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Employees' perceived benefits from participating in CSR activities and implications for increasing employees engagement in CSR

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Abstract

Purpose – The involvement of employees in a company's corporate social responsibility (CSR program) is one of the key factors for its success. Hence, it is important to understand employees' reactions to participatory CSR activities. The purpose of this paper is to examine what kinds of benefits employees perceive from participating in CSR, to identify varying levels of participation and to discuss the reciprocal relationship between the perception of benefits and participation.

Design/methodology/approach – Based on semi-structured interviews with employees, the structuring content analysis resulted in a differentiated examination of perceived benefit clusters (classified as functional, emotional and meaning and morality) and in a clustered exploration of varying levels of participation (cognitive and behavioral).

Findings – The findings reveal that employees perceived all three clusters of benefits in relation to no/low, passive, active and enthusiastic levels of participation. The data provide insights into the relationship between perceived benefits and varying levels of participation, with a balanced and differentiated perception of benefits seeming to relate to higher levels of participation. However, employees may also benefit without a behavioral form of participation, for instance, from an improved team spirit.

Originality/value – Due to its methodological approach, this empirical study provides a rich picture of employees' benefits according to varying levels of participation. The paper contributes to current CSR literature by examining self-oriented benefits, through identifying differing levels of participation, and by discussing their reciprocal relation. These findings contribute to research and practice through the implications for promoting sustainability approaches within companies.

Keywords Benefits, CSR participation, ERG theory

Paper type Case study

Introduction

These days, numerous companies communicate with their stakeholders using different approaches to corporate social responsibility (CSR). To some extent, this engagement can be attributed to stakeholders' and particularly to employees' expectations of organizations to demonstrate the assumption of responsibility (De Roeck *et al.*, 2014). Thus, it is not surprising that organizational CSR programs often involve internal activities in which employees can participate. Despite the growing research interest in employees' responses to CSR approaches, there has been limited exploration of employees' underlying motivations in

relation to participatory CSR activities (El Akremi *et al.*, 2018; Slack *et al.*, 2015; Du *et al.*, 2014; Aguilera *et al.*, 2007; Collier and Esteban, 2007).

Observations from practice indicate that employees' motivational structures are difficult to identify. In particular, the lack of motivation among employees and their motivational structures regarding participation in CSR activities remain largely unknown. Thus, it is not surprising that researchers and organizations find themselves often left with the multi-layered but still abstract questions.

Why and how do employees participate, or not, in CSR activities?
These questions are highly relevant as employees, as key stakeholders, have a tremendous influence on companies' CSR ambitions (Slack *et al.*, 2015; McShane and Cunningham, 2012; Collier and Esteban, 2007). Relevant research refers to employees as enactors of organizational CSR (Slack *et al.*, 2015; Bhattacharya *et al.*, 2009), emphasizing that employees responsiveness to participatory CSR activities is decisive for success. Despite the fact that participatory CSR activities are widely established in practice, it should not be taken for granted that employees are motivated to participate in a CSR action solely by the assumption that they will feel good from doing something good (Vlachos *et al.*, 2013). Several studies emphasize that employee perspectives, as well as their motivations and perceived benefits in relation to CSR, are complex (Peloza *et al.*, 2009; Peterson, 2004).

In this discussion of why employees actually participate in CSR activities, the question of employees' perceived benefits is central. This study thus aims to explore employees' motivational structures to participate in CSR activities by examining the different types of benefits. Furthermore, this paper argues that employees' individual perceptions of benefits relate to varying levels of participation and in turn, affect employees' responses to CSR activities. This perspective leads to the following three guiding research questions:

RQ1. What kinds of benefits do employees perceive from participating in CSR?

RQ2. What varying levels of participation can be identified?

RQ3. How do the perceived benefits relate to varying levels of participation and vice versa?

These questions need to be taken into account when discussing employees' benefits in relation to CSR, and the findings contribute to the literature by extending a dichotomous understanding of participation in CSR activities and by examining the relationship between benefits and participation.

