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Transforming corporate social responsibilities

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published in

Human Relations
2020

DOI (link to publisher)

[10.1177/0018726720970275](https://doi.org/10.1177/0018726720970275)

document version

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

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citation for published version (APA)

Girschik, V., Svystunova, L., & Lysova, E. (2020). Transforming corporate social responsibilities: Toward an intellectual activist research agenda for micro-CSR research. *Human Relations*, 75(1), 3-32.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0018726720970275>

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Transforming corporate social responsibilities: Toward an intellectual activist research agenda for micro-CSR research

human relations

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DOI: 10.1177/0018726720970275

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Abstract

In their recent essay, Gond and Moser (2019) have proposed that micro-CSR research has the potential to “matter” and transform business practices as it engages closely with how individuals in companies work with and experience corporate social responsibility (CSR). But can micro-CSR research in its current form realize this transformative potential and serve social justice? Adopting an intellectual activist position, we argue that the transformative potential of micro-CSR is severely limited by its predominant focus on CSR as defined, presented, and promoted by companies themselves, thereby serving to sustain the hegemony of the business case for CSR, promoting narrow interests and maintaining managerial control over corporate responsibilities. We propose that micro-CSR researchers broaden the scope of their research to cultivate the potential of alternative ideas, voices, and activities found in organizational life. In so doing we lay out a research agenda that embraces employee activism, listens to alternative voices, and unfolds confrontational, subversive, and covert activities. In the hope of inspiring other micro-CSR researchers to explore

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these unconventional paths, we also offer suggestions as to how we can pursue them through empirical research.

Keywords

corporate social responsibility, critical performativity, employee activism, intellectual activism, micro-CSR

The multibillion-dollar tech industry has come under moral scrutiny both from the outside world and from within. The Tech Workers Coalition based in the San Francisco Bay Area started as an attempt to connect to the local community and has grown into a movement that seeks to challenge the tech industry's practices, including questionable use of technology and the exploitation of low-paid and temporary workers, from janitors to Uber drivers (Sheets and Schaefer, 2017; Tech Workers Coalition, 2018). The Coalition's 2018 zine *Tech Won't Build It!* states its mission as follows:

Our labor has transformed the lives of technocrats, CEOs, and investors – all at the expense of the most oppressed in society [. . .] But like many workers in many industries before us, we too have skills to self-organize, to refuse to do harm, to make demands, to fight for the things our communities so desperately need, and to win [. . .] We don't have to be complicit, and we don't have to be silent.

The tech workers' movement uses a range of tactics, including the leaking of now infamous Google and Facebook memos, online activism enabled by social media tools, as well as more traditional tactics such as strikes and protests. Pressure from employees has led numerous companies in the sector to abandon plans to work with US President Donald Trump. Google has been pressured to cancel its intended collaboration with the Chinese government, while employees at Amazon have halted the company's plans to develop and sell facial recognition technology that could have been used by US law enforcement with potentially catastrophic implications for minorities.

The successes of the Tech Workers Coalition illustrate that employees can at times pressure their companies to take a moral stance and act on issues of social justice. Yet, these transformative dynamics still fall outside the scope of current micro-CSR research. The burgeoning literature on micro-CSR has been developing the micro-foundations of CSR, or 'the individual actions and interactions underlying any CSR-related practices', by advancing our understanding of how CSR professionals work with CSR as well as how other employees perceive, evaluate, and react to companies' CSR practices (Gond and Moser, 2019: 3). Gond and Moser (2019) comprehensively make the case that this literature has offered much-needed theoretical insights into the intra-organizational dynamics around CSR and is well-positioned to deliver important insights for practitioners. By conceptualizing CSR as comprising organizational policies and actions (Aguinis, 2011: 858), however, the micro-CSR literature adopts a narrow focus on the practices that companies present and promote under the CSR banner and thereby overlooks the

abundance of alternative ideas, voices, and activities that reside in organizational life and which, perhaps even more potently, contribute to corporate responsabilization.

Our purpose in this essay is to explore how we as micro-CSR researchers can push for more socially responsible business practices as we pursue our research. In the spirit of intellectual activism (Contu, 2018, 2020), we ask how we can walk our own talk and place the power of our ideas ‘in service to social justice’ (Collins, 2013: ix). The intellectual activist stance we adopt here is grounded in black feminist thought and rests on an understanding of social justice as a part of progressive democratic politics that values freedom, equality, and solidarity (Contu, 2020). It insists that we as scholars use our position of privilege to partake in such politics and take responsibility for how our research matters. To motivate our endeavor, this critical essay first sets out the ways in which the current focus of micro-CSR research serves to reproduce and stabilize business as usual. We then explore alternative directions for future research that broaden the scope of micro-CSR research to include overlooked ideas, voices, and activities that hold transformative potential. We close by offering methodological considerations and reflections that seek to inspire others to walk this path with us.

Why micro-CSR research needs intellectual activism

Companies can serve both as vehicles for change and perpetrators of injustice: they often have the means to tackle societal challenges, including financial resources, managerial competences, and political clout, yet they equally often benefit from maintaining the status quo to extract economic rents (George et al., 2016; Surroca et al., 2013). It had been hoped that CSR would lead companies to participate in positive change insofar as it encourages them to take on more responsibility for social issues (Bowen, 1953; Margolis and Walsh, 2003). Yet critics have observed that many companies have responded to the pressure for CSR by adopting such practices only ceremonially without actually practicing what they preach (see, for example, Fleming and Jones, 2013). In this way companies ward off criticism and pre-empt activist strikes while business continues as usual behind the facade (Delmas and Burbano, 2011; McDonnell et al., 2015).

The micro-CSR literature has looked behind this facade by focusing on how individuals in companies work with and experience CSR. In their comprehensive review of this burgeoning field, Gond and Moser (2019) bring together the sociological and the psychological streams of micro-CSR scholarship. Contributions that adopt a sociological perspective have focused on how CSR professionals legitimate and promote social issues in their companies and the discursive, political, and identity-related struggles they face in doing so (e.g. Risi and Wickert, 2017; Wright and Nyberg, 2012). In contrast, works that adopt a psychological perspective have mostly been concerned with how (prospective) employees perceive and react to organizational efforts to implement CSR (for reviews of this literature, see Gond et al., 2017; Jones and Rupp, 2017; Rupp and Mallory, 2015), and to some extent with how employees engage with CSR in their organizations (e.g. Aguilera et al., 2007; Hemingway, 2005; Sendlhofer, 2019; Slack et al., 2015). These studies have enriched our understanding of the factors that impact employees’ reactions to corporate CSR practices and strategies, linking them to several work-related

attitudes and behaviors such as organizational identification, job satisfaction, and organizational citizenship behavior (for a review, see Gond et al., 2017). Taken together, the two streams of micro-CSR research have shed light on the intra-organizational dynamics that obstruct or foster CSR within companies.

