-grained details about the cognitive and organizational mechanisms at play in the shaping of CSR transparency. Specifically, we introduce a bottom-up model which explains how reserved and non-reserved approaches of CSR transparency are developed.

1. Introduction

Transparency, here defined as the perceived quality of intentionally shared information from a sender (Schnackenberg & Tomlinson, 2016), has gained traction in academic research on Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR[1]) as well as in business. In this article we explore the concept of CSR transparency, i.e., transparency involving disclosure of CSR-related information. CSR transparency has been described as a force that provides grand solutions to corporate ills (Roberts, 2009) that offers promises for a better future (Holzner & Holzner, 2006; Tapscott & Ticoll, 2003). CSR transparency ensures that relevant stakeholders (e.g., government, consumers, media, owners, employees) will receive the information they require to accurately assess the CSR-related performance of an organization (Deegan & Rankin, 1996; Gray, 2001). A certain customer may, for example, need information about where and how a product was produced to make an informed purchasing decision. CSR transparency is, therefore, instrumental to create long-lasting, trusting relationships with stakeholders (Eccles, Ioannou & Serafeim, 2012; Kang & Hustvedt, 2014). In cases where CSR-related information cannot be properly assessed, there is little possibility to distinguish organizations that excel in CSR from those that underperform.

According to Albu and Wehmeier (2014), the conceptualization of

CSR transparency has been overly simplistic in extant literature. Research has equated transparency with information disclosure and focused on its outcomes. In so doing, extant literature has largely disregarded the processes through which individuals determine which information is relevant and which is not. Recent studies, however, have claimed that sensemaking by employees is instrumental for exerting CSR transparency (Albu & Wehmeier, 2014; Kim & Lee, 2018). The premise for this claim is that CSR transparency is ambiguous in nature because the relevance, quality, and context of CSR-related information is open for interpretation. Organizational members will encounter moments of uncertainty while practicing CSR transparency and try to seek clarification of what is going on. They may do so by extracting and interpreting external cues in dialogue with others and use these cues to create order and "make sense" of what has occurred (Maitlis, 2005; Weick, 1995; Weick, Sutcliffe & Obstfeld, 2005). Hence, from a sensemaking perspective, disclosing information is not merely about increasing the flow of information, it is also about enhancing the understanding (Kim & Lee, 2018).

In this vein, Albu and Wehmeier (2014) argue that research to a greater extent should view transparency as a phenomenon that is shaped in human interactions. Drawing on Schnackenberg and Tomlinson's (2016) conceptualization, this study treats CSR transparency as a

subjective and socially constructed concept that, depending on how it is exerted by employees, will influence an organization's behavior in distinct ways. This understanding implies that sensemaking of CSR transparency involves the active authoring of narratives by individuals (Weick, 1995; Weick et al., 2005). Interestingly, individual employees will take part in constructing the very situations they attempt to comprehend (Podgorodnichenko, Edgar, Akmal & McAndrew, 2021). Because organizations have different interpretative systems (Daft & Weick, 1984; Weick, 1995), there will be different frames to decide how CSR transparency is conceived and enacted, ultimately affecting how a company is perceived by stakeholders.

The purpose of this article is to study how CSR transparency emerges in organizations by using a sensemaking perspective. In line with recent studies (Christensen & Schoeneborn, 2017; Kim & Lee 2018; Schnackenberg & Tomlinson, 2016), we argue that because of the ambiguous nature of CSR transparency, organizational members are compelled to engage in sensemaking processes. While sensemaking has been argued to offer a promising framework for analyzing various CSR phenomena (Richter & Arndt, 2018), research in this area is still in its infancy (Aguinis & Glavas, 2019). Through this study we expect to contribute to CSR research by illuminating the sensemaking processes that drive the emergence of CSR transparency (Girschik, Svystunova & Lysova, 2020; Gond, El Akremi & Swaen, 2017). Drawing on management studies, we also investigate the underlying mechanisms that shape sensemaking processes and produce a variability in approaches to CSR transparency. These mechanisms are captured by both cognitive (Tata & Prasad, 2015) and organizational features (Tourish & Robson, 2006).

By exploring the emergence of CSR transparency, we complement research that has focused on CSR transparency as an organizational outcome (e.g., Constantinescu & Kaptein, 2015; Kim & Lee, 2018). While we do not refute outcome-perspectives, we argue that a sensemaking view is highly relevant to understand how CSR transparency can be developed and practiced. This perspective is particularly pertinent in small business settings where the agency of individuals is pronounced (Sendlhofer, 2020). Compared to larger organizations, smaller organizations are generally less hierarchical and less governed by formalized rules and protocols (Jenkins, 2009). Therefore, individual employees may strongly influence the practices of CSR transparency in these settings.

2. Perspectives on CSR transparency

The concept of CSR transparency has been argued to lack theoretical anchorage and conceptual consistency (Wehmeier & Raaz, 2012). The following overview of CSR transparency confirms the notion that the conceptualization of the term is based on different assumptions. Here we present two principal streams of literature within the field of CSR that view CSR transparency as either an (ethical or business case) outcome or a process. Recognizing that process-perspectives are understudied, yet highly salient, we conclude this section by developing a sensemaking perspective which provides sociological explanations to the emergence of CSR transparency.

2.1. CSR transparency as an ethical outcome

CSR transparency has been associated with virtuous moral behavior and a willingness to disclose information related to relevant CSR activities (Laczniak & Murphy, 2019). Birchall (2011, p. 9) suggests: "Transparency has become a sign of cultural (as well as moral) authority." From this perspective, information shared with stakeholders is not necessarily selected, curated, and expressed in a way that is optimized to reflect favorably on the (business) organization (Fernandez-Feijoo, Romero & Ruiz, 2014; Madsen, 2009; Pratt & Adamolekun, 2011; Signitzer & Prexl, 2007). Instead, this view implies a moral position where transparency enacts the organization's own judgments about ethical behavior or judgments imposed by external stakeholders (Constantinescu & Kaptein, 2015). CSR transparency is driven by intrinsic or extrinsic motivations that compel the organization to act virtuously or based on duty (i.e., compare the views of Aristotle and Kant). In an empirical study, Story and Neves (2015) demonstrated that a combination of intrinsic and extrinsic motivations will have a stronger impact on employees' aptitude to perform above and beyond their specified work tasks. CSR transparency may, thus, be reflective of the moral codes that guide the behavior of the organization (e.g., Carroll, 1991). Researchers subscribing to the view of transparency as an ethical ideal treat the concept as the opposite of manipulation of facts, advertising, biased information, and propaganda (Pratt & Adamolekun, 2011). Transparency, from this vantage point, reassures stakeholders that the organization is not hiding anything by adding a layer of accountability to the concept (Van Marrewijk, 2003). While studies within this stream have stressed the need to disclose information for ethical reasons, it remains obscure how companies define, scope, and process information within their CSR transparency regimes.

2.2. CSR transparency as a business case outcome

One stream of outcome-focused studies on CSR transparency has focused on the business case aspects. From this perspective, CSR transparency is associated with motivations of self-interest where organizations primarily use it as a lever to pursue their own strategic agendas, e. g., by crafting attractive images of their organizations (Kim & Lee, 2018). An essential part of such a strategy is CSR reporting, aimed to deliver purposively selected and timely information to relevant stakeholders (e.g., Dubbink, Graafland & Van Liedekere, 2008; Kim & Ferguson, 2014; Timothy Coombs & Holladay, 2013). CSR reports have been described as "signs of transparency *through their very existence*" (Christensen & Cheney, 2015, p. 83, emphasis in original). CSR reporting is conducted through different channels and to different recipients depending on the purpose it is intended to serve. For example, certain facets of CSR reporting may be formally mandated by government agencies to comply with laws and regulations (García-Sánchez, Frías-Aceituno & Rodríguez-Domínguez, 2013; Karaiskos, Evangelinos, Vouros & Nikolaou, 2019). Stakeholders may also receive continual information through CSR reports, press releases, news pieces, and ongoing information sharing online. While CSR reports are outcomes of CSR transparency that address various demands for disclosing CSR-related information, this practice has been widely criticized for lack in openness, clarity, and accuracy and thereby only serving as a window dressing activity, insinuating that unflattering information could remain hidden (Cho, 2009; Gray, 2006; Joensuu, Koskela & Onkila, 2015). For instance, the mere existence of labels, accreditations, and audits may override the organizational practices that they represent (Meijer, 2009). Another "dark side" of CSR transparency has been pointed out by Esrock and Leichty (1998) who found that some organizations use CSR transparency to flood stakeholders with favorable cherry-picked information with the intention to "blind or dazzle" the receiver (Lamming, Caldwell & Harrison, 2004, p. 299) while remaining silent about negative outcomes (Drucker & Gumpert, 2007). Social and environmental disclosures are hence not rarely self-laudatory (Hooghiemstra, 2000). It is not surprising that the practice of using CSR transparency as an indicator for CSR performance has been questioned (Christensen, Morsing & Thyssen, 2011; Higgins, Tang & Stubbs 2020; Nadesan, 2011).