Research background and perspective
CSR can be conceptualized as "economic, legal ethical and discretionary (later referred to as philanthropic) expectations that society has of organizations at a given point in time" (Carroll, 1979, p. 500, 1991, p. 283). Participatory CSR activities can include corporate volunteering (CV) actions but could, however, go far beyond that. In contrast to previous studies on CV (Dreesbach-Bundy and Scheck, 2017; Einwiller and Freinschlag, 2016; Rodell *et al.*, 2016; Brockner *et al.*, 2014), this study conceptualizes participatory CSR activities in the context of sustainability (Schaltegger, 2015). The management of corporate sustainability, including all environmental, social and economic measures by the organization, intends to "enable the company to contribute to sustainable development of the economy and the society as a whole" (Schaltegger and Burritt, 2018, p. 242). This encompasses employees' contributions to sustainable corporate behavior at work (Norton *et al.*, 2014; Paillé and Mejía-Morelos, 2014; Muster, 2011) and their participation in CV, but also their private involvement in sustainability. This latter is in contrast to CV,

not limited to single, externally oriented action. Thus, participatory CSR activities aim at promoting sustainable behavior in the organizational and everyday setting.

In reference to Stakeholder Theory (Freeman, 1984) and current CSR research, organizations need to involve employees as key stakeholders in their CSR approaches (De Roeck *et al.*, 2014; Muster, 2011; Morsing *et al.*, 2008). El Akremi *et al.* (2018) showed how empirical insights concerning micro-level perspectives have advanced organizational CSR research. Accordingly, this paper examines employees' perspectives focusing on individuals' perceptions of and reactions to participatory CSR activities.

Drawing on motivational psychology, this qualitative research studies employees' responses to participatory CSR activities by examining their perceived benefits with a novel focus on levels of participation. As shown by motivational research (e.g. Petri and Govern, 2013; Heckhausen and Heckhausen, 2010; Rudolph, 2003; Maslow, 1970; Alderfer, 1969), benefits and needs are the two main factors influencing individual motivation. This study argues that employees perceive certain benefits from participating in CSR activities and, hence, satisfy personal needs. Alderfer's theory of existence, relatedness and growth (ERG) as a theoretical framework allows the necessary discussion of employees' motivation in general and, in particular, the discussion of employees' satisfaction of personal needs. Employees' benefits in terms of satisfied needs are therefore likely to be crucial to employees' motivation to participate in CSR activities.

This study explores not only the different benefits perceived by employees but also different levels of participation. The characterization of CV as one possible CSR activity in an overall corporate sustainability strategy necessarily entails revising the mainly behavioral understanding of participation in CSR activities (e.g. Einwiller and Freinschlag, 2016; Brockner *et al.*, 2014). Such a behavioral approach often leads to a dichotomous conceptualization of participation: participation and no participation. In contrast, this paper explores different participation levels, arguing that varying levels of participation and employees' perceived benefits "have a causal influence on each other's evolution" (Kallis and Norgaard, 2010, p. 690). Thus, the objective of this research is not to prove causality but to establish possible causal influences through use of a coevolutionary lens, referring to coevolution as a research framework for organizations in general (Kallis, 2007; Porter, 2006) and to social coevolution mechanisms in particular (Kallis and Norgaard, 2010, p. 691). Following a coevolutionary reasoning, employees' perceptions of benefits and their varying levels of participation are understood as social subsystems which "are characterized by interdependence, circular causality, and iterative feedback" (Porter, 2006, p. 486).

Overall, this study contributes threefold to the emerging research on employees' responses to participatory CSR activities. First, based on in-depth interviews, this study provides insights into the relationship between employees' perceived benefits and varying levels of participation. A structured qualitative content analysis leads to the exploration of three benefit clusters and the identification of four differing levels of participation. Thus, no or low levels, passive levels, active levels and enthusiastic levels of participation are discussed in relation to the functional, emotional and "meaning and morality" benefits. As a second contribution, this investigation contributes to research by extending micro-level perspectives on internal CSR and by encouraging the discussion of differing levels of participation in CSR activities. Finally, this study supports practice by providing insights for promoting sustainability within the company.