Laying out directions for future micro-CSR research, Gond and Moser (2019) emphasize that by virtue of its engagement with intra-organizational dynamics such research has the potential to be critically performative, i.e. to make itself matter by producing impacts on CSR practice. Encouraging more critical research into the negative impact of CSR on employees, as well as the uses and abuses of managerial control and power, Gond and Moser (2019) propose that future micro-CSR research can be progressive while at the same time raising points of critique in fruitful dialogue with practitioners. Because micro-CSR research focuses on how CSR is practiced on the ground, it can develop tools and frameworks that are within the reach of practitioners and may enable them to act upon CSR. Micro-CSR research thus has the potential to matter insofar as we as scholars aim to be critical, progressive, and engaged.

To fully realize this potential, however, micro-CSR scholars will need to be both much more ambitious and much humbler. We need to be more ambitious because a truly critical and progressive research agenda must interrogate rather than merely accept the institutionalized power relations within which people struggle as given (Cabantous et al., 2016; Contu, 2020). To do so, our research needs to be centered on analyses of power that recognize and take seriously the ways in which institutionalized power relations manifest themselves in the construction of identities and subject positions in situ, and how these enable and constrain the ways that individuals make sense of, communicate, and act on their lived experiences (Ashcraft et al., 2009; Meyer and Vaara, 2020). At the same time, we need to be humbler and to critically reflect on our own practices by asking what we study and how, scrutinizing the extent to which our practices contribute to social justice. In this spirit, and inspired by recent critical assessments of CSR practices and scholarship, we review the micro-CSR literature and conceptualize three challenges that currently limit the transformative potential of micro-CSR research.

Challenge 1: Micro-CSR research sustains the hegemony of the business case

The dominant narrative around CSR in the discourses of both scholars and practitioners centers on companies' aligning CSR with strategy by identifying a business case (Feix and Philippe, 2020; Kaplan, 2020; Porter and Kramer, 2006). Constructing such alignment is not an easy task, however, and micro-CSR research has highlighted how CSR professionals struggle to cope with the multiple tensions inherent in their work, including tensions between business and social goals (Dahlmann and Grosvold, 2017; Hunoldt et al., 2020; Kok et al., 2019), between their companies' business objectives and practices and their own personal values and beliefs (Hahn et al., 2015), as well as the inconsistent temporal horizons of financial reporting, building stakeholder relationships, and even tackling climate issues (Gond and Moser, 2019; Mitra and Buzzanell, 2017). Although Mitra and Buzzanell (2017) suggest that reflecting on these tensions enables CSR professionals to experience their work as meaningful, these tensions typically also

lead to considerable frustration as CSR professionals struggle and often fail to genuinely incorporate CSR into the managerial reality of the companies in which they work (Carollo and Guerci, 2018; Wright and Nyberg, 2012; Wright et al., 2012).

Professionals promoting CSR typically have to resort to rhetoric adapted to traditional business logic in order to avoid the rolling eyes of management and business-minded colleagues (Carollo and Guerci, 2017; Gond et al., 2018; Shamir, 2004). Given that senior managers have been shown to believe in the business case for CSR (Hafenbrädl and Waeger, 2017), they do not need to be convinced *of* but rather *by* the business case for CSR, i.e. social causes must contribute to a company's bottom line to be legitimate in the eyes of senior managers who have ultimate control of resources and strategy (Carollo and Guerci, 2017; Mitra and Buzzanell, 2018). For example, Brès and Gond (2014) show how the ways in which CSR consultants translate issues advanced by social movements enable such issues to be embedded in corporate practices while at the same time commodifying them. In this way, alignment with corporate strategy becomes a more important part of their professional role than that of being the company's conscience and source of alternative CSR definitions. This in turn further limits the sources and scope of viable ideas about a company's responsibilities to those who instrumentalize people and the planet to serve profit.

In a recent critique, Roth et al. (2020) note that CSR may at best act as a mechanism of employee self-deception, and at worst as an inadvertent means by which to stabilize the status quo rather than address problems that threaten corporate legitimacy. Especially when companies have strongly espoused CSR commitments, employees may be co-opted into management's idealized description of how the company deals with social issues, thus compromising the discursive space for critique (Kourula and Delalieux, 2016). Even when employees promote more progressive and bottom-up initiatives, they soon decouple those from their 'moral responsibility for CSR' as they have to deal with the internal procedures that maintain the conventional business model (Sendlhofer, 2019). The effects of such processes are illustrated powerfully in Wright and Nyberg's (2017) study of how Australian companies gradually resolved the tensions associated with climate change by translating them into 'business as usual'. In doing so, corporate commitments to tackle climate change were effectively diluted as climate initiatives were realigned 'with the dominant market discourse of maximizing shareholder value' (Wright and Nyberg, 2017: 1651).

These contributions to micro-CSR vividly illustrate the intra-organizational dynamics through which companies instrumentalize CSR to serve the status quo, with CSR professionals reinforcing the business case as they struggle to promote ideas about CSR that are perceived as viable within the dominant managerial reality. As Kaplan (2020: 2) puts it: 'the very ideology that makes the business case for CSR sound appealing also predicts the absence of actual engagement with CSR issues.' Unsurprisingly, then, CSR has so far delivered too little corporate action even on low-hanging fruits (De Bakker et al., 2020). Though most micro-CSR researchers do not shy away from adopting a more normative stance, our review shows that their contributions reflect the tensions inherent in practitioners' attempts to promote corporate responsibility – and thereby unwittingly maintain them. If we are to leverage the performative potential of micro-CSR research, therefore, we need to find more powerful ways to challenge the hegemony of the business case and cultivate a broader spectrum of ideas around companies' social responsibilities.

Challenge 2: Micro-CSR research promotes narrow interests

Micro-CSR research has shown that CSR professionals often have activist leanings or experiences (Girschik, 2020; Risi and Wickert, 2017; Wickert and De Bakker, 2018). The diffusion of CSR across the corporate landscape has been accompanied by increasing professionalization, however, leading to the rise of established experts in the field and enabling CSR to be constructed as an attractive market in its own right (Brès and Gond, 2014; Brès et al., 2019). For example, Porter and Kramer's (2006) consulting firm FSG has become a dominant voice in promoting CSR discourse while at the same time monetizing the idea of measurable win-win strategies. Similarly, micro-CSR research has shown that individuals can instrumentalize CSR for a variety of purposes, including self-interested attempts to improve their own positions and advance their careers, with only a secondary interest in promoting responsible business practices (Bondy, 2008; Furusten et al., 2013). For example, Bondy (2008: 313) describes individuals who were uninterested in and even dismissive of CSR but who were nonetheless 'intent on being in control of it and used power sources and influence tactics to further control the CSR agenda within their organization'. Insofar as CSR is driven primarily by people who may benefit from it, there is a risk that it becomes apolitical and self-interested.