The business case perspective rests on the premise that CSR transparency is never fully reflective of reality, but carefully managed by organizations. The reason for this is that it could be potentially harmful for organizations to reveal too much information or share information in a non-thoughtful manner (Artiach, Lee, Nelson & Walker, 2010; Gamerschlag, Möller & Verbeeten, 2011). This problem is illustrated by the accountability paradox which suggests that the more effort an organization makes to be transparent and maintain a dialogue with stakeholders, the more it loses the capacity to transmit a coherent and consistent message about its goals and visions (Carlisle & Faulkner,

2005; Stansbury & Barry, 2007). By and large, business case perspectives on CSR transparency underscore the connection between top-down strategic decision-making and outcomes of a communication strategy related to CSR matters. While these studies indicate that CSR transparency is more about active curation of information than mere disclosure, they do not seem to pay attention to the social undercurrents within organizations that could provide alternative, more process-focused, explanations to how CSR transparency in organizations emerge.

2.3. CSR transparency as a process

A parallel, narrower, stream of research suggests that scholars should pay more attention to the processes underlying CSR transparency. For example, Strathern (2000, p. 313) argued that transparency (not only in CSR settings) only serves a purpose when it "enhances understanding and not just increases the flow of information." To enhance the understanding, involved actors need to interact, share information, and create new knowledge (Cotterrell, 2000). In line with this process view, research has found that transparency practices are reflected by sensemaking processes in both CSR settings (Basu & Palazzo, 2008; Morsing & Schultz, 2006) and crisis management situations (Albu & Wehmeier, 2014). Actors make sense of CSR-related information through interpretative framing and then translate shared understandings into actions and organizational principles (Morsing & Schultz, 2006). Specifically, Basu and Palazzo (2008) describe the development of CSR transparency (along with other facets of CSR) as a process in which managers within an organization think about and discuss their roles in relation to the common good and question how their own pre-dispositions affect this process. While this process view of CSR "locates the phenomenon as an intrinsic part of an organization's character" (Basu & Palazzo, 2008, p. 124), it does not view lower-ranked employees as integral to sensemaking dynamics.

Christensen (2002) discusses the emergence of CSR transparency as a process. In his view, this process is characterized by the ongoing alignment of the various interpretations made by external and internal actors. Christensen did not, however, consider that alignment processes could take place between individual actors at different levels that create structures and practices related to CSR transparency. In a more recent study by Christensen and Schoeneborn (2017), the scholars advance the process view by demonstrating that acts of information disclosure are reflected by individual understandings of moral integrity where key-individuals in (business) organizations induce their own moral judgments and enact values that, ultimately, shape the development of organizational practices and corporate cultures.

With a few exceptions (e.g., Christensen & Schoeneborn, 2017), the focus on processes underlying CSR transparency has been set on the corporate level and on the inter-organizational (and stakeholder) levels. Studies have not extensively examined the mechanisms that shape CSR transparency nor elucidated reasons for variability of approaches of CSR transparency. Subscribing to this process-oriented view of CSR transparency, we propose that there is scope for more sociologically geared and process-oriented frameworks to unearth explanations to its development. In the following section we will provide a theoretical lens for analyzing how CSR transparency emerges in organizations through a sensemaking process, involving individuals.

2.4. Theoretical perspective: A sensemaking view on CSR transparency

This study builds on the premise that CSR transparency, due to its ambiguous nature, should be understood as a socially constructed phenomenon that organizational members try to make sense of. A literature review shows that sensemaking theories are preferably applied to analyze situations of ambiguity (Maitlis & Christianson, 2014). The sensemaking concept has long been used by scholars to study how meaning is created and transmitted (Garfinkel, 1967). The term sensemaking in a management context was first mentioned in Weick's (1969) book, *The Social Psychology of Organizing.*

Recent sensemaking research has argued that cognitive processing of information does not take place in isolation and has emphasized the social processes that occurs between people where meaning is negotiated, contested, and mutually co-constructed (Maitlis & Christianson; 2014; Weick, 1995; Weick et al., 2005).

When reacting to complex business situations, individuals may find it difficult to explain their own and others' behaviors. Sensemaking fills this gap by offering ongoing retrospective gathering, selection, interpretation, and sharing of informational cues that rationalize what people are doing (Weick, et al., 2005, p. 411). The collective understandings that are generated in these processes enable organizations to operate and make decisions in ways that are not necessarily optimally rational, but considered satisficing (Simon, 1947). Organizational sensemaking, hence, proceeds from the scanning of information sources, through mutual interpretation of data that takes place in ongoing dialogues between individuals and ends with action (Daft & Weick, 1984; Weick, 1995). In this vein, individual learning and interpretation will be diffused in an organization by individuals. Eventually it will become embedded at the collective level. It should be noted that "shared" or "intersubjective" meaning does not necessarily equate a fully agreed-upon understanding, but rather understandings that are enough aligned to create room for coordinated action (Donnellon, Gray & Bougon, 1986; Gray, Bougon & Donnellon, 1985). This collective account of meaning will subsequently guide cognition and organizational behavior (Daft & Weick, 1984; Grimes, 2010; Stubbart, 1989).

Sensemaking has been conceptually linked to a variability in CSR practices at the organizational level (Aguinis & Glavas, 2019; Basu & Palazzo, 2008). Building on this notion, different approaches to CSR transparency in organizations could be explained by distinct sensemaking processes.

CSR practices, such as CSR transparency, do not belong to the traditional domain of company activities (Turner, McIntosh, Reid & Buckley, 2019). Managers and employees may therefore be faced with ambiguity regarding their roles in enacting CSR transparency (Bridoux, Stofberg & Den Hartog, 2016; Guerci & Pedrini, 2014; Hahn, Preuss, Pinkse & Figge, 2014; Richter & Arndt, 2018).

Because of possible mixed signals of how to exert CSR transparency, individuals are bound to continually revise their ideas and practices in sensemaking processes carried out in interactions with stakeholders. We argue that such sensemaking processes can be studied by examining narratives of employee reflections about when and how they disclose CSR information to stakeholders.

Based on the idea that there are individual and organizational factors causing a variability in sensemaking processes, potentially shaping CSR transparency differently, we articulate the following research question to guide this study: How do sensemaking processes shape CSR transparency?

3. Research design and material

To answer the stated research question, we have conducted a qualitative study based on conversation-like interviews in two organizations in the Swedish apparel industry. The exploratory nature of this study required respondents that are knowledgeable about the organization and about the phenomena addressed in this study (Kumar, Stern & Anderson, 1993). The focus on two organizations, and data collected from multiple respondents, allowed us to focus on the mechanisms (i.e., interactions, organizational practices, narratives, mindsets, knowledge sharing) that underlie sensemaking processes and are formative for different approaches of CSR transparency. This study interprets the narrated lived experiences of individuals when engaging in CSR transparency as the respondents' attempts to create plausible explanations for experiences (Weick et al., 2005).

3.1. Sampling

The study of how CSR transparency emerges in the retailers Knitex and Swetex[2] is part of a larger study about small Swedish apparel retailers' CSR, including employee perspectives on CSR, organizational change processes related to CSR, and sustainable supply chain management. We theoretically sampled (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) these two organizations as they stood out in two distinct ways: (1) they were industry leaders in CSR and (2) CSR transparency was a large part of the retailer brand's profile. Theoretical sampling is a common method for grounded theory approaches and calls for a selection of respondents who are expected to be knowledgeable about the phenomenon (e.g., Strauss & Corbin, 1998). This approach is likely to increase the quality of the gathered data and "provides a clearer picture for a model of the phenomenon to be developed and then tested using other methods" (Thomson, 2010, p. 49). In line with a grounded theory approach, this study intends to foreshadow the need for alternative conceptualizations of CSR transparency (see Wehmeier & Raaz, 2012). Implications of the organizations' idiosyncrasies could open avenues for future research to systematically test our findings on a larger scale.

3.2. The two organizations: Knitex and Swetex

Knitex and Swetex are apparel retailers that were founded in the early 1990 s. Knitex is relatively large (175 employees and 2.9 M EUR EBIT) compared to Swetex (45 employees and 150,000 EUR EBIT). Both retailers are headquartered in the Stockholm area and are neither family-run nor owner-managed. They have flat organizational structures and employees report to be given freedom and autonomy when working with topics related to CSR (e.g., being allowed to disclose information to the public about the firms' CSR related activities). Furthermore, the companies are leaders in CSR in the Swedish apparel industry. Indicative of this is that they have been repeatedly awarded for their CSR leadership by industry members. Utterances of CSR transparency make up a recurring and consistent theme in both organizations. CSR transparency is reflected by communicating these efforts through various channels, such as through websites, public speeches, organization reports, and interviews.

3.3. Data collection

We collected data through continuous dialogue over the period of two years (from October 2016 to December 2018). To be able to probe deep into the two organizations, we found it important to include a variety of job roles, ranging from lower managerial (32 respondents) to executive positions (4 respondents) (see Table A.1. in Appendix A). This approach enabled us to receive granular insights into the decision autonomy of employees about the organizations' CSR.