Conceptual framework
Perceived benefits: understanding employees' reactions to participatory CSR activities
CSR research has often examined the benefits from the perspective of companies, discussing how and why companies can benefit from CSR activities (Arevalo and Aravind, 2017;

Malik, 2015; O'Riordan and Fairbrass, 2014; Branco and Rodrigues, 2006). Likewise, researchers have extensively studied consumers' perceptions of potential benefits (Plewa *et al.*, 2015; Hartmann and Apaolaza-Ibanez, 2012; Bhattacharya and Sen, 2004). In discussions of employees' motivations to participate in CSR activities, the question of employees' perceived benefits has previously been researched (Sekar and Dyaram, 2017; Einwiller and Freinschlag, 2016; Rodell *et al.*, 2016; Brockner *et al.*, 2014). In this study, the term benefit is defined as an advantage perceived by employees resulting from participation in organizational CSR activities, for example, a higher level of self-esteem.

This paper draws on the theory of ERG. Alderfer (1969) developed his threefold needs' theory in contrast to Maslow's theory of needs (1970). His theoretical framework is fruitful in displaying how individual motivations derive from the interplay between benefits and needs in an organizational setting., Accordingly, this study argues that employees may satisfy individual needs through participatory CSR activities, leading to a perception of benefits.

The ERG theory (Alderfer, 1969, p. 145) stipulates that there are primarily three forms of self-oriented needs. Existence needs refer to distinctive forms of material and physiological needs. Relatedness needs reflect an individual's desire to belong and have significant others such as employees or friends and to gain external attention. Lastly, respect and growth needs describe the personal need to contribute to environments. Alderfer (1969, p. 145) emphasized that "these needs provide the basic elements in motivation." Moreover, he tested and confirmed a simple frustration-regression hypothesis and thus found evidence for the motivational interplay of needs and satisfaction.

Based on Alderfer's (1969) framework for the distinction of needs, this study proposes three different clusters of benefits, functional, emotional and meaning and morality. This approach focuses on employees' perceptions of self-oriented benefits in the CSR context, in line with the studies by Einwiller and Freinschlag (2016), Brockner *et al.* (2014), Peloza *et al.* (2009, 2006) and Peterson (2004). As stated above, employees may satisfy individual needs by participating in CSR activities, leading to a perception of benefits which, in turn, may explain employees' motivation to participate in CSR activities. Thus, the threefold exploration of employees' perceived benefits provides valuable insights for understanding and enhancing employees' motivation to participate in CSR activities.

What we already know about benefits and needs in the CSR context

Recent studies have often discussed CSR and employee needs without especially examining employees' perceived benefits at the micro-level (Di Giulio *et al.*, 2012; Bhattacharya *et al.*, 2008; Aguilera *et al.*, 2007). For instance, Bauman and Skitka (2012) presented four employee needs in the CSR context: safety and security, distinctiveness, belonging and meaningful existence. The authors understood these needs as four different routes by which CSR could influence employees' relationships to a given company. However, Bauman and Skitka's valuable suggestions remain a hypothetical construct without discussing perceived benefits in detail.

Two relevant studies by Bhattacharya *et al.* (2008, 2009) discussed benefits and needs in the CSR context and will be outlined briefly. Bhattacharya *et al.* (2009) developed a process model that seeks to explain stakeholders' perceptions of benefits and their related behavioral reactions. While the study focused on the organizational outcome, the authors, however, also discussed several returns for stakeholders as influences on the stakeholder-company relationship, leading to behavioral outcomes such as a greater intent to purchase company's products. The present study follows, to a large extent, the lead of Bhattacharya *et al.* (2009), and especially their basic distinction of different types of benefits.

Bhattacharya *et al.* (2008) in another study examined when and how internal CSR can be a useful marketing strategy to win the war for talent. They described four potential clusters

of benefits and needs associated with organizational CSR activities: creating opportunities for self-enhancement, improving work-personal life integration, building a bridge to the company and creating a reputation shield.

Further to the studies outlined above, this study, due to its theoretical and methodological approach and its focus on employees, makes three distinct contributions to this debate within CSR research. First, this paper extends and refines Bauman and Skitka's approach through its empirical investigation of benefits. Second, and in contrast to Bhattacharya *et al.* (2008), this research perspective does not focus on the benefits for organizations but examines employees' benefits from experiencing participatory CSR activities. Moreover, this study extends the discussion of benefits at the micro-level in the CSR literature by considering the mutual influence of varying levels of participation and employees' perceptions of benefits.

