COMMUNICATION &LANGUAGE at work

Towards issue centric stakeholder relations and sustainable communication in corporate community engagement and employee volunteering

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Abstract

Corporate community engagement and employee volunteering are established fields of corporate social responsibility research and practice. Community engagement and employee volunteering aim at enhancing corporation-stakeholder relationships prioritising specific corporate centric, dyadic relations to communities and employees respectively. These dyadic relationships privilege the corporation as the active communicator and decision maker thereby marginalising communities and employees as passive receivers of corporately designed decisions and meaning. In light of existing critiques of corporate centricity, the article's purpose is to reorient the corporate centric stakeholder approach in community engagement and employee volunteering based on networked, issue centric approaches. The methodology of theory adaptation is applied whereby domain theory (community engagement and employee volunteering literatures) is problematised and reoriented using alternative theoretical conceptualisations referred to as method theory (developments in stakeholder research within corporate social responsibility scholarship). Firstly, it is demonstrated how community engagement and employee volunteering literatures place the corporation at the centre of dyadic relationships to communities and employees respectively. Second, by overlapping community engagement and employee volunteering a corporate community engagement volunteering (CCEV) framework is constructed highlighting corporate centricity and allowing for its problematisation with reference to corporate social responsibility literature. Third, developments in corporate social responsibility stakeholder research are drawn upon in order to reorient the framework placing the issue (and not the corporation) at the centre as the basis for promoting joint decision-making and sustainable communication between stakeholders engaged in corporate community engagement volunteering. The article contributes to community engagement and employee volunteering literatures by reconceptualising community and employee stakeholders and provides researchers and practitioners with a networked approach where the issue, and not the corporation, inspires relationship building. Issue centric stakeholder relations are argued to provide a foundation for sustainable communication practices in which all stakeholders are recognised as active decision and meaning makers.

1 Introduction

In this paper, we address stakeholder relations and sustainable communication at the intersection of corporate community engagement and employee volunteering. Corporations seek societal legitimation and act as arbiters of citizenship by building and maintaining relationships with diverse stakeholders through corporate social responsibility (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2004; Crane et al., 2014; Rendtorff, 2019). This includes an array of different initiatives such as community engagement and employee volunteering aimed at enhancing stakeholder relationships with communities and employees respectively (Peloza & Shang, 2011). Whereas community engagement is aimed at initiatives for societal betterment involving the communities where increased wellbeing is sought (Bowen et al., 2008; Dare et al., 2014), employee volunteering is broadly understood as employees volunteering their time and/or skills for societal activities which are planned, supported or encouraged by their employer (Gatignon-Turnau & Mignonac, 2015; Grant, 2012).

Community engagement and employee volunteering are frequently described as win-win, or even win-win-win, situations, benefitting the involved corporations, communities and employees (Alchuna, 2015; Caligiuri et al., 2013; Cook et al., 2023; McCallum et al., 2013). Broadly speaking, corporations are said to benefit from building reputation and legitimacy internally and externally; communities gain resources (in the form of donations, volunteer expertise, knowledge and labour) which they otherwise would not have access to; and employees benefit by increased wellbeing from putting their skills and knowledge to good use in helping others (e.g. Cook & Burchell, 2018; Grant, 2012). In addition to the benefits assigned to each stakeholder, initiatives are also associated with contributing to solving and mitigating societal problems in general (e.g. Gatignon-Turnau & Mignonac, 2015; Glińska-Neweś, 2022).

Although the idea of a win-win-win situation suggests potential benefits to all stakeholders, as well as to society, both community engagement and employee volunteering literatures tend to emphasise corporate benefits and to privilege the corporation as the strategic initiator of relationship building (Bevan & Werhane, 2010; Gond & Matten, 2007; McLennan & Banks, 2019). This view on stakeholder relations is rooted in classical stakeholder theory positioning the corporation at the centre of dyadic relationships to its various stakeholders (e.g. Freeman, 1984). The so-called 'hub and spoke' approach has previously been problematised for treating stakeholders as means to furthering corporate ends (Steurer, 2006); ignoring stakeholder agency and overlooking vulnerable stakeholders (Roloff, 2008); as well as externalising or marginalising stakeholders (Werhane, 2011). Thus, it implies an instrumental, functionalist view on strategy, management and communication as purely focused on promoting corporate goals and objectives (cf. Falkheimer & Heide, 2018; Zerfass et al., 2018).