The data collection consisted of primary data including 36 semi-structured interviews (17 at Knitex, 19 at Swetex). It also consisted of secondary data including archival data, such as organizational reports, sustainability reports or the organizations' websites. In the study at hand, we focused on understanding how employees expressed the organization's CSR practices. The interview guidelines were open-ended and included topics such as: Career path, CSR in relation to job roles and as citizens, the role of smaller organizations and CSR, and stakeholder relationships. Furthermore, interviews focused on how employees have worked with CSR issues as well as transparency issues (and the combination of the two). Informants were encouraged to explain their day-to-day activities at work and could freely narrate their engagements and activities. The duration of interviews was on average one hour. All interviews were transcribed verbatim and the data was organized with the data management program Nvivo.

---

[2] Knitex and Swetex are fictional names for the organizations.

Table A1
List of interviewees.

	Knitex		Swetex
Freja	Sustainability director	Irina	Purchasing manager
Clara	Design assistant	Marie	Fabric purchaser
Emmi	Design assistant	Louise	Communications
Linnea	Product manager	Karin	New product design
Julia	Supply chain manager	Göran	CFO, supply chain manager
Ingrid	Communications	Filippa	CEO
Jenni	Sales manager	Mikael	Supply chain manager
Kristina	Logistics	Eva	Product developer
Madelene	Wholesale manager	David	Head of design
Alva	Fabric manager	Hannah	Customer experience manager
Lucas	Digital tech lead	Mena	Product developer
Ida	Product buyer	Irina	Purchasing manager (2nd round)
Robin	Head of design	Marie	Fabric purchaser (2nd round)
Susanna	Buyer jersey	David	Head of design (2nd round)
Sara	Financial controller	Göran	CFO, supply chain manager (2nd round)
Örjan	CEO	Karin	New product design (2nd round)
Alva	Fabric manager (2nd round)	Louise	Communications (2nd round)
		Hannah	Customer experience (2nd round)
		Jonas	Head of brand design

3.4. Data analysis

The study was carried out with a grounded theory approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) and we entered data collection with a general interest on the narratives of how employees perceive the development of CSR transparency. In line with Maguire and Hardy (2009), we recognize narratives as constitutive of the environment and not just representational. Hence, narratives provide opportunity to capture accounts that reflect both the sensing and acting parts of sensemaking processes (e.g., Maitlis, 2005). As we immersed ourselves in the interview material, we identified a consistent overarching narrative about CSR transparency. As we continued to iterate between data and theory, we discovered that adopting a sensemaking lens allowed us to carve out the underlying mechanisms of CSR transparency that are interpreted and enacted by employees, reportedly often in dialogue with each other and external stakeholders.

As an initial step, we established an overview of the material and have organized the data into "first-order concepts." An example for the descriptive code "regular meetings" is the following: "I think that like the other companies that I have contact with, I meet them quite regularly, discuss different, or new problems and areas [about CSR]." (Marie, Swetex) and "We meet frequently [for discussing CSR], I have been meeting most of them [members of the CSR project group] and Freja a little bit more often." (Ingrid, Knitex). Creating these descriptive codes (Punch, 2014) enabled us to sort the data for the subsequent step in the analysis, the axial coding. After this, we included the secondary material to triangulate the data (Jick, 1979). For example, the code "information gathering/sharing" was triangulated as follows: "But we can also have informal meetings with other companies, organizations, and working units. It is neither a fixed path nor fixed [CSR] knowledge. It is something we need to re-evaluate along the way and share with each other." (Louise, Swetex) with "By sharing our thoughts, knowledge, methodology and ambitions in this [CSR] report, we hope to inspire you [reader] to join us in our quest." (Sustainability report, Knitex).

Furthermore, our analysis focused on detecting patterns of similarity and dissimilarity in the data set. This axial coding process led us to a reduced number of codes. In this stage, we started to iterate between data and theory and applied the perspective of sensemaking devised by Daft and Weick (1984) (see also Thomas, Clark & Gioia, 1993) to further

analyze our data. This iterative process gave rise to four second-order themes. In this stage, we were interested in the employees' cues about CSR transparency. We were particularly interested in how informants created meaning with regards to being transparent about CSR-related information.

Finally, building on the second-order themes, we continued with higher-inferential coding and focused on how CSR transparency was expressed and represented through the respondents' narratives. We arrived at three aggregate dimensions that deliver the basis for our theoretical discussions. Fig. 1 illustrates the data structure.

4. Findings

The findings of this study demonstrate numerous consistencies in the two cases. Firstly, the development of CSR transparency was in both cases characterized by sensemaking processes (containing both organizational and psychological components), largely driven by employees. Secondly, CSR transparency emerged as pivotal in the development and management of CSR. We also found inconsistencies in our data to consider. Namely, the formation of individual perceptions differed between the organizations which led to a categorization of two ostensibly distinct approaches of CSR transparency, here labeled *reserved transparency* and *non-reserved transparency*.

We examined how employees handle CSR-related information, how they discuss CSR-related information with their colleagues, and their reasoning behind disclosing (or not disclosing) certain CSR-related information to external stakeholders.

4.1. Employee sensemaking of CSR

In Knitex and Swetex, employees have autonomously engaged and taken initiatives in issues related to CSR, indicating an intrinsically motivated sensemaking process, fueled by the enthusiasm of employees and guided by their beliefs and moral pre-dispositions. At Knitex, the employees engaged in a rather overt scanning process of CSR-related information. This process took place in dedicated meetings where relevant issues were discussed among employees. The latest knowledge about CSR-related information was presented and employees negotiated how to communicate new insights internally as well as to customers, owners, and media. To acquire CSR-related information, Knitex hired several employees, informally referred to as researchers: "She [Linnea]

is our researcher here. You must make sure, however, that all her research will be shared and can be implemented." (Alva, 2nd round, Knitex). Gathering and sharing CSR-related information in the meetings was reported to be key for making CSR issues visible to everyone. The employees made an agreement about disseminating ideas that they perceived as relevant both to other employees and to external stakeholders. This is reflected in the project group's consent:

> *All attendees [of the CSR meeting] have the responsibility to distribute all information among colleagues. They also have the responsibility to engage with all external stakeholders.* (Freja, Knitex)

At Swetex, a similar process of scanning and interpreting CSR information was detected. Employees repeatedly mentioned how their personal interests influenced their research about CSR. The employees of Swetex gathered information in an unstructured way since there were no protocols to guide the fulfillment of the task. The results of their research became fragmented and, possibly, biased by individual predispositions and motivations. This would have consequences for the way CSR-related information was organized and eventually shared with external stakeholders. Compared to Knitex, the relatively flatter hierarchy among the employees (i.e., lacking a CSR leader) allowed employees to share the new CSR information they had gathered directly with external stakeholders.

> *Here at Swetex, everyone is really personally interested in these [CSR] matters and we learn from each other. We also learn a lot from other companies, or from one supplier, or one worker. We have constantly informal [CSR] meetings with colleagues in our business. It is not like a fixed path. We need to re-evaluate along the way and share with each other all [CSR] information.* (Louise, Swetex)

An observation applying to both organizations is that their interpretations of CSR transparency were more strongly influenced by personal moral schemata than by business motives. The employees frequently labeled CSR, and their personal responsibilities to this cause, as either "avoid doing the wrong thing" or "doing the right thing.".

> *I think it [CSR] is very important. As a company, it is sometimes difficult to be innovative. But this is the only way forward for us and the industry. It would feel wrong to continue what we have been doing for so long.* (Emmi, Knitex)
>
> *[…] This is when you really have a proper sustainable company. I think that also in combination with that [CSR], doing it wrong today as a*

First order concepts

- Regular meetings
- Research about CSR related innovations
- Information gathering/sharing
- Learning processes

- CSR is "doing the right thing"
- Avoiding CSR is "doing the wrong thing"

- Transparency is limited responsibility
- Transparency is differentiation
- Transparency is information filtering
- Transparency is an added on quality

- Transparency is about honesty
- Transparency is being reflexive
- Transparency is business development
- Transparency is part of daily operations
- Transparency generates future business
- Transparency is key for long-term survival

Second order themes

- Identifying CSR topics
- Moral labelling of CSR
- Protecting CSR initiatives
- Disclosing CSR initiatives