CSR participation
The aforementioned studies by Bhattacharya *et al.* (2009, 2008) do not clarify how they define participation. Furthermore, most studies on CV have adopted a behavioral approach to defining participation, particularly emphasizing active forms of support (e.g. Einwiller and Freinschlag, 2016; Brockner *et al.*, 2014; Kim *et al.*, 2014; Do Paço and Nave, 2013). Hence, participation in CV is often measured in terms of hours spent or the frequency of participation. As a consequence, Rodell (2013, p. 1279) notes that their "specific nature may not adequately capture respondents who engage in volunteering in other ways."

Furthermore, Du *et al.* (2014) emphasized that employees are a heterogonous group. This study likewise emphasizes that employees are individuals who differ in terms of their perceptions of benefits and their levels of participation. Instead of using personal characteristics to differentiate employees in the CSR context, this paper focuses on employees' varying levels of participation.

In the light of literature on citizen participation literature (e.g. Carpentier, 2016; Arnstein, 1969) and to CSR studies such as Bekmeier-Feuerhahn *et al.* (2017), Chen and Hung-Baesecke (2014), Rodell (2013) and Green and Hunton-Clarke (2003), this study argues that there is not only a behavioral form of participation in CSR activities. In their conceptual study, Bekmeier-Feuerhahn *et al.* (2017) distinguished between cognitive and behavioral kinds of CSR participation. This study follows that approach and explores varying levels of participation in CSR activities in general.

The tools commonly used in the citizen participation literature (Carpentier, 2016), various ladder diagrams, also cover a spectrum from cognitive to behavioral participation since they regard participation as a continuum. Several authors (e.g. Pretty and Shah, 1994; Arnstein, 1969) have used these diagrams to emphasize that initial stages of participation tend to be characterized by passive and indirect forms of participation, for example cognitive or informative participation. The final stages of participation, in contrast, tend to involve direct forms of participation, such as behavioral participation.

Bhattacharya *et al.* (2009, p. 262) argued that indirect and direct forms of participation can both lead to perceived benefits. However, it remains unclear which forms of participation appear internally in organizations. To discuss the relationship between varying levels of participation and perceived benefit in greater detail, this study adopts the approach of Bekmeier-Feuerhahn *et al.* (2017) and examines data according to the following two clusters of CSR participation: cognitive and behavioral levels of participation.

Methods and material
The qualitative research approach of this study offers a different and complementary means to understanding how employees experience CSR. This study applied a qualitative approach to meet the requirements of the value-oriented and therefore complex CSR discourse

(Sinkovics *et al.*, 2005; Ghauri and Grønhaug, 2002; Sykes, 1990). Thereby, this explorative research design breaks new ground by allowing the identification of differing levels of participation in CSR activities in relation to three clusters of benefits.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with employees of a large international telecommunication provider with a staff of approximately 2,000 employees at its German headquarters. There was no binding relationship with the company to influence the research process at any time. The authors of this study are members of the university and not employees of the company.

The department for corporate responsibility in this company has been organizing CSR activities such as a volunteer program for several years. All employees can spend up to two days per year on regional, social or environmental projects. The company has also implemented some ongoing CSR actions dealing with natural resources and energy (e.g. recycling, reducing water use, printers and paper waste, utilizing open offices and home offices). Other activities aim to integrate disabled people into work life, educate young professionals and create an internal social networking platform for working parents.

Respondents to the call for participation included employees working in departments, such as finance, network technology and HR. In each of these departments, respondents were chosen randomly by the first letter of their first name to create a diverse sample (in terms of age, gender, time at the company, position, etc.). The CSR department invited all of these employees via internal e-mail to participate on a voluntary basis in a scientific study, announcing that completing an interview would not take longer than one hour. The usual privacy policies were applied. All 15 interviews were held during two days in September 2014 at the German headquarters. Each interview lasted between 16 and 55 min, with an average of 31 min, as shown in Table I. All interviews were audio-recorded and later transcribed.

The questions followed a semi-structured interview guide, starting with their overall perception of the organization's CSR engagement, followed by questions concerning projects and activities and related motives. In addition, interviewees were asked about their own experiences of CSR activities and to evaluate their participation.