Such corporate centricity potentially prevents corporations and other stakeholders from engaging in shared decision- and meaning-making through sustainable communication practices in order to benefit not only corporations, but also people and society at large (cf. Ditlevsen & Johansen, 2024). A sustainable approach to communication argues in favour of acknowledging all stakeholders as active decision and meaning makers. Accordingly, it can be argued that community engagement and employee volunteering's focus on communities and employees as resources to be used in the achievement of corporate goals and objectives needs to be readdressed if intentions of benefitting all stakeholders are to be realised. Moreover, if community engagement and employee volunteering activities are to secure corporate legitimacy and citizenship, they need to be oriented towards achieving greater societal goods, rather than solely steering for corporate goals and objectives (Gond & Matten, 2007; Rendtorff, 2019). Within corporate social responsibility, the betterment of societal causes is frequently described as 'walking the talk' suggesting that corporations must match their communication efforts and their actions (Ali Gull et al., 2023; Schoeneborn et al., 2020). Consequently, if the promises of creating win-win-win situations, which are embedded in community engagement and employee volunteering, are to be realised, corporations need to embrace a stakeholder conceptualisation that focuses equally on all stakeholders. Such a view can be linked to process approaches to communication where the messy, omnidirectional nature of communication recognises all stakeholders – e.g. corporations, communities and employees – as active actors with decision- and meaning-making capabilities (Gulbrandsen & Just, 2020; van Ruler, 2018).

In light of the above, the purpose of this conceptual article is to reorient the corporate centric stakeholder approach in community engagement and employee volunteering, with its focus on corporate self-interests, by way of a networked approach focused on societal issues. Such conceptualisation matters since the theoretical and practical understandings of stakeholders affect how researchers and practitioners orient themselves (Werhane, 2018). The contribution, thus, lies in offering an alternative mental model (Werhane, 2011; 2018) for how stakeholders are addressed within corporate social responsibility initiatives involving communities and employees in order to establish groundwork for sustainable communication practices in this particular context.

The article is structured as follows: first, we address the methodology that informs the re-conceptualisation of stakeholder thinking within community engagement and employee volunteering. Second, we provide an overview of how stakeholders and stakeholder relationships are addressed within community engagement and employee volunteering literatures respectively. Third, building on the overview of the two streams of literature, we construct an integrative stakeholder corporate community engagement volunteering framework and problematise its corporate centric nature. Fourth, we offer an alternative mental model for conceptualising stakeholders by reorienting the framework from a dyadic, corporate centric perspective to a networked, issue centric perspective. Finally, we discuss the reoriented framework's potential implications for research and practice in the context of sustainable communication, as well as its possible limitations, before offering our conclusions.

2 Theory adaptation as a conceptual research methodology

The main purpose of the article is, as mentioned above, to reorient stakeholder relations within community engagement and employee volunteering scholarship from corporate centricity to issue centricity by way of networked approaches to stakeholder theory. Thus, the article is based on theory adaptation which is a methodological template that can be applied in conceptual papers aimed at revising existing scholarship by "introducing alternative frames of reference to propose a novel perspective on an extant conceptualization" (Jaakkola, 2020, p. 23).