Aggregate dimensions

- **Employee-driven CSR**
- **Reserved transparency**
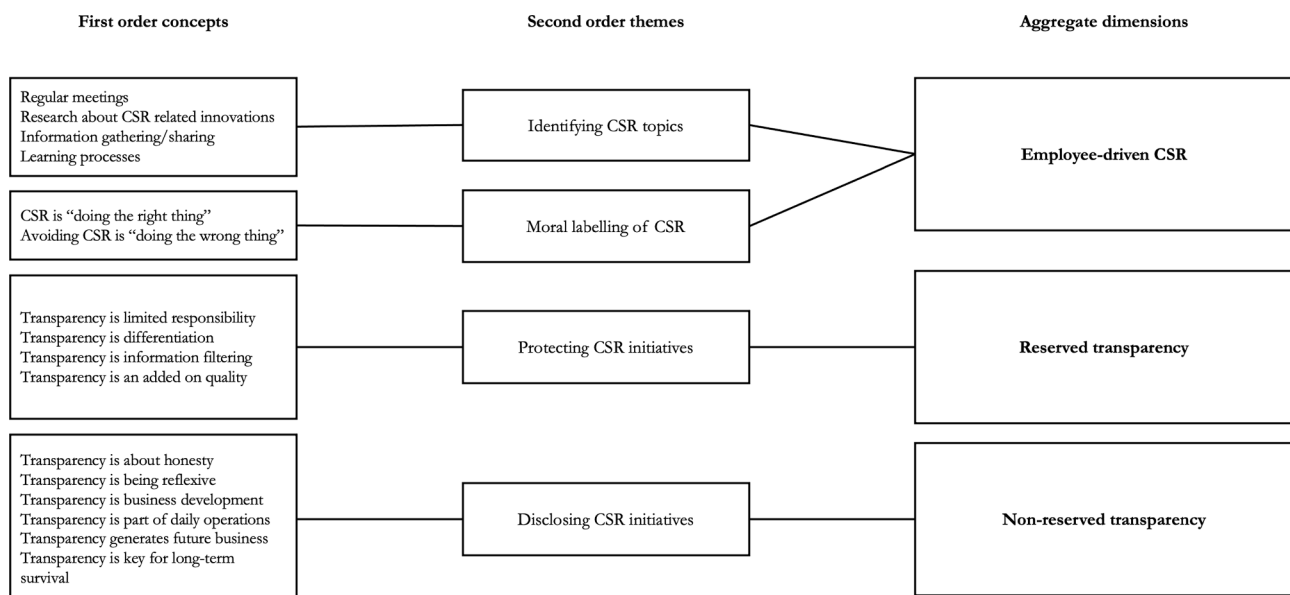- **Non-reserved transparency**

Fig. 1. Data structure.

company feels way too cheap in comparison to doing it right. (David, Swetex)

By this sharp dichotomous categorization (i.e., "right"; "wrong"), the employees adopted a reflexive behavior to decide whether a certain conduct is acceptable or unacceptable. Based on reflections, different practices emerged related to how the employees of the two organizations decided to disclose CSR-related information. At Swetex, the employees appeared to share the idea that knowing about CSR would automatically endow social and environmental accountability, both for themselves and for their external stakeholders. Employees at Swetex generally considered CSR transparency to be the missing link that could be used to compensate for potential shortcomings in the organization's implementation of CSR. At Knitex, however, the employees perceived limited personal responsibility and accountability regarding CSR transparency.

The findings demonstrate that sensemaking processes based on morals and beliefs shaped CSR transparency. For example, specific utterances of transparency are largely determined by collectively formed understandings about the boundaries for sharing CSR-related information. In some instances, this compels employees to disclose CSR-related information that they consider relevant as clearly and accurately as they can.

Our observations suggest that manifestations of moral responsibility are malleable and thereby also framed by the organizational setting. For example, in the case of Swetex responsibilities for CSR are (informally) distributed among employees, fostering intrinsic motivations as well as a perceived entitlement among employees to step up and act as representatives for the organization. Employees became observant of the meaning of organizational practices and experienced it as their moral obligations to make relevant CSR-related information overt.

4.2. Approaches to CSR transparency: Reserved and non-reserved

Both approaches of CSR transparency – reserved and non-reserved – are driven by employees in the sense that their interpretations of CSR transparency were translated into actual practices. This indicates an autonomous sensemaking process among employees. Additional supportive material about the two approaches is presented in Table B.1. in Appendix B.

4.2.1. Reserved transparency

Conversations with employees at Knitex revealed that they viewed CSR transparency to be critical for CSR. They perceived a crucial interdependency between the two. Nonetheless, the employees indicated an opportunistic use of CSR transparency as they carefully selected the specific topics they wanted to convey to the public and carefully planned how these topics were communicated to external stakeholders. Thus, the employees disguised certain topics although claiming to intend full transparency. An explanation for this contradictory behavior may be that employees were concerned about their individual accountability in relation to the specific work tasks which they were assigned to do. From this standpoint they were not prepared to take responsibility for the organization's operations in a larger sense. This is interpreted as taking personal caution as well as to protecting the organization, which mirror reserved transparency.

> *Learnings [about CSR] are difficult to talk about. If you are insecure, you will rather not talk about it. Just like everybody, it is embarrassing if they ask a question, and you cannot answer it. You know you feel secure in the surroundings and keep quiet.* (Jenni, Knitex)

In this case employees' perceptions of their own responsibilities created an uncertainty about what CSR-related information should be disclosed, how it should be disclosed, and what ramifications it would have. The data revealed several narratives reflecting reserved transparency that can be broadly divided into psychological factors (i.e.,

Table B1
Additional supportive material.

	Illustrative quotes	Interpretation of CSR transparency
Knitex	We always try to see how we can change and how we can move into the right direction. Many things have happened during my nine years at Knitex. I think that it [CSR] is a very good thing and we have always talked about it: to be transparent and sustainable as possible. (Susanna, Knitex)	These statements reflect those employees who perceive CSR transparency to be instrumental. While CSR transparency seems to be key for stakeholder management, the social mechanisms underlying transparency reflect that transparency is interpreted to have a protection function for the organizational activities related to CSR. Hence, employees indicate a reserved use of CSR transparency.
	It [CSR] is part of the fundamental belief of the people working in the company, the founder of the company and the owners. There are some people at the company that have the higher purpose to make a difference. But today it is not making a difference. Maybe people try to use it as a survival strategy. I do not think it is enough. If you are dying as a brand, just becoming transparent or being sustainable will not safe you. If you are dying, you are dying, because people are not interested in you. They will not buy you, just because you are becoming more transparent about it [CSR]. (Örjan, Knitex)	
Swetex	It [CSR] has always existed, I think. But of course, the more information is available, the easier it is for us to be transparent and the easier it is for others to find or double-check information. I think it is becoming more important and that is just super positive. It is hopefully pushing things even further. It can be hard for us to communicate about everything we know, because we do not have the time for it, or we cannot always figure out what people want to know about. But when they are asking something, we often react: 'Oh of course, we should talk about this as well.' It is already so natural for us. We have been working for it [CSR] for a long time. […] So, it is really good with an open dialogue. (Louise, Swetex)	These statements reflect those employees who perceive transparency as part of daily operations and strategic decision making. It is interpreted that CSR transparency plays a major role in stakeholder management as well as is viewed to be key for pursuing CSR. Furthermore, CSR transparency is interpreted to have a function for generating future business opportunities and therefore reflects a non-reserved CSR transparency approach.
	Today everything is still built on the economic model. So, it is tricky to say: 'Let us reveal all the information for free.' We are not so far away from that, but I think it is still at the very core at a lot of the economic models. I think that you then need kind of peel it off and see that you can really get a benefit from it. We are trying to make a business case out of sharing [CSR] knowledge, rather than saying let us just keep it to ourselves. I think that historically brands or manufacturers have been living on it [being restrictive]. But now, they are starting to look at collaborations or combinations of it. This is a way of growing our business. (David, Swetex)	

protection by assuming limited responsibility) and organizational traits (i.e., differentiation through CSR transparency and control through information filtering) that were reproduced in social interactions among the employees.

First, limited responsibility for CSR transparency was exhibited by employees attempting to facilitate stakeholder dialogues by, e.g., informing first-tier suppliers about their expectations of social responsibility. However, the employees did not view themselves as accountable for the behaviors of suppliers. From this perspective CSR transparency only covered operations considered to be within the perceived reach of the organization. A mismatch was, thus, observed between the collective agreement about the organization's objectives related to CSR transparency and the actual ambitions of employees:

> *At the end of the day, we can only be as transparent to the extent our partner [supplier] allows us to be. They know exactly when we come and visit them as their customer. They can prepare everything for that day. We are not there on a daily basis and therefore we cannot be 100% sure that our partners refrain for example from using child labor.* (Robin, Knitex)
> *I think it is transparency which is a huge part of it [CSR]. That even here we are small but that also means that we have to rely on some agents or full package makers in Asia. […] But I have also worked on two seasons now and I have not seen all the transparency, like I am struggling to find and to seek out some of these makers. They are not new fabric suppliers either. Yeah, we are getting there, but that is also because we are small. That is a hindrance, we do not have an organization in Asia that is managing our fabric mills. We have people that we have to pay to manage our garments.* (Alva, Simplicity)

Furthermore, disclosing information about materials appeared to be an important component when employees reflected about CSR-related information. The employees implied that transparency could help the company differentiate its products from those of competitors and thereby yield a competitive advantage. Hence, information that could position the company vis-a-vis competitors appeared to be favored for disclosure.