S. No.	Interview participants	Company Departments	Gender	Interview September 2014
1	2U	Human Resources	F	x
2	3U	Human Resources	M	x
3	4U	Corporate Affairs	M	x
4	5U	Marketing	F	x
5	6U	Marketing	M	x
6	2C	Finance	F	x
7	3C	Sales and Services	F	x
8	4C	Finance	M	x
9	5C	Network Technology	F	x
10	U7	Network Technology	M	x
11	U8	Service Technology	M	x
12	U9	Sales and Services	M	x
13	6C	Service Technology	F	x
14	7C	Digital	F	x
15	8C	Corporate Affairs	F	x
		Average call duration		31 min
		Average length of service		7.9 years

Table I.
Overview interview participants

Data analysis
With regard to the qualitative analysis, this study followed Kuckartz's method of structuring content analysis (Kuckartz, 2014), which is, in turn, based on Mayring (2014). This systematic technique is characterized by a procedural model and a category system, defining the processual steps, orders and categories of text analysis in advance. The category system of this analysis consisted of the theoretically based three benefit clusters in reference to the three ERG needs, and the two main clusters of cognitive and behavioral forms of participation. Since the model and category processing is characterized as an iterative procedure, the detailed category and code system included both deductive codes from topics in the interview guide and inductive content-driven codes.

According to Guest *et al.* (2006, pp. 78-79), a complete and expressive codebook can be created after 12 interviews. To strengthen the reliability of coding, different teams of students and supervisors simultaneously coded transcripts and compared all codes. This procedure is meant to reduce subjectivity and to strengthen the accuracy of all codes and subcodes (for a discussion of validity in qualitative research, see Andersen and Skaates, 2004).

This study focuses on the perspective of interviewees at the individual level and their behavior in an organizational setting. In the first step, each interview was analyzed. In the second step, all interviews were compared and analyzed as a group, discussing patterns in the relationships between benefits and varying levels of participation. The applied research perspective and analyzing process were guided by the three aforementioned research questions. Thus, the results below first focus on the different kinds of benefits employees perceived from participatory CSR activities. The second paragraph discusses the varying levels of participation; and, building on those results, the discussion section illuminates the relationship between those four levels of participation and employees' three perceived benefit clusters.

Results
Identification of benefits perceived by employees
In reference to Alderfer's (1969), three ERG needs and following the lead of Bhattacharya *et al.* (2009), this study proposes functional, emotional and meaning and morality benefit clusters. Bhattacharya *et al.* (2009) distinguished between functional, psychosocial and values benefits for a broad range of stakeholders. Furthermore, they assumed a causal connection and hierarchy between those three benefit clusters. For instance, psychosocial benefits are understood as consequences of perceived functional benefits. And values, the third benefit cluster, is based on psychosocial benefits and is defined as some form of overall result of CSR (Bhattacharya *et al.*, 2009, p. 263). Due to its qualitative research design and its focus on employees, this study conceptualizes and enhances the benefit clusters from Bhattacharya *et al.* according to the data. Thus, the approach taken here is explorative and does not rely on assumed hierarchies or causal dependencies. For instance, and in contrast to the value benefits from Bhattacharya *et al.*, the meaning and morality benefit cluster could be identified when interviewees expressed having shared values with the organization, but also when they perceived their horizons had been broadened. Those benefits can be perceived without a necessary connection to emotional benefits. The structuring content analysis of this study, thus, leads to functional, emotional and meaning and morality benefits as independent and not causally related benefit clusters.

The results of this study indicated that interviewees perceive a broad variety of self-oriented benefits. Most of the benefits mentioned by interviewees could be related to one of the three clusters: functional benefits, emotional benefits and meaning and morality benefits:

(1) Functional benefits can be defined as the acquisition and development of different skills, such as interpersonal skills, or as opportunities for career profiling or a better work-life integration, e.g. "Of course, I am at work a lot,and on the other

hand I have my private life, and so time is tight and they made it relatively easy for me to support it (CSR activity)" (3C: 33). However, one interviewee also stated material benefits: "they (i.e. the company) pay your flight and your hotel. They also pay the attendance fee of € 2,000.00 and all extra costs of participation" (5U: 60). Other tangible, functional benefits were mentioned only a few times. These included, for example, the opportunity to buy recycled computer equipment at low prices. However, there are functional benefits that could be perceived as both tangible and intangible, such as reduced barriers to sustainable behavior in the workplace. To summarize, functional benefits can be described using objective criteria and are characterized by a purpose. As indicated by the responses of interviewees, these benefits do not seem to have an interpersonal dimension and they do not require high levels of involvement in sustainability. Furthermore, functional benefits are related to the workplace setting and, hence, pertain to employees as members of an organization and not to employees as private persons. In contrast to the emotional benefit cluster discussed in the following section, functional benefits were mostly described by interviewees in a matter-of-fact tone, and these benefits did not seem to require emotional involvement.