This risk is exacerbated when CSR is compartmentalized as a distinct function at corporate headquarters. Though the idea that CSR should be integrated across all business functions has gained momentum, micro-CSR research shows it is still formally defined by a select group of people while other employees have little say in what social issues matter to the company and how it should act on them. Most studies portray employees as passive recipients of organizational CSR strategies and frameworks (for definitions and reviews, see Gond et al., 2017; Jones and Rupp, 2017; Rupp and Mallory, 2015). As illustrated in studies on employees' pro-environmental and green behaviors (Boiral, 2009; Norton et al., 2015; Ones and Dilchert, 2012; Ramus and Steger, 2000) and CSR engagement (e.g. Aguilera et al., 2007; Slack et al., 2015), employees who engage more actively often merely support the implementation of an already existing CSR strategy. For example, Boiral (2009: 231) explains that employees' pro-environmental initiatives may constitute a 'less formalist vision of environmental management' through which employees support, but do not challenge, the organizational greening strategy. Further, the literature has tended to regard them as a single group, regardless of whether and in which ways they are affected by the company's activities. This approach does not fully account for the fact that employees may belong to more than one stakeholder category on account of their membership of other organizations such as trade unions or their own local communities (Hejjas et al., 2019). As a result, the many voices that reside in companies may not be heard in the construction of their companies' responsibilities.

This lack of attention to the diversity of voices in companies is particularly salient when considering the international dimensions of CSR. Global CSR policies usually originate at corporate headquarters and then have to be implemented and renegotiated in idiosyncratic national contexts (Acosta et al., 2019; Gutierrez-Huerter et al., 2020). Despite local adaptations, legitimating processes are usually still oriented toward western countries where the corporate headquarters, major investors, target audiences, and

(aspirational) peer groups are located (Jamali, 2010). As a result, such CSR policies do not do justice to the plurality of voices on the ground where social justice issues actually unfold (Atal, 2017; Ehrnström-Fuentes, 2016; Lauwo, 2018). These western-centric practices serve the purpose first and foremost of legitimating corporate activities. Not unlike polar bears and orangutans, the people who are actually affected in the global South are portrayed as a ‘poor, exotic Other in need of some western-led, market-based development intervention’ (Archer, 2020: 175; see also Schneider, 2020). These tropes may perform well in glossy CSR reports but they indicate little interest in the lived experiences of those whom they claim to help or to empower, instead serving to perpetuate gendered neocolonial relations (McCarthy, 2017; McCarthy et al., 2020; Ozkazanc-Pan 2019; see also Kaplan, 2020; Rhodes et al., 2020). Such detachment may have grave unintended consequences, for example, when even well-intentioned CSR policies such as micro-financing or the abandonment of child labor have detrimental outcomes for the communities affected (Gond and Moser, 2019; Khan et al., 2007).

Previous contributions to micro-CSR literature have thus far served to reinforce the voices that dominate the CSR discourse, thereby reflecting a lack of engagement on the part of companies with those who are not associated with (formally) defined CSR practices. In doing so, the literature has largely failed to take into consideration the extent to which CSR practices are both symptomatic of and reproduce societal inequalities (Kourula and Delalieux, 2016). In order to leverage the performative potential of micro-CSR research, we need to embrace a richer diversity of voices, especially those that draw attention to the problems of people most adversely affected by corporate activities.

Challenge 3: Micro-CSR research maintains managerial control

Given the enduring primacy of the business case and the continuing prevalence of a narrow set of interests, CSR professionals have a relatively limited repertoire of appropriate actions with which they can seek to drive change. Micro-CSR research has shown that even where their intentions are driven by passion and commitment to the causes they advocate, CSR managers face internal legitimacy deficits (see, for instance, Frandsen et al., 2013 for an illustration) as well as the challenge of overcoming marginalization and of gaining access to the management who ultimately control the allocation of resources (Risi and Wickert, 2017). Their relatively weak position in the company and their need for management support can curtail the range of identities and actions considered viable for CSR professionals. To legitimate their role in organizations and appeal to higher echelons, CSR managers often have to speak the language of profit (Wickert and De Bakker, 2018). In doing so, they legitimize their role by describing themselves as ‘motors of change’ or ‘business-oriented managers’ while downplaying any characterization of their work as idealistic or philanthropic (Carollo and Guerci, 2017).

When focusing on how CSR professionals drive CSR in companies it is thus not surprising that the focus in the micro-CSR literature has primarily been on their overt and collaborative actions, in many cases comprising attempts to sweet-talk management into undertaking more socially responsible activities. Often such practices on the part of CSR professionals are captured by the notion of issue-selling, i.e. ‘behaviours that are directed towards affecting others’ attention to and understanding of issues’ (Dutton and Ashford,

1993: 398). The main purpose of issue selling is, by definition, to win the attention of top management and convince them to allocate resources to social causes (Dutton et al., 2001; Sonenshein, 2016); hence, approaching the selling of social issues like ‘any other business issue’ is one way CSR professionals can succeed, at least outwardly, in their efforts (Anderson and Bateman, 2000). For example, Wickert and De Bakker (2018: 65) find that in their issue-selling efforts, CSR managers emphasize the need to ‘speak the buyers’ language’, addressing them in the way that ties in with these buyers’ motivations and incentives. Such overt and collaborative activities undertaken within their organizational roles may indeed have an impact on management’s decision-making if the initiatives they propose are considered economically viable (Alt and Craig, 2016). These issue-selling efforts can only ever bring incremental change, however, so long as CSR professionals focus on achieving small wins rather than promoting an overwhelming vision of a better world (Wickert and De Bakker, 2018).

Similarly, bottom-up activities within an organization’s CSR framework tend to deliver new initiatives, but they do not promote change. As captured by the literature on employees’ pro-environmental and green behaviors (Boiral, 2009; Norton et al., 2015; Ones and Dilchert, 2012; Ramus and Steger, 2000) and employees’ engagement with CSR (e.g. Aguilera et al., 2007; Hemingway, 2005; Slack et al., 2015), employees may engage in behaviors beyond their formal organizational roles and take initiatives on social issues. Again, however, such employee-driven initiatives typically involve a certain degree of organizational oversight and are not completely spontaneous or independent of existing managerial practices (Norton et al., 2015; Ones and Dilchert, 2012), i.e. they typically fall within the description of ‘formal organizational activities that have a socio-environmental focus’ (Opoku-Dakwa et al., 2018: 581). Moreover, as Slack et al. (2015: 543) find, employees reflecting on their engagement with CSR often refer to initiatives that happen ‘notably not within the organization’, such as planting trees in one’s spare time. Overall, as employee-driven initiatives are relatively innocuous and benign, their impact tends to be marginal rather than transformative. Meanwhile, employee efforts that actually challenge dominant ways of thinking and doing CSR have remained underexplored.