> *It means that nowadays the main task of brands is to create a certain feeling for the customer who wants to buy a cardigan. This customer could simply buy a very similar cardigan at five other brands. This is when we make the decision for the customer a little bit easier: We must represent values that customers can identify themselves with. For this transparency is the key. This is also the reason why we really work hard to be transparent and do not hide anything.* (Robin, Knitex)

Transparency could also, occasionally, be perceived as a threat to employees at Knitex. This created an organizational climate where CSR-related information was filtered and selectively shared, thus depreciating the utility of CSR transparency as a vehicle for inclusion and accountability.

> *That [transparency] is absolutely a thing. Like it is a thing for everybody. It is difficult to change everything at the same time. It is impossible to do that. There is a difference between lying to the customer and showing them an acceptable alternative of a sustainable garment. Of course, we have things that are not so good. Absolutely. But it is not that we are telling the customers that everything is perfect. […] You always have to balance it: You have to choose what story you want to tell the customer.* (Jenni, Knitex)

4.2.2. Non-reserved transparency

At Swetex, a non-reserved approach of CSR transparency developed based on the shared idea that CSR transparency is indicative of CSR performance. This did, however, not mean that all available information was shared all the time. Information was rather disclosed based on assessments about its relevance to the CSR agenda of the organization, which in turn required ongoing discussion and reflection among employees.

> *I think that most of the people really appreciate that we say: Ok, this is what we want to do, and this is where we are now. This is something that we have a problem with, but we are trying to find solutions. This is the roadmap to go. Instead of just hiding things, or because it will just come and hit you in the back really soon, nowadays. Everyone is really used to knowing that they can discuss [CSR].* (Louise, Wizard)

The organization itself allowed a high level of autonomy (open work-descriptions, managers encouraging individual initiatives), providing substantial leeway for employees to act. As a result of the organization supporting active curation of CSR information, employees developed extensive knowledge about CSR operations. Employees grew confident about their own abilities to make judgements concerning these issues. Assessments and decisions related to CSR transparency by employees were closely linked to their own moral-value systems. Employees expressed a sentiment of being personally responsible for CSR practices and therefore felt accountable for the organization's conduct in this area. This sentiment would, thus, gradually blur the boundaries between personal objectives and the objectives of the organization. Individuals found it worthwhile to be straight-forward and honest about CSR, including both the successes and failures in these matters. These aptitudes expanded the scope of CSR transparency in the organization. Employees appeared to be comfortable expressing their opinions sincerely, instead of crafting socially desirable versions of CSR transparency.

The sensemaking of non-reserved transparency related to psychological factors (i.e., aspirations for honesty; reflexivity) as well as organizational traits (i.e., orientation towards business efficiency and effectiveness) were strengthened in the social interactions between employees as well as in interactions with stakeholders. In situations of non-reserved CSR transparency, employees relied to a large extent on their own judgements when developing a regime for CSR transparency. In this vein, non-reserved transparency develops from mental images of organizational integrity, subversiveness, and non-conformism.

Aspirations for honesty emerged as a shared value among employees. In practical terms this meant that employees did not refrain from speaking about their own shortcomings in public:

> *As long as we are honest with how far we have gotten and this [CSR] is our goal, then I think that should be really listed as a good example. If you say you do not care or start lying and say that you are better than you actually are, then it is really bad. Then you are really fake news. It is most important to be honest and say that: 'Now at least we know where we are, and we see the problems and acknowledge the problems, and we want to improve.'* (Louise, Swetex)

Honesty is conceived as a vital part of transparency that must be enacted through actions, storytelling, and media posts:

> *The way we try to communicate is by trying to tell people how we work. Communicating on our social media how we choose our fabrics or the factories that we work with. For me that is a more honest way of being transparent. It is always going to be that actions speak louder than words. You can say that you have a sustainability story, but if you do not do it all the way, then you do not act strong enough.* (Karin, Wizard)

Moreover, non-reserved transparency was partly enabled by reflexivity. Employees constantly iterated between researching the status, shortcomings, and solutions for sharing CSR information. The employees were upfront in cases where information was scarce:

> *We are working with tier 1, 2, and 3. But looking at the entire fiber production – even further down the supply chain – that is where we do not have all the information. It is a challenge for us in terms of ethical and social standards. Let us consider the example of recycled polyester. This is absolutely the easiest sourcing in terms of traceability. But let us consider that we are using virgin polyester. Where does virgin polyester come from? Crude oil. Where has it been drilled? We do not have knowledge about the*

ethical or the social standards over there. We are far from perfect in this case. (Filippa, Swetex)

Finally, the employees mentioned the need to future-proof business operations as a motivation for CSR transparency. According to them, their business would only develop prosperously in the long run if CSR was straightforwardly communicated to stakeholders, for instance by publishing their brand book:

We want them [other stakeholders] to change. That is why it is all about transparency, right? For example, our brand book: It is not a secret. Most of the companies keep their brand book to themselves and say: 'This is our holy bible.' We put ours out on our homepage. Everybody can access it and see how we work [with CSR]. We want to be transparent enough, so everybody can understand that this is our way of working. We have to be transparent in every way we can. (Karin 2nd round, Swetex)

5. Discussion

Addressing the question: How do sensemaking processes shape CSR transparency? produced two primary findings. First, we observed that the sensemaking process of CSR transparency can be a bottom-up process initiated by employees. Second, two approaches to CSR transparency emerged from the analysis. We theorize that different cognitive and organizational mechanisms underlie sensemaking processes and render a variability of interpretations of CSR transparency that are constitutive of these approaches. Related to these findings we develop two propositions in this section.

While outcomes of CSR transparency have been extensively researched, e.g., represented by literature about ethical perspectives (e. g., Constantinescu & Kaptein, 2015) and business case perspectives (e.g., Kim & Lee, 2018), there is little knowledge about how different approaches of CSR transparency emerge. Wehmeier and Raaz (2012) claim that the larger that the organization is, the more likely that its employees will attempt to force the organization to be transparent. However, the possibility for employees to change norms and practices related to transparency may be limited in larger organizations. The study at hand demonstrates that employees in small organizations can exhibit strong engagement, exert influence, and indeed take leading roles in shaping CSR transparency. Smaller organizations are likely to escape public scrutiny (Lawrence, Collins, Pavlovich & Arunachalam, 2006) where mass media often function as the main advocate for civil society (McQuail, 2000). This does not mean that CSR development is neglected in these organizations. In the study at hand, it was the employees that filled information voids and held their organizations accountable. They acted as gatekeepers in the disclosure of information and, hence, functioned as advocates for civil society – from a bottom-up position.

Previous literature about CSR transparency has often revolved around CSR reporting, stipulating this function as a key mechanism for managing transparency (Quaak, Aalbers & Goedee, 2007). CSR reporting, though, mainly addresses larger organizations (Johnson & Schaltegger, 2016). In fact, many smaller organizations do not engage in formal reporting, an issue that even has earned a special label named the "SME communication gap" (Wickert, Scherer & Spence, 2016). The one organization in our study that is found to not formally report CSR (i.e., Swetex) is arguably more progressive in terms of CSR transparency than the organization that publishes CSR reports (i.e., Knitex). This implies that CSR reporting may indeed not be the most meaningful indicator for organizational transparency, especially in smaller organizations. Instead, organizational traits (social interactions, control mechanisms) and psychological factors (moral values, beliefs, accountability) become important in sensemaking processes that shape CSR transparency.

The development of CSR transparency is thus ongoing; shaped by believable and inspiring images conjured up by employees, serving as motivators in the daily practices of individuals and giving guidance in how to manage long-term communication with stakeholders

(Christensen & Schoeneborn, 2017). Based on this reasoning, we formulate the following proposition capturing the agency of employees in shaping CSR transparency:

Proposition 1. *Specific approaches to CSR transparency are continually created, developed, and sustained through the sensemaking of employees (implying a bottom-up approach).*

5.1. Reserved transparency

Reserved transparency was found in the case of Knitex. This approach to CSR transparency is shaped through sensemaking, where individuals consider factors such as limited responsibility, differentiation, monitoring, and information filtering. This view ties into the argument provided by Pfeffer and Salancik (1978, p. 257), who state that organizations are "involved in a constant struggle for autonomy and discretion, confronted with constraining and external control." In other words, employees interpret transparency as an instrument for preserving organizational autonomy while maintaining good relationships with their stakeholders. Individuals thereby maintain a sense of staying in control, as opposed to being controlled through externally imposed transparency programs (Costas & Grey, 2014). Based on our observations, transparency can also be associated with personal risk. Actual practices related to transparency were, therefore, frequently decoupled from an individual's own moral schemes. Perceived demands for high levels of visibility put a strain on the creativity of employees as well as their willingness to make decisions as they were aware of the watchful eyes of both their superiors and external stakeholders.