(2) Emotional benefits such as pleasure or pride are different emotions felt by employees when they discuss the company's CSR activities or when they participate in CSR activities, e.g. "But it really feels right that the company is engaged in CSR" (2U: 41), or, "Well, it makes me proud to work for such a company" (3 C:29). Interviewees mentioned emotions which varied dramatically in terms of their intensity. For example, some were quite enthusiastic when they described the general CSR engagement of the company, the CSR activity, the cooperation with CSR partners, the outcomes of this kind of cooperation, or experiences as members of what they portrayed as a unified team. This strengthened team spirit expressed by employees emphasized a feeling of relatedness, which is an emotional benefit, although a strong team spirit may also be considered a functional benefit. The interviewees also indicated that they felt proud of participatory CSR activities; therefore, it was important for them that their contributions in the CSR contexts were recognized and valued by the company and other employees. Thus, during the description of emotional benefits, interviewees seem to refer to themselves both as members of the organization and as private persons.

(3) Meaning and morality benefits are associated with intangible, abstract meanings and moral values at an individual meta-level. According to one of the respondents (8U: 29), "Here in this company, there are also people who like to help as well, who enjoy contributing to society." Meaning and morality benefits were often mentioned in responses to questions dealing with a meaningful life in general and valuing congruence in the company in particular. One interviewee stated, "And these are topics, where it is not just about doing a stadium tour with disabled people or where you have your own interests. It is about intuition and sensitivity, about leaving my own comfort zone" (3U: 69). The results indicated that several meaning and morality benefits, e.g. a positive self-perception due to CSR, tended to broaden interviewees' horizons, and personal development in particular was a perceived benefit not related to the organization. In contrast to functional and emotional benefits, employees perceived meaning and morality benefits mainly from a private viewpoint and not as employees.

Varying levels of participation in CSR activities
The results not only indicate that interviewees perceive a wide range of benefits in the context of CSR activities, but they also point to differing levels of participation. Further to the aforementioned differentiation into cognitive and behavioral forms of participation, data

analysis extended this twofold distinction by identifying four different levels of participation: no or low level (group A), passive level (group B), active level (group C) and enthusiastic level (group D) of participation.

Interviewees belonging to the first group A did not participate in any CSR activity and did not intend to do so in the near future. They had no or very poor knowledge of the CSR activities of the company and showed very little interest in CSR in general. Interviewees in the second group B tended to prefer indirect participation. In other words, they were usually not directly involved in CSR activities but could at least imagine doing so in the future. Other interviewees participated indirectly, for example, by talking with colleagues about their CSR experiences. This kind of participation is primarily cognitive, i.e. a person may consider CSR participation and different possibilities for participation, conditions, costs and consequences. Interviewees belonging to the third group C participated in CSR activities, but in contrast to those in the last group D, they were characterized by lower levels of emotional and cognitive involvement. The last group D was highly involved when it came to CSR in general and activities by the company in particular. Interviewees in this group had a sophisticated knowledge of different aspects of CSR and were familiar with all of the CSR activities at the company. In this group, there were high levels of enthusiasm and of support for CSR activities and similar efforts outside their professional lives. The next section discusses the relationship between perceived benefits and varying levels of participation in order to contribute to the debate on employees' underlying motivation to participate in CSR activities.

