

DOCTORAL THESIS

Learning from Interactions and Conversations: A Communicative Constitutive Perspective on Organizational Social Responsibility

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ABSTRACT

Researchers have increasingly studied the functions that communication plays in the implementation of organizational social responsibility (hereinafter (C)SR). With studies primarily viewing communication as a tool for conveying information, a mechanism for boosting relationships, and a resource for fulfilling planned objectives, this dissertation emphasizes the need to more explicitly spotlight the performativity of communication in (C)SR research.

By building on the emergent literature that adopts a constitutive view of communication to investigate (C)SR, this dissertation maintains that communication should be conceived as the cornerstone for understanding and explaining how (C)SR is established and perpetuated in and by organizations. Though finding increasing support, the propositions of these works embracing a constitutive view of communication necessitate a strengthening of the argumentation based on data analyses from concrete (C)SR situations. Concomitantly, some of the concepts suggested by these studies require a deepening of theorization.

Accordingly, this research engages in developing empirically-informed observations that can enrich the conceptualizations of these studies, while adding conceptual, methodological, and practice-centered depth to the contributions that they suggest for the works that adopt functionalist and mechanistic views of communication to investigate (C)SR. It does so by focusing on interactions between (C)SR-makers through the adoption of a ventriloquial perspective on communication. That is, a conceptual and methodological lens that has the potential to unveil how the various elements of (C)SR situations make a difference in (C)SR discussions.

Based on material collected during fieldwork in a cooperative network, this work embarks on a ventriloquial analysis of conversations, i.e., a set of analytical steps to unpack which voices manifest, how that occurs, and what role they take on in interactions. The analyses conducted reason upon the arguments that suggest (C)SR as (a) a polyphony of voices, (b) a process characterized by conflictual situations, and (c) a dynamic interplay of actions, aspirations, and values that define organizations and their boundaries as socially responsible actors.

This dissertation provides novel understanding on (C)SR by concomitantly studying which voices matter in within-organization negotiations on (C)SR topics, how those voices intervene, and what effects they engender. Theoretically, this research contributes to the studies that adopt a constitutive view of communication to theorize on (C)SR by investigating which types of voices and tensions surface in interactions (and how and with what effects), and how practitioners (and their organizations) respond to them. It also does this by grounding the character of (C)SR in the relationships between univocality and polyvocality, and illustrating the emergence of theme-specific oppositions and dynamics of “othering” narration in the intersection between (C)SR and the construction of organizational boundaries. The proposed observations show value to integrate the propositions that studies following

functionalist and mechanistic views of communication cultivate regarding the nature, conceptualizations, and ways of approaching (C)SR and its making in organizations. They also bring insights that have implications for a ventriloquial perspective on organizing. Practically, this research suggests mechanisms of open dialogue and the creation of mutual understanding, which could support practitioners in dealing with the conflicts that occur when planning (C)SR.