The point of departure for theory adaptation is a problematisation of a particular theory or concept (Jaakkola, 2020; Lukka & Vinnari, 2014). Problematisation can be understood as challenging the value of a theory and exploring its weaknesses and problems in order to open it up and "point out the need and possible directions for rethinking and developing the theory" (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2007, p. 1265-6). Adaptation through problematisation involves domain and method theory. Domain theory is "a particular set of knowledge on a substantive topic area situated in a field or domain" (Lukka & Vinnari, 2014, p. 1309) in this case, the community engagement and employee volunteering literatures' corporate centric conceptualisations of stakeholders. Method theory is a "meta-level conceptual system for studying the substantive issue(s) of the domain theory at hand" (Lukka & Vinnari, 2014, p. 1309). The method theory is located in developments of stakeholder thinking within corporate social responsibility scholarship which point to replacing the corporation as the centre of stakeholder models with the societal issue that brings stakeholders together (e.g. Bevan & Werhane, 2010; Roloff, 2008; Werhane, 2011). The role of the method theory is to provide new insights to the domain theory, i.e., "to expand, organize, or offer a new or alternative explanation of concepts and relationships" (Jaakkola, 2020, p. 20).

The methodological template results in a three-step procedure (cf. Jaakkola, 2020). First, we present an overview of stakeholder conceptualisations within community engagement and employee volunteering in order to elaborate on the initial claim that stakeholders are viewed from within a corporate centric logic. Second, we problematise corporate centricity arguing that it marginalises stakeholders and stands in the way of corporations doing good by promoting the corporations' own interests ahead of societal and stakeholder interests, and consequently, also blocks the implementation of sustainable communication practices. Third, we propose an alternative perspective by drawing on networked approaches to stakeholder relations in which the corporate centric understanding is replaced by an issue centred view arguing that issue centricity is necessary for sustainable communication to take place within community-oriented initiatives involving employees.

3 Stakeholders in corporate community engagement and employee volunteering

Community engagement and employee volunteering litteratures vary in their definitions, understandings and stakeholder focus (Dare et al., 2014; do Paço & Nave, 2013; Grant, 2012). Community engagement refers to initiatives directed towards (g)local communities. Centred on the corporation-community relationship, the corporation seeks to build and maintain associations, belonging and mutual dependency with community stakeholders (McLennan & Banks, 2019). Engagement activities may entail anything from financial donations for short term community projects (e.g. providing funds for fixing the playground at a local park) to establishing long term partnerships (e.g. setting up a programme to combat obesity in local schools). Employee volunteering, on the other hand, refers to initiatives where volunteer work is encouraged and facilitated by an employer (Dreesbach-Bundy & Scheck, 2017). Volunteering activities may involve putting work related skills to use (e.g. bank employees tutoring pupils on personal finance) or donating labour (e.g. employees volunteering in soup kitchens or helping to cleanup beaches). Similar to engagement activities, volunteer activities vary from isolated initiatives to extended commitments and collaborations.

Although community engagement and employee volunteering are sometimes treated as separate initiatives within corporate social responsibility scholarship, concrete activities tend to bridge the two areas meaning that a specific activity can equally be seen as community engagement and employee volunteering: an employer facilitated initiative to encourage bank employees to participate in educating school children on personal finance can equally be seen as employee volunteering and community engagement as it equally promotes corporate bonds to employees and community members. Moreover, the two sets of literature reference each other. In community engagement literature, volunteering is seen as an engagement activity (Brammer & Millington, 2003) or as a particular type of engagement (Bowen et al., 2010; Gold et al., 2018; van der Voort et al., 2009), and in employee volunteering literature, community is mentioned as a potential beneficiary of volunteering initiatives (Grant, 2012). However, the main relationship is still considered to be between the corporation and employees as seen in an emphasis on recruitment, motivation, socialisation and identification (e.g. do Paço & Nave, 2013; Pajo & Lee, 2011; Peloza & Hassay, 2006).