Our review shows that the micro-CSR literature has thus far been focused on tactics, routes, and initiatives deemed viable under the CSR banner. This focus is further constrained by our tools of the trade (Kaplan, 1964), i.e. our choice of settings, participants, and methods, and how we frame the questions to guide our research. For as long as we focus exclusively on CSR managers and employees developing and implementing CSR practices and initiatives under the CSR banner, we cannot hope to promote the less appropriate, uncomfortable, and disruptive activities required to challenge the status quo and drive more radical change.

New directions for micro-CSR research

Given the evidence that social justice does not fare well under the current CSR banner, we cannot be content with simply pointing out how others could do CSR better. The question is how we can overcome such ‘decaf’ performativity (Contu, 2008) and radically transform CSR to serve social justice. To develop an intellectual activist research agenda, we first need to broaden the scope of micro-CSR research and engage with

alternative ideas, voices, and activities. What we propose is not a ‘grand plan’, however; rather, we hope to encourage micro-CSR researchers to join us in nurturing change by ‘finding and promoting such practices within hives of activity already buzzing with as-yet-thwarted potential’ (Ashcraft, 2018: 618). In what follows, we sketch the contours of a micro-CSR research agenda that counters the hegemony of the business case by embracing employee activism, moving beyond narrow interests to include alternative voices and challenging managerial control by unfolding confrontational, subversive, and covert activities. Table 1 provides an overview of the topics discussed and possible exploratory research questions.

Table 1. New research directions and exploratory research questions.

New research directions	Possible research questions
Beyond the business case: Embracing employee activism	
Reviving nonviable identities and ideas	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What alternative ideas around their companies’ social responsibilities do activist employees hold? Where do these ideas originate and how do they develop over time? • How are activist employees’ social purposes and ideas shaped by their personal and professional backgrounds? • What are the nonviable ideas that reside in organizational life? How do activist employees find out which ideas are viable? How do they push the boundaries of viability? • How do activist employees maintain their nonviable ideas and identities and sustain their motivation in pursuing them in the face of pressures for conformity in the corporate context?
Insider/outsider roles	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How do activist employees cultivate relations with external social movements and how do these relationships shape their ideas? • How do activist employees use their outsider roles to maintain critical distance from dominant corporate discourses? • How do activist employees protect their ideas and identities from being instrumentalized by management? • How do activist employees keep their professional roles and career development opportunities unharmed by their outsider role?
Beyond narrow interests: Listening to alternative voices	
Intersectionality and the uses of privilege	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Who voices which social problems in organizations? Whose voices are heard? Why and to what effect? • How do activist employees represent or amplify the voices of others inside and outside their companies? How do their own privileges shape these choices? Whose experiences are buried in representation? • How do different social problems compete? Do they crowd each other out? How do activists deal with moral choices resulting from issue competition, particularly in the context of unequal privilege? • How do the efforts of employee activists leverage or compete with formal organizational CSR frameworks and practices?

(Continued)

Table 1. (Continued)

New research directions	Possible research questions
Coping with defense mechanisms and sanctions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What counter-reactions do activist employees experience? • How do activist employees cope with backlashes from management and colleagues? • How do they fight exhaustion, meaninglessness, exclusion, shame, anxiety, and fear? • How do activist employees form communities and cultivate solidarity?
Challenging managerial control: Subversive, confrontational, and covert tactics	<p data-bbox="401 478 987 504">unfolding subversive, confrontational, and covert activities</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How do activist employees organize and mobilize support among other employees and outside their companies? How do they do so while keeping their activities covert? • How do activist employees compete and collaborate with other activist movements in and around their companies (e.g. labor movements)? • How do activist employees escape or cope with having to 'sell their souls' as they promote their ideas within the dominant managerial reality? Can they avoid issue-selling tactics that leverage the business case? And if so, what are the consequences? • How does organizational and national context shape activist tactics and to what extent do certain settings empower and constrain employee activism and corporate retaliation?
Building and sustaining pressure for change	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How do activist employees use powerful external actors to mount external pressure on their organizations? • How do tactics oriented at internal and external stakeholders complement each other? Can attempts at sweet-talking, for instance, undermine more covert attempts at coalition-building with external stakeholders? • How do activist employees ensure participation in their movements across occupational, organizational, and national boundaries? How do they sustain commitment to their causes over time? • How do activist employees resist the temptation to settle for more comfortable positions? What happens when their ideas or initiatives are co-opted into CSR practices?

Beyond the business case: Embracing employee activism

The hegemony of the business case renders CSR a legitimate means to further corporate interests, thus instrumentalizing people and the planet in order to serve profit. How, then, can we, as micro-CSR researchers, tap into, engage with, and cultivate alternative ideas that challenge the hegemony of the business case and privilege social justice? And how can these ideas be protected from being subsumed into business as usual?

To engage with ideas that are less commonly included in the micro-CSR literature and which might not be considered viable under the CSR banner, we suggest expanding our

focus to employee activism. Activist employees have social purposes in pursuit of which they challenge the status quo in the companies that formally employ them and of which they are considered members (Risi et al., 2014; Wickert and De Bakker, 2018). Having a social purpose means they aim ‘to remedy a perceived social problem, or to promote or counter changes to the existing social order’ (Briscoe and Gupta, 2016: 674). Crucially, regardless of their formal titles and positions, activist employees do not view their companies merely as places where they work but are also concerned with the role of these companies in society and how the companies’ activities serve or hinder social justice. By embracing employee activism, we thus draw attention to people who, for a variety of reasons, care about issues of social justice.

This shift in focus requires broadening the scope of micro-CSR inquiry beyond individuals working under the CSR banner (i.e. CSR professionals) to include activist accountants, activist human resource managers, and activist manual and service workers. Perhaps more importantly, this approach demands noticing people rather than just the roles and identities they perform, paying attention to ideas, ideologies, and identities considered inappropriate to express at work and kept hidden behind a facade of professionalism, in this way enabling us to capture the ‘misfits’ that are ‘undone’ in the organizational setting (Butler, 2005). Such misfits may keep nagging at people and moving them to promote change in their organizations (Creed et al., 2010). By embracing activist employees and the misfits that would not normally pass through the organizational filter, we can foster people’s multiple identities and nonviable ideas, especially those that help both us and them to envision companies’ responsibilities differently.