Furthermore, reserved transparency can be considered as an illustration of the accountability paradox (Carlisle & Faulkner, 2005; Stansbury & Barry, 2007). From this perspective, reserved transparency is neither driven by strategic aspirations nor by aspirations to act virtuously in accordance with moral judgments. According to our observations, members of the organization do not follow a carefully devised plan in how to tackle stakeholder pressures and release information. Based on shared ideas and commonly held assumptions of employees, the organization uses CSR transparency pragmatically to react to external pressures. In the case of Knitex, the relatively large distance between managers and staff appeared to make employees less inclined to take on responsibility and more prone to put limits on CSR transparency to avoid making mistakes. Hence, employees did not attempt to enhance the image of the company but sought to protect themselves against criticism. Engaging with CSR transparency in this way has little to do with ethical considerations or with strategic considerations to avoid negative assessments (as stipulated by outcome approaches of CSR transparency). The approach is rather reflected by coping with uncertainty and mitigating risks associated with external scrutiny (Leitch & Davenport, 2002; Markham, 1996).

5.2. Non-reserved transparency

The Swetex case revealed that the sensemaking of non-reserved transparency is shaped by narratives revolving around honesty, reflexivity, and business development. In fact, non-reserved transparency enhances the understanding about CSR transparency issues and sometimes even broadens the scope for what information that can be shared. Non-reserved transparency is characterized by proactiveness as it seeks to expand the views of parties who are interested in the actions or decisions of an organization (Rawlins, 2008). Non-reserved transparency is also characterized by the ambition that stakeholders are "being told everything they need to know" (Gower, 2006, p. 96).

The approach is aspirational (Christensen & Schoeneborn, 2017) in the sense that it pushes the frontiers for how organizations should behave and interact with stakeholders. Non-reserved transparency indeed appears to reach beyond an "educational" approach by laying open organizational processes that disclose social or environmental

factors. The employees at Swetex expressed a willingness to share information to parties that were not primarily concerned with CSR, e.g., by involving customers that made their purchasing decisions based on other concerns than CSR, such as style and price.

Employees acted on the high level of autonomy given to them by exposing the organization to critique and, thereby, created pressure on themselves to excel in CSR (Strathern, 2000). Quite paradoxically, exposing their own organizations to scrutiny seemed to strengthen employees' bonds to their employer-organization. Sensemaking processes represented by non-reserved transparency could arguably thrive in organizations that allow personal autonomy that empower individuals to use their own judgements. It could also be fostered in organizations exerting less formalized control, thus creating space for knowledge sharing, collaboration, and distributed accountability. The case of Swetex shows that being able to act autonomously in line with ethically grounded motivations makes employees more committed to the organization. This commitment may perpetuate the inclination to further develop the non-reserved transparency approach.

Based on the above reasoning we discern that sensemaking processes are prevalent in both case organizations, although they produce distinct approaches to CSR transparency. We suggest that relatively high levels of control that reduce personal autonomy may inhibit personal engagement. In these situations, reserved approaches to CSR transparency will likely emerge (and non-reserved approaches will, viceversa, likely emerge under lower levels of control). Thus, we articulate the following proposition:

Proposition 2. *Organizations with employees perceiving a low (high) level of personal autonomy in making moral assessments are associated with a reserved (non-reserved) CSR transparency approach.*

6. Contributions and conclusions

Contrary to studies focusing on CSR transparency as an outcome of either an ethical stance (Fernandez-Feijoo et al., 2014; Madsen, 2009; Pratt & Adamolekun, 2008; Signitzer & Prexl, 2007;) or based on business case considerations (García-Sánchez et al., 2013; Karaiskos et al., 2019; Kim & Lee 2018), this study embraces the complexity of the phenomenon by focusing on its sociological underpinnings. This study moves beyond the simplistic conceptualization of CSR transparency as an outcome. In specific, the study theorizes and empirically qualifies the notion that sensemaking by employees, in fact, is conducive to the emergence of different approaches of CSR transparency.

We do not claim that the two suggested approaches of CSR transparency that emerged in our study represent an exhaustive typology. To the contrary, it is likely that other approaches of CSR transparency exist. CSR transparency is dependent on the social setting in which it is exerted which can lead to variations of the phenomenon. We, thus, encourage researchers to further investigate the relationships between sensemaking regimes and CSR transparency practices in other settings.

Secondly, this study has answered the call for more qualitative research in CSR that use individuals as the level of analysis (Aguinis & Glavas, 2012; Jones, Newman, Shao & Cooke, 2019). In answering this call, this study has paid specific attention to the voices of employees instead of the voices of CSR managers, the latter which have been dominating in micro-CSR literature (Girschik et al., 2020). By so doing, the study has uncovered novel insights into employee-driven CSR. The findings indicate that more granular frameworks are needed to explain the underpinnings of transparency in the field of CSR. We argue that it is sometimes useful to move beyond top-down perspectives to better understand how CSR transparency is exerted in organizations. In line with developments in the micro-CSR literature (Gond & Moser, 2021), we encourage researchers to closely examine both psychological factors (e. g., moral values, beliefs, accountability, aspirations for honesty, reflexivity) and organizational factors (e.g., social interactions, control mechanisms, orientations towards business efficiency and effectiveness).

Third, smaller organizations characterized by informal structures arguably have more leeway than larger organizations to create novel, niched, and more subversive forms of CSR (Jenkins, 2009; Shevchenko, Lévesque & Pagell, 2016). The study gives supporting evidence to the idea that small organizations, to various extents, can give room for autonomy which empower employees to exercise their own judgments, possibly leading to more radical and genuine transparent behavior. Studying smaller organizations can provide original insights about alternative, often innovative, approaches of CSR transparency.

6.1. Managerial implications

CSR transparency can help companies to position their brands, establish legitimacy, and develop stronger relationships with customers and media. This study shows that CSR transparency can be exerted by individual employees where they decide which information should be disclosed and how it should be disclosed. While such autonomy can empower employees and strengthen their competence related to CSR transparency, lack of centralization can also lead to inconsistencies and mixed messages. We argue that the upside of allowing employees to take a lead in transparency practices still has merits that can benefit the company in the long run. Sensemaking of transparency foster shared understandings, meaning that views and practices over time become aligned which, in turn, can improve the coordination around CSR transparency. Allowing these processes to develop organically can firmly anchor CSR transparency in the organization.

6.2. Conclusions

The findings suggest that the inconclusive evidence regarding the manifestations of CSR transparency will remain unless researchers investigate the very processes shaping CSR transparency. This study underscores that CSR transparency is not innate to the organization but rather something that is emerging. To capture this phenomenon, research needs to consider individuals (both executives and employees) as levels of analysis and probe into both the inter-individual and intra-individual sensemaking processes. Furthermore, the salience of employee sensemaking implies that organization- and management-literature could benefit from paying attention to alternative voices in the organization, instead of treating employees as passive actors, subdued by organizational strategy and policy (Girschik, et al., 2020; Weiss & Rupp, 2011). In line with Girschik and colleagues (2020), we suggest that more research on employees and their instrumentality in shaping organizational practices may contribute to create a better understanding about how CSR transparency (and other CSR issues) in organizations evolves.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Tina Sendlhofer: Writing – original draft, Methodology, Funding acquisition, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Daniel Tolstoy:** Writing – review & editing, Validation, Conceptualization.

Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Appendix A

The interviewees are listed by organization and in chronological

order.

Appendix B.

References

Aguinis, H., & Glavas, A. (2019). On corporate social responsibility, sensemaking, and the search for meaningfulness through work. *Journal of Management, 45*(3), 1057–1086. https://doi.org/10.1177/0149206317691575

Aguinis, H., & Glavas, A. (2012). What we know and don't know about corporate social responsibility: A review and research agenda. *Journal of Management, 38*(4), 932–968. https://doi.org/10.1177/0149206311436079

Albu, O. B., & Wehmeier, S. (2014). Organizational transparency and sense-making: The case of Northern Rock. *Journal of Public Relations Research, 26*(2), 117–133. https://doi.org/10.1080/1062726X.2013.795869

Artiach, T., Lee, D., Nelson, D., & Walker, J. (2010). The determinants of corporate sustainability performance. *Accounting & Finance, 50*(1), 31–51. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-629X.2009.00315.x

Basu, K., & Palazzo, G. (2008). Corporate social responsibility: A process model of sensemaking. *Academy of Management Review, 33*(1), 122–136. https://doi.org/10.5465/amr.2008.27745504

Birchall, C. (2011). Introduction to 'Secrecy and Transparency' The Politics of Opacity and Openness. *Theory, Culture & Society, 28*(7–8), 7–25. https://doi.org/10.1177/0263276411427744

Bridoux, F., Stofberg, N., & Den Hartog, D. (2016). Stakeholders' responses to csr tradeoffs: When other-orientation and trust trump material self-interest. *Frontiers in psychology, 6*, 1992. https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2015.01992

Carlisle, Y. M., & Faulkner, D. O. (2005). The strategy of reputation. *Strategic Change, 14*(8), 413–422. https://doi.org/10.1002/jsc.741

Carroll, A. B. (1991). The pyramid of corporate social responsibility: Toward the moral management of organizational stakeholders. *Business Horizons, 34*(4), 39–48.