In order to investigate how central stakeholders are conceptualised in extant scholarship and provide a basis for problematisation of the stakeholder conceptualisations, a narrative review (Juntunen & Lehenkari, 2021) of community engagement and employee volunteering literatures is carried out. The aim is to generate an overview of stakeholder understandings, not to conduct an exhaustive review of the literatures' content and scope. The two streams of literature are reviewed in relation to the questions: how are community engagement and employee volunteering defined? Who are the central stakeholders identified within community engagement and employee volunteering? What relationships connect the stakeholders? And which roles are attributed to them? The literature has been identified in academic search databases through searches centred on 'employee volunteering' and 'corporate community engagement' and affiliated concepts e.g. 'corporate volunteering' and 'corporate community involvement'. Based on their abstracts, articles were subsequently included or excluded from the review based on whether or not they explicitly dealt with stakeholder and stakeholder relations.

3.1 Corporate community engagement

Community engagement is a growing field and practice focused on corporations engaging their communities by providing them with information, time or money (Bowen et al., 2008; Deigh et al., 2016; Delannon et al., 2016; Denni & Cadeaux, 2014; Lorenz et al., 2016). Defined as "involving communities in decision-making and in the planning, design, governance and delivery of services" (Swainston & Summerbell, 2008, p. 11), it aims to (co)create solutions to local, regional and societal-level problems (Bowen et al., 2008). Thus, seeking to potentially mitigate negative social and environmental effects from corporate operations (Gold et al., 2018). Community engagement draws on multiple research areas including development studies, cross sector partnership studies and civic engagement studies. The literature on community engagement can be characterised by two main foci: (1) Community engagement in terms of the pattern of activities and level of intensity invested by the corporation towards the community, i.e. literature that seeks to map various forms of engagement and construct typologies (Bowen et al., 2010; Brenner & Manice, 2011; Hess et al., 2002; Sharmin et al., 2014). And (2) community engagement as a managerial practice drawing on corporate community leadership and stakeholder management, i.e. literature that places community engagement in the context of stakeholder theory in order to address managerial aspects (Bowen et al., 2008; Dare et al., 2014; Deigh et al., 2016; Kemp, 2010; McLennon & Banks, 2019; van der Voort et al., 2009).

Community engagement scholarship addresses different stakeholders including communities and beneficiaries, nonprofits and employees. However, the stakeholders and the relationships they form with the corporation are not addressed equally. The corporation–community relationship is central. The community stakeholder is characterised in both concrete terms (e.g. as a geographical location) and in abstract terms (e.g. as an interest group) (Dare et al., 2014). Brenner and Manice (2011, p. 88) thus define community as "a group of people united by least one but perhaps more than one common characteristic, including geography, ethnicity, shared interests, values, experiences or traditions."

A key focus area within community engagement literature is, as mentioned above, to map various forms or types of engagement. One such typology is Bowen et al.'s (2010) continuum of community engagement. Here, the corporation-community relationship is conceptualised on a continuum from transaction via transition to transformation (Bowen et al., 2010). Transactional relationships consist in providing information, time or donations to a community, i.e. an occasional referral of resources from the corporation (e.g. funding local community events, donating to urban regeneration projects or simply informing communities about corporate operations that may affect them). Transitional relationships are characterised by increasing dialogue and interaction between corporation and community (e.g. setting up fora for discussing corporate operations and addressing potential sponsorships or other forms of support). Transformational relationships integrate mutual learning, sense-making and co-creation into interactive collaboration processes and alliances. Such relationships are visible in the establishment of projects with shared responsibility and leadership (e.g. a forestation corporation joining forces with the local community to set up a programme dedicated to promoting sustainable forestry and replanting, thereby mitigating the societal impact of its operations on the local population).

Activities may look similar across the different relationship types but are distinguishable based on the role assigned to the community. Where a transactional relationship strategy views the community as a passive receiver of corporate resources focusing on one-way transmissions from corporation to community, a transformational strategy views the community as an active, empowered co-developer and instigator of initiatives. Moreover, Delannon et al. (2016) have suggested that a fourth, more flexible and adaptive, integral strategy can be identified in which corporations draw on all three strategies, i.e. concrete initiatives may equally involve transactional, transitional and transformational exchanges. Regardless of the strategy or strategies chosen, the goals of community engagement are usually defined as community development and empowerment (e.g. Dare et al., 2014). However, the dark side of community engagement initiatives reveals practices where communities are frequently co-opted by corporations, potentially looking to further corporate goals, leading to an erosion of communities' freedom of choice (Maher, 2019). Maher (2019) shows how a corporation in its formal initiatives uses both transitional and transformational strategies (e.g. hosting meetings and creating joint committees), while simultaneously through informal activities engages in unethical attempts to prevent community involvement (e.g. paying off local community leaders and hindering debates from taking place).