Discussion
Benefits and varying levels of participation: both sides of the story
Thus far, few researchers, (Slack *et al.*, 2015; Bauman and Skitka, 2012; Bhattacharya *et al.*, 2008) have investigated benefits in relation to varying levels of CSR participation. As already suggested and shown in Figure 1, the benefits mentioned by participants can be grouped into functional, emotional and meaning and morality benefit clusters. Furthermore, the varying levels of participation can be clustered into four groups (A–D).
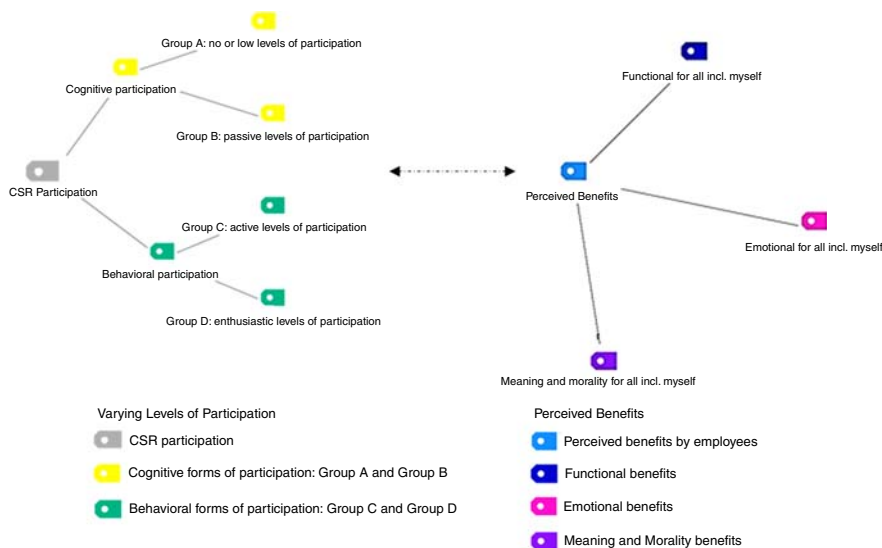
Figure 1.
Perceived benefits
and varying levels
of participation:
a coevolutionary
perspective

The results may indicate that perceived benefits and the varying levels of participation within groups A–D influence one another. It should be note here that further research is needed to examine this assumption. As already stated, this paper does not aim to prove causality but to establish possible causal influences through use of a coevolutionary lens, referring to Kallis and Norgaard's (2010, p. 691) social coevolution mechanism. Figure 1 indicates this coevolutionary perspective with the double-sided arrow. Thus, varying levels of participation evolve together with employees' perception of benefits in the context of participatory CSR activities, emphasizing a reciprocal evolution of action and perception without claiming any causal direction. In reference to Bhattacharya *et al.* (2009), however, the relationships between benefits and participation will be presented from the perspective of varying levels of participation.

From a limited to a more nuanced perspective of benefits

Interviewees belonging to the first group A showing no or low levels of participation tended to have a very limited perception of benefits. In other words, members of this group seemed to perceive only single benefit clusters, e.g. either functional or emotional benefits. The results indicated that the number of benefits perceived by employees steadily increased from groups A–D. The latter group mentioned functional, emotional and meaning and morality benefits, whereas the interviewees in the other three groups tended to address benefits belonging to one but no more than two clusters. It is, however, important to emphasize that even interviewees who do not consider participating in CSR activities (group A) and do not have any personal experience in this respect also perceive benefits when it comes to CSR activities at the company. In other words, even employees with no or limited prior experience of CSR activities may benefit from them because, for example, the perceived external image resulting from CSR activities may also turn out to be an emotional benefit for these employees as they feel proud to work for this company. This suggests that the perception of benefits does not *per se* lead to a greater willingness to participate in CSR activities.

Furthermore, this study showed that the responses of interviewees become more and more detailed from passive participants (group B) to those who participated in CSR activities (group C). The higher the levels of participation, the more likely it seems that employees perceive a wider range of benefits and that they are able to describe these in greater detail.

The more employees participate, the more they may reflect on CSR approaches

The results indicated that the more the interviewees were involved in CSR activities, the more likely it was that they were knowledgeable concerning sustainability topics in general and organizational CSR activities in particular. Interviewees who never or hardly ever participated in these activities were often aware of their company's CSR activities, but even those in group B tended to have no or only very little knowledge of sustainability or CSR issues. Members of group C and D often said that participating in CSR activities had allowed them to broaden their horizons. They also emphasized that they had begun to reflect on several issues related to CSR, such as new approaches to facilitate the integration of disabled persons in the company. Interviewees belonging to group D explained that they had spent considerable time reflecting on individual attitudes and behaviors, for instance, possible strategies to encourage colleagues in their CSR efforts or how to further reduce waste. The responses indicated that, in regards to CSR issues, there might be a marked increase in the levels of knowledge and cognitive and emotional investment from groups A to D. These insights are, thus, relevant to research and practice in terms of, e.g. communicating CSR activities appropriately to different target groups.