As illustrated in our opening example of the Tech Workers Coalition, employee activism may accumulate into social movements around alternative ideas of corporate responsibilities. Though this is a timely example, employee activism has been theorized as ‘bureaucratic insurgency’ (Briscoe and Safford, 2008; Soule, 2012; Zald and Berger, 1978). Previous studies have shown how activist employees can mobilize and form internal social movements that raise pressing social issues unaddressed by their employers (Scully and Segal, 2002; Van Der Voort et al., 2009). Not unlike their external counterparts, these social movements can engage in exerting pressure on companies to take responsibility for the causes they champion. For instance, the Polaroid Revolutionary Workers’ Union that operated between 1970 and 1977 questioned their employer’s collaboration with the apartheid-era government of South Africa in providing film for the passbooks South Africans had to carry (Soule, 2009). Nevertheless, we still know relatively little about how activist employees take up issues of social justice and develop alternative ideas about the social responsibilities of their companies, whether as a result of their personal convictions or professional encounters. We need to understand how such alternative, often nonviable, ideas emerge, are fostered, and pursued despite corporate pressures for conformity.

A distinguishing feature of activist employees identified in previous contributions is their dual membership of both the organizations that employ them and of external social movements, whether formalized or informal, and thus the possibility of their simultaneously identifying with both (Creed, 2003; Meyerson, 2001; Meyerson and Scully, 1995, 1999). To understand how activist employees develop, cultivate, and protect alternative ideas around their companies’ responsibilities, we can usefully draw on the previous

theorizations of how actors work across organizational boundaries (DeJordy et al., 2020; Langley et al., 2019; Weber and Waeger, 2017). Through their boundary-spanning activities, including building alliances within, across, and beyond organizational settings, activist employees may come to develop alternative ideas (DeJordy et al., 2020). For instance, Rothenberg (2007) studied the ways in which environmental managers responded to technical and institutional pressures and found that, as boundary spanners, these managers were exposed to multiple fields and discourses and therefore often developed sustainability initiatives that served to change the framing of environmental issues within their company. This suggests that maintaining exposure to the ideas and understandings of external activists or other societal actors might help employee activists to stay on track, enabling them to keep a critical distance from the dominant discourses in their companies and so avoid co-optation into business as usual and the consequent dilution of their causes (Wright and Nyberg, 2017). Yet, there is also an urgent need to understand how activists protect their ideas from being instrumentalized by managers – and whether they may be able to do so without sacrificing their corporate careers.

Beyond narrow interests: Listening to alternative voices

CSR risks serving narrow interests by giving a platform to prominent voices that determine and reproduce CSR discourses without much attention to the actual social problems they claim to address or to the people most affected. By drawing attention to employee activism, we have already called for a broadening of the scope of micro-CSR research to consider a more diverse group of people as agents of social change, thereby inviting alternative voices into our studies. But how can we, as micro-CSR researchers, gain a better understanding of what problems are being voiced, by whom, and to what effects?

Some activist employees are inevitably likely to be better equipped to voice problems than others, as individuals' positions in companies usually mirror and reproduce wider social inequalities (Amis et al., 2018). To understand the power relations implicated in the reproduction of inequalities, we turn to intersectionality. This concept captures the notion that people's experiences are rarely defined around a single axis (Crenshaw, 1989) and that privileges and penalties are reconstituted by interlocking axes of power and oppression (Contu, 2020; Villesèche et al., 2018). In management studies these axes include gender and race, for example, as defining social identities that reproduce occupational segregation (Ashcraft, 2013). To illustrate, consider how differently most would perceive an activist man in finance, a queer activist accountant, or an activist mother in human resources. In an international context, additional axes include language (Vaara et al., 2005) and the status of subsidiary units, particularly when there are neo-colonial tendencies at play (Boussebaa, 2015; Storgaard et al., 2020). Such intersections constitute privileges and penalties by promoting or impairing access to networks, thus conferring different resonances and amplitudes on the voices of activist employees.

As different social problems compete for attention and resources, the question of who engages in employee activism has implications for the kinds of issues they address and their effectiveness in these pursuits. Those who occupy powerful roles will likely have difficulty relating to the experiences of powerless groups (Rhodes et al., 2020). For example, mid-level managers are less likely to be interested in or even effective in

securing a living wage for low-paid workers (Scully, 2015). Nevertheless, individuals may use their privileges to represent or amplify the voices of those who would otherwise not be heard (Smith, 2002). Once we discern privileges and penalties, we will be able to become sensitive to how different groups of people compete with, represent, or stand in solidarity with each other's causes, and with what consequences they do so. In addition, this raises questions around how various social problems may complement or crowd each other out in the definition of corporate responsibilities.

Micro-CSR has recognized that positive emotions arise when people promote social issues. Indeed, Gond and Moser (2019) advocate closely interrogating the emotional dimension of employees' engagement in CSR. Acknowledging a diversity of voices, however, also entails taking seriously and investigating the penalties people face when challenging the status quo. When people make claims that are considered inappropriate or outright offensive within extant normative frameworks, including a company's dominant CSR narrative, they prompt others to mobilize an arsenal of defenses that silence, discredit, or exclude them (Hafenbrädl and Waeger, 2017; Kenny, 2018). Activist employees may be portrayed as hippies with unrealistic ideals, for example (Wright et al., 2012), and may face micro-aggression, shaming, and accusations of disloyalty from colleagues and superiors (Scully and Segal, 2002), or even be ridiculed as being mentally unstable (Kenny et al., 2020). Further research may usefully explore activists' coping and community-building strategies in the face of these hardships.

Challenging the status quo is a frustrating endeavor, and activist employees may struggle with exhaustion and anxiety as a result. Feeling a sense of duty or even a calling to bring about radical change, they may pursue their purposes in unhealthy ways, including workaholic and alcoholism, and may harbor unrealistic expectations of themselves and others (Cardador and Caza, 2012; Carollo and Guerci, 2018). By fighting for their goals, they may distance themselves from or even shame 'those who do nothing' (Kenny, 2015). Such a loss of collegial ties and appreciation, combined with a perceived failure to create a meaningful impact, may take a personal emotional toll on activists and engender a sense of meaninglessness (Bailey and Madden, 2019; Driscoll, 2020). Being seen as people who rock the boat may prove detrimental to their careers (Meyerson, 2008) and even their livelihoods if they lose their jobs (see, for example, Soule, 2009). The potential negative consequences associated with pushing for change in the workplace may leave activist employees incapacitated by fear and thus effectively silenced (DeCelles et al., 2019). To understand why and how people speak up or remain silent, we suggest that future research should be informed by an emotional agenda that looks not only at the emotions that drive activists but also at those emotions that wear them out (Ashkanasy et al., 2017; Goodwin et al., 2009).