Nonprofits are infrequently mentioned in the extant literature. However, a few scholars have addressed nonprofit organisations, e.g. Bowen et al. (2008), Deigh et al. (2016), Seitanidi and Ryan (2007) and van der Voort et al. (2009) where various roles – i.e., the nonprofit as beneficiary, intermediary and partner – are tentatively addressed. The different roles assigned to nonprofits have inspired Seitanidi and Ryan (2007) to arrange corporation-nonprofit relationships on a continuum from philanthropy via transaction to integration. Drawing on a classification developed by Austin (2000), the continuum suggests various positions assigned to nonprofits ranging from passive recipients of donations (philanthropy) to partners in an equal collaboration (integration) (Seitanidi & Ryan, 2007). In that sense, the continuum mirrors the corporation-community relationship strategies introduced above as it moves from asymmetrical, unidirectional relations to symmetrical, two-way relations. When nonprofits are seen as targets for philanthropy, emphasis is placed on how they can benefit from community engagement and the involvement of corporations (e.g. Bowen et al., 2008; van der Voort et al., 2009). As an example, it has been suggested that community engagement activities can be a way for nonprofits to get access to capital and other resources, e.g. labour, or to exploit corporate networks in order to secure additional resources (Bowen et al., 2008). In addition to being described as beneficiaries of corporate community involvement, nonprofits are sometimes seen as intermediaries between corporations and communities (Deigh et al., 2016) i.e., as instrumental connectors rather than stakeholders in their own right. It is thus suggested that corporations may lack access to community stakeholders and therefore need nonprofits to facilitate community relations. In addition, it is argued that corporations, in some contexts and situations, may not possess the knowledge needed in order to help

community stakeholders and therefore may need the expertise of the nonprofits (Deigh et al., 2016). Finally, it is argued that nonprofits can be seen as partners with an emphasis on profit-nonprofit cooperation in joint efforts to tackle shared societal issues (Seitanidi & Ryan, 2007).

In community engagement, employee volunteers are addressed as one of the resources offered to communities (and nonprofits) by corporations (Bowen et al., 2010; Muthuri, 2008; van der Voort et al., 2009). Except from case studies on concrete initiatives where employee volunteers are articulated as the main drivers of community operations (e.g., Vo, 2016), the time and commitment of employees are seldom acknowledged within community engagement literature, and only a handful of scholars addresses the employee volunteer perspective within community engagement (e.g. Bowen et al., 2010; Brammer and Millington, 2003; van der Voort et al., 2009). Whereas community engagement downplays the employees, their stakes are highlighted within employee volunteering as will be explicated below.

3.2 Employee volunteering

Employee volunteering, also known as 'corporate volunteering', 'corporate sponsored volunteering' or 'corporate supported volunteering' (Gatignon-Turnau & Mignonac, 2015; Pajo & Lee, 2011; Tschirhart & St. Clair, 2008), represents a complex interface of different disciplines including organisational behaviour, psychology, sociology, marketing, corporate governance and nonprofit management (Rodell et al., 2015). This interdisciplinarity results in a number of definitions. However, it is widely accepted that employee volunteering involves "giving one's time, knowledge, or skills as part of a community service, outreach, or social responsibility activity on company time without additional compensation or direct personal remuneration" (Grant, 2012, pp. 592-593). As employee volunteering is defined broadly, it encompasses a wide range of different types of activities (as mentioned above).