Cho, C. H. (2009). Legitimation strategies used in response to environmental disaster: A French case study of Total SA's Erika and AZF incidents. *European Accounting Review, 18*(1), 33–62. https://doi.org/10.1080/09638180802579616

Christensen, L. T. (2002). Corporate communication: The challenge of transparency. *Corporate Communications: An International Journal, 7*(3), 162–168. https://doi.org/10.1108/13563280210436772

Christensen, L. T., & Cheney, G. (2015). Peering into Transparency: Challenging Ideals, Proxies, and Organizational Practices. *Communication Theory, 25*(1), 70–90. https://doi.org/10.1111/comt.12052

Christensen, L. T., Morsing, M., & Thyssen, O. (2011). The polyphony of corporate social responsibility: Deconstructing accountability and transparency in the context of identity and hypocrisy. In G. Cheney, S. May, & D. Munshi (Eds.), *Handbook of communication ethics* (pp. 457–474). New York, NY: Lawrence Erlbaum.

Christensen, L. T., & Schoeneborn, D. (2017). The corporate construction of transparency and (in) transparency. In *Corporate Social Responsibility* (pp. 350-370). Cambridge University Press.

Constantinescu, M., & Kaptein, M. (2015). In *CSR standards and corporate ethical virtues: A normative inquiry into the way corporations integrate stakeholder expectations* (pp. 159–180). Cham: Springer.

Costas, J., & Grey, C. (2014). Bringing secrecy into the open: Towards a theorization of the social processes of organizational secrecy. *Organization Studies, 35*(10), 1423–1447. https://doi.org/10.1177/0170840613515470

Cotterrell, R. (2000). Transparency, mass media, ideology and community. *Cultural Values, 3*(4), 414–426. https://doi.org/10.1080/14797589909367176

Daft, R. L., & Weick, K. E. (1984). Toward a model of organizations as interpretation systems. *Academy of Management Review, 9*(2), 284–295. https://doi.org/10.5465/amr.1984.4277657

Deegan, C., & Rankin, M. (1996). Do Australian companies report environmental news objectively? An analysis of environmental disclosures by firms prosecuted successfully by the Environmental Protection Authority. *Accounting, Auditing & Accountability Journal, 9*(2), 50–67. https://doi.org/10.1108/09513579610116358

Donnellon, A., Gray, B., & Bougon, M. G. (1986). Communication, meaning, and organized action. *Administrative Science Quarterly, 32*(1), 43–55. https://doi.org/10.2307/2392765

Drucker, S. J., & Gumpert, G. (2007). Through the looking glass: Illusions of transparency and the cult of information. *Journal of Management Development, 26*(5), 493–498. https://doi.org/10.1108/02621710710748329

Dubbink, W., Graafland, J., & Van Liedekerke, L. (2008). CSR, transparency and the role of intermediate organisations. *Journal of Business Ethics, 82*(2), 391–406. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10551-008-9893-y

Eccles, R. G., Ioannou, I., & Serafeim, G. (2012). *The impact of a corporate culture of sustainability on corporate behavior and performance.* Cambridge, MA, USA: National Bureau of Economic Research.

Esrock, S. L., & Leichty, G. B. (1998). Social responsibility and corporate web pages: Self-presentation or agenda-setting? *Public Relations Review, 24*(3), 305–319. https://doi.org/10.1016/S0363-8111(99)80142-8

Fernandez-Feijoo, B., Romero, S., & Ruiz, S. (2014). Effect of stakeholders' pressure on transparency of sustainability reports within the GRI framework. *Journal of Business Ethics, 122*(1), 53–63. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10551-013-1748-5

Garfinkel, H. (1967). *Studies in ethnomethodology*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.

Gamerschlag, R., Möller, K., & Verbeeten, F. (2011). Determinants of voluntary CSR disclosure: Empirical evidence from Germany. *Review of Managerial Science, 5*(2–3), 233–262. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11846-010-0052-3

García-Sánchez, I. M., Frías-Aceituno, J. V., & Rodríguez-Domínguez, L. (2013). Determinants of corporate social disclosure in Spanish local governments. *Journal of Cleaner Production, 39*, 60–72. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jclepro.2012.08.037

Girschik, V., Svystunova, L., & Lysova, E. I. (2020). Transforming corporate social responsibilities: Toward an intellectual activist research agenda for micro-CSR research. *Human Relations.* https://doi.org/10.1177/0018726720970275

Glaser, B. G., & Strauss, A. L. (1967). *The discovery of grounded theory: Strategies for qualitative research.* Chicago: Aldire.

Gond, J.-P., El Akremi, A., & Swaen, V. (2017). The psychological microfoundations of corporate social responsibility: A person-centric systematic review. *Journal of Organizational Behavior, 38*(2), 225–246. https://doi.org/10.1002/job.2170

Gond, J.-P., & Moser, C. (2021). Critical Essay: The reconciliation of fraternal twins: Integrating the psychological and sociological approaches to 'micro' corporate social responsibility. *Human Relations, 74*(1), 5–40. https://doi.org/10.1177/0018726719864407

Gower, K. K. (2006). Truth and transparency. In K. Fitzpatrick, & C. Bronstein (Eds.), *Ethics in public relations* (pp. 89–105). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Gray, R. (2006). Social, environmental and sustainability reporting and organizational value creation? Whose value? Whose Creation? *Accounting. Auditing and Accountability Journal, 19*(6), 793–819. https://doi.org/10.1108/09513570610709872

Gray, R. (2001). Thirty Years of Social Accounting, Reporting and Auditing: What (If Anything) Have We Learned? *Business Ethics: A European Review, 9–15.* https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-8608.00207

Gray, B., Bougon, M. G., & Donnellon, A. (1985). Organizations as constructions and destructions of meaning. *Journal of Management, 11*(2), 83–98. https://doi.org/10.1177/014920638501100212

Grimes, M. (2010). Strategic sensemaking within funding relationships: The effects of performance measurement on organizational identity in the social sector. *Entrepreneurship Theory and Practice, 34*(4), 763–783. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-6520.2010.00398

Guerci, M., & Pedrini, M. (2014). The consensus between Italian HR and sustainability managers on HR management for sustainability-driven change - towards a 'strong' HR management system. *The International Journal of Human Resource Management, 25*(13), 1787–1814. https://doi.org/10.1080/09585192.2013.860388

Hahn, T., Preuss, L., Pinkse, J., & Figge, F. (2014). Cognitive frames in corporate sustainability: Managerial sensemaking with paradoxical and business case frames. *Academy of Management Review, 39*(4), 463–487. https://doi.org/10.5465/amr.2012.0341

Higgins, C., Tang, S., & Stubbs, W. (2020). On managing hypocrisy: The transparency of sustainability reports. *Journal of Business Research, 114*, 395–407. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2019.08.041

Holzner, B., & Holzner, L. (2006). *Transparency in global change: The vanguard of the open society.* Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press.

Hooghiemstra, R. (2000). Corporate communication and impression management–new perspectives why companies engage in corporate social reporting. *Journal of Business Ethics, 27*(1–2), 55–68. https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1006400707757

Jenkins, H. (2009). A 'business opportunity' model of corporate social responsibility for small-and medium-sized enterprises. *Business Ethics: A European Review, 18*(1), 21–36. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8608.2009.01546.x

Jick, T. D. (1979). Mixing qualitative and quantitative methods: Triangulation in action. *Administrative Science Quarterly, 24*(4), 602–611. https://doi.org/10.2307/2392366

Joensuu, K., Koskela, M., & Onkila, T. (2015). Social proximity and environmental NGO relationships in corporate sustainability reports. *Sustainable Development, 23*(1), 26–40. https://doi.org/10.1002/sd.1569

Johnson, M. P., & Schaltegger, S. (2016). Two decades of sustainability management tools for SMEs: How far have we come? *Journal of Small Business Management, 54*(2), 481–505. https://doi.org/10.1111/jsbm.12154

Jones, D. A., Newman, A., Shao, R., & Cooke, F. L. (2019). Advances in employee-focused micro-level research on corporate social responsibility: Situating new contributions within the current state of the literature. *Journal of Business Ethics, 157*(2), 293–302. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10551-018-3792-7

Kang, J., & Hustvedt, G. (2014). Building trust between consumers and corporations: The role of consumer perceptions of transparency and social responsibility. *Journal of Business Ethics, 125*(2), 253–265. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10551-013-1916-7

Karaiskos, D. E., Evangelinos, K. I., Vouros, P., & Nikolaou, I. E. (2019). In *The New Framework for the Compulsory Publication of Sustainability Reports: Evidence From Greek Companies* (pp. 36–51). IGI Global.

Kim, S., & Ferguson, M. T. (2014). Public expectations of CSR communication: What and how to communicate CSR. *Public Relations Journal, 8*(3), 1–22.