Challenging managerial control: Unfolding subversive, confrontational, and covert activities

Previous micro-CSR literature has focused on rather innocuous and moderate tactics, routes, and initiatives considered viable under the CSR banner. Leveraging their insider-ship and pursuing their 'passion with an umbrella' (Scully and Segal, 2002), employee activists may use conventional channels of politics within organizations, thus adopting a

collaborative approach to top management. Indeed, previous work has observed how some activist employees position themselves as protagonists of CSR and use various forms of sweet talk to persuade others to adopt new ideas and practices in their company, including through gracious appeals and issue selling (Girschik, 2020; Risi et al., 2014; Skoglund and Böhm, 2020). These observations align with micro-CSR research on the activities of CSR professionals aimed at gaining management support and securing resources for addressing social issues (e.g. Gond et al., 2018; Wickert and Schaefer, 2015). In advancing an activist research agenda, however, we should look for alternative and more progressive activities.

One major tactical advantage of employee activists is that they often have a dual affiliation with both their companies and external social movements and can switch between their insider and outsider roles (Creed, 2003; Meyerson, 2001; Meyerson and Scully, 1995, 1999; Zald and Berger, 1978). As ‘bureaucratic insiders’ (Binder, 2002; Rojas, 2006), they likely have access to complex social knowledge, resources, and power (Briscoe and Gupta, 2016). However, dually-affiliated employee activists are also outsiders to the dominant corporate culture because of their ideas, identities, and ambitions (Meyerson and Scully, 1995; Pettinicchio, 2012). As sympathetic outsiders, they may be receptive to and even recruited by external activists who seek to build internal coalitions (Briscoe and Gupta, 2016; Raeburn, 2004). Yet, it is possible that activist employees themselves may seek to collaborate with, support, and even join social movements. In what follows, we explore a variety of tactics that activist employees may pursue and how they can leverage their connections with external groups and organizations to advance their causes more potently inside companies.

Activist employees may wisely choose to refrain from overtly challenging the status quo and instead ‘wear a corporate mask’ at all times to remain shrouded in invisibility (Scully, 2015). By espousing compliance (Fleming and Sewell, 2002), they may drive their social purpose without incurring the costs of breaking out of managements’ umbrella (Contu, 2008). Following Haack et al. (2012), we label these as ‘Trojan horse tactics’ because they may entail seemingly harmless or even productive activities that do not alert management, but which enable activist employees to subvert the status quo and effectuate change over time (see also Carrington et al., 2019). Such tactics may involve mundane and pragmatic acts of resistance that are not recognized as such by management (Fleming and Sewell, 2002; McCabe et al., 2020). For example, activist employees may avoid the spotlight by quietly pushing radical adjustments at times of ongoing organizational change (Meyerson, 2001). Similarly, they may leverage existing CSR policies to initiate partnerships with NGOs or participate in multi-stakeholder initiatives whose influence they can then leverage to increase pressure on the organization (Haack et al., 2012; Soderstrom and Weber, 2020). Further research may usefully explore how activist employees mobilize others inside and outside their company, while avoiding drawing attention to their potentially undercover activities. As well, we need to learn more about how activist employees experience and cope with hiding what actually matters to them.

If conventional channels have been exhausted or are inaccessible or deemed ineffective, activist employees may confront management more overtly, violating the rules of the corporate game (Farrell and Petersen, 1982) and forming what Zald and Berger

(1978) referred to as ‘bureaucratic insurgency’. In doing so, employees may openly protest, for example by contesting decisions and forming coalitions to organize their resistance, drawing effectively on their knowledge of their colleagues’ values and orientations (Briscoe and Gupta, 2016; Farrell and Petersen, 1982). Protests may have a symbolic character and assume miniature forms of organizational revolt. For instance, employee activists may wear indicative buttons or dress differently to express their ideological views and prompt other employees to do the same (Lounsbury et al., 2003). During the Black Lives Matter protests of 2020, for example, Starbucks employees in the US fought for their right to wear clothing and accessories indicative of their support for the movement despite the company’s policy of prohibiting personal political clothing, further mounting pressure against the company on social media (Murphy, 2020).

To strengthen their protest, activist employees often use their ‘indirect’ voice (Hirschman, 1970) by building external coalitions or even filing complaints with external authorities. Amazon’s US employees, for example, have been vocal about their stance on climate change, expressing their opinions through walkouts, protests, and conversations with the press, as well as using social media to amplify their cause, such as the Twitter account *Amazon Employees for Climate Justice* that allows these workers to express even more radical views to the wider public while preserving individual anonymity. A recent tweet posed the following question: ‘Amazon is still funding climate-denying and climate-delaying politicians and lobbyists. Why are we still funding accomplices to the fossil fuel industry’s destruction?’ (Amazon Employees for Climate Justice, 2019). As another example of protest, workers at Wayfair, the international online furniture retailer, protested against Wayfair’s collaboration with the US immigration authorities in selling furniture to a government contractor operating shelters for migrant children separated from their parents at the US border. This protest involved the employees staging a walkout that was coordinated and publicized on Twitter, eventually leading management to engage with them in discussions to address the issue (Taylor, 2019).

Openly protesting and confronting managerial control is a costly path to walk, however, as activist employees may face retaliation, as has been noted in numerous cases of labor movement protests. During a nationwide strike of the United Auto Workers against General Motors, for instance, General Motors stopped paying health-care coverage for striking employees (LaReau, 2019). Similarly, Atal (2017) describes the case of the Lonmin mining company in South Africa that ran a hospital for mining-related health risks as well as clinics attending to workers with HIV/Aids under the CSR banner, and which, in times of labor unrest, would suspend anti-retroviral treatments for workers on strike. As these cases illustrate, activists can incur penalties extending even to the withdrawal of the supposed safety nets that companies – and employment systems – might provide (Allen and Tüselmann, 2009; Bidwell et al., 2013; Tüselmann et al., 2015). Institutional contexts further define how easily companies can retaliate against troublemakers by firing them, as illustrated by Google’s dismissal of activist employees (known as the ‘Thanksgiving Four’) for their attempts to organize in part because of their discomfort with the company’s US Border Patrol cooperation (Lee, 2019). We therefore suggest bringing the state back and examining its role as the ultimate umbrella under which employees can expect their efforts to be

protected or to attain policy enforcement (Scully, 2015), which in turn is likely to shape their strategies and tactics.

To avoid such risky and overt confrontation, activist employees may even resort to sabotage, i.e. tactics that undermine or threaten their company. They may use their external alliances to leak information to the media or to regulators. In 2010, for example, 116 Shell employees concerned about the company's environmental impact sought to initiate a 'peaceful corporate revolution' by emailing staff contacts to NGOs. The email set out a 'four-stage strategy for raising awareness of allegations about Shell's practices in Nigeria, including campaigns to target the media and institutional investors', not least by encouraging NGO professionals to infiltrate the company. The senders wanted to remain anonymous and 'badly' needed to keep their jobs because they had 'families to feed, clothe, and shelter' (Crooks, 2010). More recently, reports of Google terminating its racial-justice-focused diversity training program were leaked to the media by concerned employees (Glaser, 2019). Instead of communicative tactics, activist employees may also directly sabotage a company's operations, either by manipulating or damaging physical assets or equipment, or by mobilizing a large number of employees to simultaneously call in sick (Zald and Berger, 1978). Indeed, it would be especially useful to study the varied ways in which activist employees might leverage the support of powerful external actors.