Three main streams of literature can be identified (Johansen & Nielsen, 2018): (1) employee volunteering as a particular type of corporate social responsibility initiative (Aluchna, 2015; Muthuri et al., 2009; Pajo & Lee, 2011; Plewa et al., 2015; Saz-Gil et al., 2020). This body of literature positions employee volunteering within the wider context of corporate social responsibility and focuses on how it allows corporations and employees to make joint communal, social or environmental improvements. (2) Employee volunteering as a particular volunteer type (Lee, 2001). Here, employee volunteering is not conceptualised as a corporate strategy, as within the first stream of literature, but linked to volunteerism where volunteers commit themselves to the formalised, public and proactive donation of their time to benefit persons, groups or organisations (Snyder & Omoto, 2009; Wilson, 2000). And (3) employee volunteering as representative of a unique partnership or cross-sector relation between corporations and nonprofits (Samuel et al., 2016; O'Connor & Shumate, 2014). In the final literature stream, employee volunteering is approached from within partnership literature, and thus focus is placed on how employees, as volunteers, foster connections between profit and nonprofit organisations.

Employee volunteering activities can be characterised according to type (Peloza et al., 2009). Extra-organisational volunteerism refers to activities carried out outside the workplace with no employer involvement (e.g. individuals spending part of their free time helping out at the local soup kitchen or at the local sports centre during weekends). Inter-organisational volunteerism occurs within the workplace, but corporate goals are secondary to the volunteer activity and employer support is passive (e.g. employees being allowed to spend a fixed number of paid working hours per month volunteering at the local soup kitchen or where they may otherwise choose). Here, the (employee) volunteer acts as a facilitator, or boundary-spanner, between the corporation and the nonprofits and/or the cause as the employee has freedom to choose if and where to volunteer. Intra-organisational volunteerism refers to initiatives where the employer develops the volunteer opportunity and selects the nonprofits and/or cause. While extra- and inter-organisational activities are driven by the employee, intra-organisational volunteerism is a strategic, corporate initiative (Peloza et al., 2009) where employee volunteering is defined as "employed individuals giving time […] during a planned activity" (Rodell, 2015, p. 58). These volunteer programmes give employees the possibility to join activities that are pre-scheduled by their employer (e.g. employees being given the opportunity to volunteer at the local soup kitchen on a specific day or to join in other fixed employer-led activities such as mentor programmes targeted at disadvantaged youths).

By deciding which causes, communities, issues and/or activities to support and how to manage volunteer programmes vis-à-vis employees, corporations take a lead position in employee volunteering. Besides altruistic motives, corporate agendas are connected to internal management areas i.e., human resources (job recruitment and retention) and/or to external management areas i.e., citizenship, legitimacy, reputation and social capital (Aluchna, 2015; Brammer & Millington, 2005; Johansen & Nielsen, 2018; Rodell et al., 2017; Sekar & Dyaram, 2017). In short, corporations are frequently said to engage in employee volunteering as a strategic corporate social responsibility investment that can strengthen the role of business in society (Carroll & Shabana, 2010; Glińska-Neweś & Górka, 2020) and align workplace relations and processes with corporate needs (Barkay, 2012; Shachar et al., 2018).

Apart from corporations and employees, involved stakeholders are nonprofits and beneficiaries or causes (Hess et al., 2002; Peloza et al., 2009; van der Voort et al., 2009). Their role and motivations are only modestly explored in employee volunteering literature (cf. Brzustewicz et al., 2022; Cook Burchell, 2018; Johansen & Nielsen, 2018; Samuel et al., 2016; Schneider & Neumayr, 2022). Nonprofits serve social causes and depend on corporations for extra hands, donations and expertise (Brzustewicz et al., 2022). They are frequently assumed to automatically benefit from employee volunteers and the skills or labour they provide (Cook & Burchell, 2018). Described as "the absent partner" (Cook & Buchell, 2018, p. 168), they are said to be in a subordinate position to corporations and potentially subject to co-optation (Burchell & Cook, 2013; Cook & Burchell, 2018). Typically selected as collaborators for their strategic fit, they serve to legitimise corporate initiatives (Allen, 2003). The