Kim, H., & Lee, T. H. (2018). Strategic CSR communication: A moderating role of transparency in trust building. *International Journal of Strategic Communication, 12*(2), 107–124. https://doi.org/10.1080/1553118X.2018.1425692

Kumar, N., Stern, L. W., & Anderson, J. C. (1993). Conducting interorganizational research using key informants. *Academy of Management Journal, 36*(6), 1633–1651. https://doi.org/10.5465/256824

Laczniak, G. R., & Murphy, P. E. (2019). The role of normative marketing ethics. *Journal of Business Research, 95*, 401–407. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2018.07.036

Lamming, R., Caldwell, N., & Harrison, D. (2004). Developing the concept of transparency for use in supply relationships. *British Journal of Management, 15*(4), 291–302. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8551.2004.00420.x

Lawrence, S. R., Collins, E., Pavlovich, K., & Arunachalam, M. (2006). Sustainability Practices of SMEs: The Case of NZ. *Business Strategy and the Environment, 15*(4), 242–257. https://doi.org/10.1002/bse.533

Leitch, S., & Davenport, S. (2002). Strategic ambiguity in communicating public sector change. *Journal of Communication Management, 7*(2), 129–139. https://doi.org/10.1108/13632540310807340

Madsen, P. (2009). Dynamic transparency, prudential justice, and corporate transformation: Becoming socially responsible in the internet age. *Journal of Business Ethics, 90*(4), 639–648. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10551-010-0597-8

Maguire, S., & Hardy, C. (2009). Discourse and deinstitutionalization: The decline of DDT. *Academy of management journal, 52*(1), 148–178.

Maitlis, S. (2005). The social processes of organizational sensemaking. *Academy of Management Journal, 48*(1), 21–49. https://doi.org/10.5465/amj.2005.15993111

Maitlis, S., & Christianson, M. (2014). Sensemaking in organizations: Taking stock and moving forward. *Academy of Management Annals, 8*(1), 57–125. https://doi.org/10.5465/19416520.2014.873177

Markham, A. (1996). Designing discourse: A critical analysis of strategic ambiguity and workplace control. *Management Communication Quarterly, 9*(4), 389–421. https://doi.org/10.1177/0893318996009004002

McQuail, D. (2000). Some reflections on the western bias of media theory. *Asian Journal of Communication, 10*(2), 1–13. https://doi.org/10.1080/01292980009364781

Meijer, A. (2009). Understanding modern transparency. *International Review of Administrative Sciences, 75*, 255–269.https://doi.org/10.1177/0020852309104175.

Morsing, M., & Schultz, M. (2006). Corporate social responsibility communication: Stakeholder information, response and involvement strategies. *Business Ethics: A European Review, 15*(4), 323–338. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8608.2006.00460.x

Nadesan, M. (2011). Transparency and neoliberal logics of corporate social responsibility. In Ø. Ihlen, J. L. Bartlett, & S. May (Eds.), *The handbook of communication and corporate social responsibility* (pp. 252–275). Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell.

Pfeffer, J., & Salancik, G. R. (1978). *The external control of organizations: A resource dependency perspective*. New York: Harper & Row.

Podgorodnichenko, N., Edgar, F., Akmal, A., & McAndrew, I. (2021). Sustainability through sensemaking: Human resource professionals' engagement and enactment of corporate social responsibility. *Journal of Cleaner Production, 293*, Article 126150. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jclepro.2021.126150

Pratt, C. B., & Adamolekun, W. (2011). An Ethical-Theory-Based Analysis of the Social Responsibilities of Three Global Corporations: ExxonMobil, Shell and Pfizer. In *Ethical Issues in International Communication* (pp. 154–171). London, UK: Palgrave Macmillan.

Punch, K. F. (2014). *Introduction to Social Research: Quantitative and Qualitative Approaches* ((3rd ed.)). London, UK: Sage.

Quaak, L., Aalbers, T., & Goedee, J. (2007). Transparency of corporate social responsibility in Dutch breweries. *Journal of Business Ethics, 76*(3), 293–308. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10551-006-9282-3

Rasche, A., Morsing, M., & Moon, J. (Eds.). (2017). *Corporate social responsibility: strategy, communication, governance*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

Rawlins, B. (2008). Give the emperor a mirror: Toward developing a stakeholder measurement of organizational transparency. *Journal of Public Relations Research, 21*(1), 71–99. https://doi.org/10.1080/10627260802153421

Richter, U. H., & Arndt, F. F. (2018). Cognitive processes in the CSR decision-making process: A sensemaking perspective. *Journal of Business Ethics, 148*(3), 587–602. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10551-015-3011-8

Roberts, J. (2009). No one is perfect: The limits of transparency and an ethic for 'intelligent' accountability. *Accounting, Organizations and Society, 34*, 957–970. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.aos.2009.04.005

Sendlhofer, T. (2020). Decoupling from Moral Responsibility for CSR: Employees' Visionary Procrastination at a SME. *Journal of Business Ethics, 167*(2), 361–378. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10551-019-04174-z

Schnackenberg, A. K., & Tomlinson, E. C. (2016). Organizational transparency: A new perspective on managing trust in organization-stakeholder relationships. *Journal of Management, 42*(7), 1784–1810. https://doi.org/10.1177/0149206314525202

Shevchenko, A., Lévesque, M., & Pagell, M. (2016). Why firms delay reaching true sustainability. *Journal of Management Studies, 53*(5), 911–935. https://doi.org/10.1111/joms.12199

Signitzer, B., & Prexl, A. (2007). Corporate sustainability communications: Aspects of theory and professionalization. *Journal of Public Relations Research, 20*(1), 1–19. https://doi.org/10.1080/10627260701726996

Simon, H. A. (1947). *Administrative behavior*. New York: Macmillan.

Stansbury, J., & Barry, B. (2007). Ethics programs and the paradox of control. *Business Ethics Quarterly, 17*(2), 239–261.

Story, J., & Neves, P. (2015). When corporate social responsibility (CSR) increases performance: Exploring the role of intrinsic and extrinsic CSR attribution. *Business Ethics: A European Review, 24*(2), 111–124. https://doi.org/10.1111/beer.12084

Strathern, M. (2000). The tyranny of transparency. *British Educational Research Journal, 26*(3), 309–321. https://doi.org/10.1080/713651562

Strauss, A., & Corbin, J. (1998). *Basics of qualitative research techniques*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage publications.

Stubbart, C. I. (1989). Managerial cognition: A missing link in strategic management research. *Journal of Management Studies, 26*(4), 325–347. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-6486.1989.tb00732.x

Tapscott, D., & Ticoll, D. (2003). *The naked corporation: How the age of transparency will revolutionize business*. NewYork: The Free Press.

Thomas, J. B., Clark, S. M., & Gioia, D. A. (1993). Strategic sensemaking and organizational performance: Linkages among scanning, interpretation, action, and outcomes. *Academy of Management Journal, 36*(2), 239–270. https://doi.org/10.5465/256522

Thomson, S. B. (2010). Grounded Theory - Sample Size. *Journal of Administration and Governance, 5*(1), 45–52.

Timothy Coombs, W., & Holladay, S. J. (2013). The pseudo-panopticon: The illusion created by CSR-related transparency and the internet. *Corporate Communications: An International Journal, 18*(2), 212–227. https://doi.org/10.1108/13563281311319490

Tata, J., & Prasad, S. (2015). CSR communication: An impression management perspective. *Journal of Business Ethics, 132*(4), 765–778. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10551-014-2328-z

Tourish, D., & Robson, P. (2006). Sensemaking and the distortion of critical upward communication in organizations. *Journal of Management Studies, 43*(4), 711–730. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-6486.2006.00608.x

Turner, M.R., McIntosh, T., Reid, S.W., Buckley, M.R., 2019. Corporate implementation of socially controversial CSR initiatives: implications for human resource management. *Human Resource Management Review, 29*(1), 125–136. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.hrmr.2018.02.001.

Van Marrewijk, M. (2003). Concepts and definitions of CSR and corporate sustainability: Between agency and communion. *Journal of Business Ethics, 44*(2–3), 95–105. https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1023331212247

Wehmeier, S., & Raaz, O. (2012). Transparency matters: The concept of organizational transparency in the academic discourse. *Public Relations Inquiry, 1*(3), 337–366. https://doi.org/10.1177/2046147X12448580

Weick, K. E. (1969). *The social psychology of organizing*. Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley.

Weick, K. E. (1995). *Sensemaking in organizations* (Vol. 3). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Weick, K. E., Sutcliffe, K. M., & Obstfeld, D. (2005). Organizing and the process of sensemaking. *Organization Science, 16*(4), 409–421. https://doi.org/10.1287/orsc.1050.0133

Weiss, H. M., & Rupp, D. E. (2011). Experiencing work: An essay on a person-centric work psychology. *Industrial and Organizational Psychology, 4*(1), 83–97. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1754-9434.2010.01302.x

Wickert, C., Scherer, A. G., & Spence, L. J. (2016). Walking and talking corporate social responsibility: Implications of firm size and organizational cost. *Journal of Management Studies, 53*(7), 1169–1196. https://doi.org/10.1111/joms.12209

Tina Sendlhofer is a Research Fellow at Stockholm Environment Institute and an Affiliated Researcher at the Mistra Center for Sustainable Markets at Stockholm School of Economics. Her research areas are in organization theory, small business management, and micro-CSR.

Daniel Tolstoy is an (untenured) Associate Professor at the Department of Marketing and Strategy at Stockholm School of Economics. His research interests are international business, small business management, and entrepreneurial processes.