As activist employees need not present their motives and activities overtly, they may operate as double agents and leverage a broad repertoire of tactics to maximize their impact on their company. To generate and maintain momentum, we expect that activist employees will use combinations of the above tactics simultaneously or in sequence. They may talk sweetly to management but catalyze protest among colleagues, or resort to subversive tactics if overt protest fails to generate sufficient impact. Different types of tactics can be mutually reinforcing and enabling, moreover: for example, a top management decision with disastrous consequences might lead activist employees to use sweet talk at first and then protest tactics to halt the decision, and then if these efforts fail they may resort to leaking information to the press to generate external pressure, later returning as allies to management and offering to fix public relations by implementing a better social strategy. How various tactics oriented at internal and external actors complement or undermine each other is a fruitful question for further research. Moreover, as outlined above, employee activism takes a toll on people and is difficult to sustain. Especially when their efforts are met with resistance and limited success, we need to ask how employee activists sustain momentum and participation in their movement over time.

Conversely, the very success of employee activism may make it attractive for companies to promote it. Once identified, activist employees run the risk of being designated as resident activists within their companies, perhaps attaining higher status but ultimately functioning as figureheads and thereby allowing the company to espouse commitment. The roles of activists themselves and their demands of the companies they work for can thus be subsumed within and serve the corporate status quo. The tendency of companies to co-opt critical voices raises questions of how employee activists can withstand the temptation to settle for more comfortable positions in the long run.

A toolkit for activist micro-CSR researchers

With this critical essay, we hope to encourage micro-CSR researchers to join us in the endeavor to promote alternative ideas, practices, and activities that may transform corporate responsibilities to serve social justice. Yet engaging in research that matters requires us to be unapologetically political (Cabantous et al., 2016), not only in our conceptual but also in our empirical approach. In what follows, we argue that we need to embrace three key commitments that should guide our methodological choices: we have to commit to political participation, inclusiveness, and care. We recognize that using our position as scholars to ‘transform and uplift our research, local, and global communities’ (Tillmann-Healy, 2003: 735) might require sacrificing the comfort of conventional methodological approaches. To aid micro-CSR scholars in this undertaking, in this final section of our essay we hope to equip them with a helpful toolkit for pursuing an intellectual activist agenda.

Committing to political participation

As micro-CSR scholars, we often draw on rather conventional methods that allow us to maintain a discrete distance and stay well within our comfort zones. Yet, to advance an intellectual activist agenda, we advocate constructing new knowledge while forging solidarity with and empowering research participants. To do so, social movement scholars have long engaged in ‘activist ethnographies’ in which they participate in the roles of activists as well as researchers (Reedy and King, 2019). As a variant of institutional ethnography (Smith, 2005; see also Meyer and Vaara, 2020), activist ethnographies seek to provide a voice to research participants and engage them in co-constructing knowledge for change (Juris and Khasnabish, 2013). The more ‘militant’ (Juris, 2007) political activist ethnography (PAE) is used to ‘investigate methods of organizing for change’ and has the potential to empower activists to decide when to comply with and when to defy ruling regimes by investigating how they work (Hussey, 2012: 3; see also Frampton et al., 2006; Smith, 1990). Such in-depth and prolonged engagement with activist employees might require ‘coat-switching’ between ethnographic observations in the workplace and observations outside of corporate settings (Homan, 1980), mirroring the insider/outsider activities of activists themselves. Rather than advocating any one specific strategy, we would suggest that as micro-CSR researchers we carefully choose tools for the trade that not only fit with the theoretical questions we choose to pursue but also allow us to stand by our own values.

Regardless of the chosen strategy, by participating rather than posing as bystanders or taking a fly-on-the-wall position, we as micro-CSR scholars want to stand in solidarity with those we study by moving toward ‘radical reciprocity’ between the researcher and the researched (Ellis, 2007). This entails rethinking our relationship with research participants and moving toward more intensive collaboration – ‘from studying “them” to studying “us”’ (Tillmann-Healy, 2003: 735). Radical reciprocity is not an instrumental strategy to gain better access to the individuals we study. It involves placing relationships with them at the same level of priority as the fieldwork, taking no more than what we as researchers are willing to give, keeping secrets when asked, even where they make for a

better story, and supporting them as allies (Charon, 2014). Through such active participation, we can overcome the division between the researcher and the researched and engage more fully with the experiences we seek to understand rather than remaining passive onlookers or voyeurs (Collins, 2013: 223).

Using privilege to include and amplify voices

Because we as researchers speak and act from privileged positions (Reid et al., 2006), we have a tendency to – often unwittingly – perpetuate existing power relations rather than use our privilege to diligently select whose voices we include and amplify. In accordance with the tenets of intellectual activism, we propose to commit to inclusiveness and to fostering conjunctive strategies, the building of ‘bridges and synergies with co-researchers, stakeholders and all constituencies’ (Contu, 2020: 746). A key decision made at the outset of any research project is that of empirical setting and focus, and in line with our research directions, we see intellectual activism as starting at the stage of issue and context selection. It is at this point that researchers need to reflect on the implications of engaging with a particular cause, considering whether it fits with or contradicts the corporate CSR narrative and whose interests could be represented and excluded by engaging with this cause in the study. In the same spirit, we need to consider critically the composition of our author teams, including scholars at different stages of their careers, from different backgrounds, in different life situations and geographical locations. This becomes especially important for tackling inequality and ethnocentrism and for understanding which issues are at stake (Brydon-Miller, 2004; Muhammad et al., 2015).

We also recognize that finding activist employees inside organizations is not an easy task. How, then, should scholars who purposefully seek to identify and study activist employees proceed? Researchers who study change agents in companies usually begin their studies by approaching people with relevant roles in a selected company. In contrast to CSR professionals and social intrapreneurs, however, activist employees do not necessarily pose as protagonists. As we have argued above, activist employees may for good reasons choose to conceal themselves and their activities, and this is especially likely in cases where their ideas directly challenge corporate ideologies or strategies, for example in the case of environmental activism in oil and gas companies. Identifying social activists may require prolonged and intense engagement with a company in order to understand the dominant ways of thinking about corporate responsibilities in the firm first and over time to develop the networks and sensitivity needed to meet those who differ from the prevailing corporate narrative.