Implications

The results of this study indicate that employees perceive different kinds of benefits in relation to their participation in CSR activities. As already suggested, this study conceptualizes the relationship between varying levels of participation and employees' perceived benefits as a coevolutionary process. Thus, it is important to note that the description of this relationship in the previous paragraph is illustrative and could also be presented from the perspective of employees' perceived benefits.

However, organizations should also be aware of the full range of potential benefits that could be perceived by employees and of the fact that even employees showing no or only low levels of participation may still perceive certain benefits. Thus, employees' perceptions of benefits in relation to varying levels of participation cannot be described by "What you do is what you get." Several participants pointed out that they perceived these activities to be quite effective in combination with entry programs, as they facilitated the integration of new staff into teams. New employees may be able to satisfy certain needs by participating in CSR activities. For this reason, companies would be well advised to introduce employees as early as they can to these kinds of activities, as doing so might not only increase participation in CSR activities, but also have other advantages, e.g. smoother staff integration.

Specific studies such as Mazzei (2014) and Mee and Clewes (2004) have demonstrated the possible influence of corporate communications on employees' behavior. Hence, if organizations apply the insights of this study to improve target-group specific communication, this could foster employee motivation to participate in CSR activities. This study offers several useful suggestions for effective internal CSR communications and can be discussed in relation to relevant literature, such as Dhanesh (2012) and Uusi-Rauva and Nurkka (2010). Corporate communication departments aware of these benefit clusters can communicate the returns of CSR participation to appeal to specific groups. As discussed above, employees characterized by no or low levels of participation tended to pay little attention to or show little interest in CSR issues, and their perception of benefits was, by and large, rather limited. In this case, a communicative approach stressing differentiated benefits would probably not be effective. In contrast, employees characterized by an active or enthusiastic level of participation would most likely appreciate detailed CSR communication, as they are characterized by a high level of reflection and tend to have a nuanced perception of benefits.

Referring to a general corporate sustainability approach, the findings of this study indicate that participatory CSR activities can increase employees' awareness of social and environmental issues and potentially lead to changes in both attitude and behavior, promoting sustainability within the company.

Limitations and further research

The findings of this study are limited because they are based on responses of employees working for only one company. For this reason, it will be necessary to conduct follow-up studies in other organizational contexts to investigate whether the findings presented here can be generalized. It is also important to note here that the company in which the study was conducted has been very committed to CSR and offers a wide range of CSR activities. Future studies also need consider companies that do not show this kind of commitment to CSR. It is possible that employees may perceive benefits if the company has only recently adopted a CSR approach.

Few studies (Sekar and Dyaram, 2017; Rodell, 2013) have discussed the necessity of extending the understanding of participation in the CSR context. The approach taken in this study, particularly by taking the micro-level together with the general perspective of employees, has led to a fourfold understanding of participation. Thus, this study may intensify scholarly attention toward individual perceptions and actions from a

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coevolutionary perspective in the CSR realm. The assumption of a coevolutionary relationship with circular causality has not yet been tested. Therefore, future studies should clarify the question of causality in this research context.

This study explores the relationship of benefits and varying levels of participation without examining the perceived costs of CSR participation. Consumer-oriented sustainability research has already examined costs for consumers who behave sustainably (Jackson, 2005). Future studies should likewise examine employees' perceived investments.

Moreover, employee-oriented research could investigate the perception of the perceived benefits of team leaders as distinct from team members. This kind of investigation could yield new insights concerning the different needs and benefits of employees depending on their status in an organization. Future research could also examine the values held by those subjects who associated CSR activity with manifold benefits. This research could, furthermore, explore the importance of culture, and indeed different cultures, on participation in CSR.

Glossary

CSR	Corporate Social Responsibility
CV	Corporate Volunteering
e.g.	Exempli gratia
ERG	Existence Relatedness Growth
i.e.	Id est
etc.	Et cetera

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