Alternatively, one could reach out to activist employees by approaching a social movement and finding out where its members, volunteers, and/or supporters work. As activist employees often span corporate boundaries by connecting with social movements or activist NGOs, we may connect with them by first connecting with external activists. Employment relations scholars, for instance, have increasingly uncovered patterns of social activism amongst employees by engaging with trade unions (Hyde and Vachon, 2019). Moreover, we may strengthen our relations with those students and alumni who we have experienced in class as caring strongly about social justice. Lessons can also be drawn from other research with hidden and hard-to-reach populations. For

example, researchers of conspiracy theorists recruit participants by identifying and participating in the relevant events they might attend (Harambam and Aupers, 2015). If connecting with activists proves difficult in real life, we should consider reaching out to them through online platforms they might use to strategize and implement their campaigns (Briscoe and Gupta, 2016).

Taking inclusivity seriously in participant selection entails seeking out the perspectives of any employee activists who may have been silenced and/or left the organization voluntarily or involuntarily and those whose voices are not prominently heard, particularly in remote subsidiaries. Not unlike whistleblowers, former activist employees can be vocal and could be identified through media coverage, particularly in cases where they have become public advocates for a cause they support (see Elias, 2020, for example, for an illustration). Relatedly, silenced employees can turn to online platforms where they can remain anonymous whilst expressing their beliefs and ideologies ‘outside formal organizational boundaries’ through posts on social media accounts or counter-institutional websites (Gossett and Kilker, 2006: 63; see also Thompson et al., 2020). Employees in remote subsidiaries may use such platforms to share their experiences and observations with audiences both at home and abroad, or even take part in virtual walk-outs (Newton, 2020), enabling us to identify and connect with those we would not have reached otherwise through online observations and netnographic research (Kozinets, 2007).

Embracing discomfort and care

As researchers, we might often seek out the comfort of a polished and coherent narrative. Yet speaking truth to power and nurturing change require us to embrace also those experiences that are uncomfortable and messy. Indeed, when collecting data, especially in corporate contexts, we always need to remember that a researcher’s presence can urge people to present viable and desirable accounts of themselves (Butler, 2005). Our interviewing might therefore reinforce roles and identities whose performance is deemed legitimate in the corporate context (Tyler, 2020). Instead, we therefore suggest adopting an anti-narrative approach aimed at ‘reflexively undoing’ the coherent stories people have constructed about themselves (Riach et al., 2016). By foregrounding themes that are conventionally downplayed, such as emotions and power dynamics inherent in activist struggles, we can invite more complex, nonlinear, and non-coherent accounts of people’s lived experiences and allow alternative ideas and feelings to be expressed (Rumens, 2018). This approach leads us to appreciate what activists leave out and what they think is not relevant for discussion. In doing so, we actively interrogate the norms that constrain participants’ accounts (Gilmore and Kenny, 2015) and thus work critically with ‘the conditions of possibility for being and becoming’ (Cabantous et al., 2016: 210). Rather than reproducing viable accounts, anti-narrative research can help us to reflexively undo CSR practices and roles, instead enabling us to co-conceive of and nurture alternatives.

Embracing the uncomfortable and messy lived experiences of employee activism requires us to pay attention to emotions. To evoke them, scholarship on emotions has recently started to embrace visual methods alongside traditional narratives (Creed et al.,

2014). Photo-elicitation (Kjellstrand and Vince, 2020) and participatory visual methods (McCarthy and Muthuri, 2018) can help us in accessing participants' feelings when discussing sensitive topics or when it becomes particularly difficult to bridge linguistic and occupational communication barriers. Moreover, in the spirit of radical reciprocity, we must take our own feelings seriously (Blee, 1998; Lerum, 2001). Participating in employee activism is also likely to involve coming face to face with a host of uncomfortable truths, including the possibility of encountering dark sides of activism that challenge not only corporate but also our own ideologies, such as right-wing movements (Blee, 1998; Gillan and Pickerill, 2012). Conventionally, the success of an empirical study 'implies that the author transcended any troubling feelings, at least by the time the account was written' (Kleinman and Copp, 1993: 17). Yet, such quandaries also challenge us to critically engage with activist concerns around concrete issues, such as facets of human rights, recognizing the implications of the focal issue for analysis and reflecting more closely on why activists chose their causes and why we chose to focus on them. As Ashcraft proposes, we may develop 'affective sense-abilities' by nurturing our own lived and embodied experiences, and in so doing become better change agents ourselves, as 'the more we feel what we do, the better we know what we do; and the more we know by feeling what we do, the more we have to offer' (Ashcraft, 2018: 621).

The study of activist employees is always likely to be rife with ethical risks and concerns that need to be considered throughout the research project, including the write-up stage. Given that such employees often operate from vulnerable positions, regardless of their occupational status, researchers need to find ways of participating that serve to empower activists and not endanger their efforts and livelihoods. One of these risks involves the possibility of unwittingly outing employees' activities to management, thereby jeopardizing the jobs and livelihoods of research participants. Another relates to the process of engaging with participants in ways that might inadvertently take them out of their comfort zones by challenging their perspectives and fueling further tensions between their work and activist agendas. Given that these issues might not always be anticipated at the research design stage, we can only encourage scholars to further explore critical engagement with practice and to keep reflecting on the ethical dilemmas they encounter along the way (Contu, 2018) by following the logic of 'relational ethics of care' (Ellis, 2016). This approach calls for ongoing reflection on the impact of research on individual participants who share their stories and feelings with the scholar, as well as making 'good interpersonal decisions concerning our responsibilities toward those in our studies' (Ellis, 2016: 435). It also entails that we need to take great care in how we present heroes and villains in our studies as we write up our work.

Concluding remarks

In this critical essay we have argued that micro-CSR research in its current form fails to leverage its transformational potential and serve social justice. Rather, it sustains the status quo insofar as it reinforces rather than challenges the hegemony of the business case, the dominance of narrow interests, and managerial control over corporate responsibilities. Sketching the contours of an intellectual activist research agenda, we have proposed how we, as micro-CSR researchers, can nurture change by uplifting the

alternative ideas, voices, and activities found in organizational life but as yet subdued by the dominant managerial reality. Our agenda illustrates that transforming CSR will probably be difficult, uncomfortable, and fraught with ethical dilemmas, both for activist employees who challenge the status quo and for us as intellectual activists who consociate in solidarity. Within academia too we struggle with power relations that constitute privileges unequally (Spence, 2016; Stigliani, 2020), and walking our own progressive talk is even more difficult for some than others. Intellectual activism must be a community effort (Contu, 2018, 2020). As feminists know, the more a path is used the more a path is used (Ahmed, 2019). With this essay we hope to have encouraged others to walk this path with us.

Acknowledgements

We thank the feminist scholars on whose powerful work we built for their courage, for their solidarity and for their relentless efforts to embody the ideas of intellectual activism. We thank the editor Olga Tregaskis and three anonymous reviewers for their close and uplifting engagement with our manuscript. We discussed our ideas with colleagues at Loughborough University London, at Copenhagen Business School, and in the CSR community at EGOS. We are grateful for their insights and encouragements.

Funding

The authors received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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