profit/nonprofit relationship can be viewed on a continuum: a transactional relationship views the arrangement between corporation and nonprofit as the result of self-interest, whereas an integrative relationship promotes cooperation between corporation and nonprofit with the aim of creating value for all stakeholders (Austin, 2000; van der Voort et al., 2009). While integrative relationships are frequently seen as superior to transactional relationships, Schneider and Neumayr (2022) argue otherwise based on a study of nonprofits suggesting that integrative relationships are difficult to implement.

Beneficiaries or causes (e.g. communities) equally hold a minor position (Dreesbach-Bundy & Scheck, 2017) within corporate volunteering literature. Although they are seen as the core reason employee volunteering initiatives exist, they are often addressed as disempowered, passive receivers lacking will or authority to take part in collaborative processes or decision-making (Johansen & Nielsen, 2018). Consequently, they are subject to feeling grateful and to following the procedures laid out by decision makers (e.g. corporate managers and/or volunteers) in exchange for the charitable benefits achieved (e.g. receiving a free meal or financial tutoring).

Employees are, perhaps unsurprisingly, seen as the most important stakeholder involved in employee volunteering activities, and a rich body of literature deals with their status and role (e.g. Dreesbach-Bundy & Scheck's (2017) review). Employees are both corporate representatives supporting the realisation of organisational goals and volunteers driven by personal motivation and skill development (Dempsey-Brench & Shantz, 2023; Glińska-Neweś et al., 2022). Moreover, employees are said to benefit from strengthened job identification, increased work life satisfaction and improved socialisation (do Paço & Nave, 2013; Gatignon-Turnau & Mignonac, 2015; Pajo & Lee, 2011; Oliveira et al., 2022; Peloza & Hassay, 2006). The double status as employee and volunteer may have positive and negative effects. Amongst the positive effects are boosting skills and career opportunities, while potential negative effects include weakening the employees' position when it is taken for granted by employers (Grant, 2012; Shachar et al., 2018) or leading to health and well-being problems such as burn out, as a result of the perceived pressure of volunteering (Samuel et al., 2013). However, most employee-oriented employee volunteering studies address employee benefits, i.e. positive effects including job motivation, skill development, satisfaction and overall good-feeling (Brockner et al., 2014; Caligiuri et al., 2013; do Paço & Nave, 2013; Grant, 2012; Haski-Leventhal et al., 2019; Jones, 2010; Rodell, 2013). Engaging employees also affects organisational identification through building organisational ties and a sense of belonging (Rodrigo & Arenas, 2008). Employee volunteering is thus recognised for its capacity to foster stronger psychological and emotional employee-employer relationships (Kim et al., 2010) and to positively affect job motivation and satisfaction amongst employee volunteers and employees in general (Rodell et al., 2017). However, as pointed out by Cook et al. (2023) such outcomes are strategic collective outcomes benefitting the corporation but failing to address the individual benefits for employees. Instead, Cook et al. (2023) point to employees' mainly benefitting from altruistic motivations linked to doing good by making a difference in, and giving back to, (local) communities. Accordingly, they suggest that employees value volunteering due to the ties they form with communities and individuals rather than due to the ties they form with their employers.

In the following, community engagement and employee volunteering are compared and combined with a focus on central stakeholder roles and relationships as a point of departure for problematising their shared corporate centricity.

4 The corporate centric CCEV framework

As indicated above, community engagement literature references employee volunteering literature and vice versa. Within community engagement literature, using employees as volunteers is mentioned as one potential engagement strategy (Bowen et al., 2010; Brammer & Millington, 2003; Deigh et al., 2016), and within employee literature, initiatives frequently target community issues (Aluchna, 2015; Caligiuri et al., 2013; Cook et al., 2023; Muthuri et al., 2009). However, where employee volunteering prioritises employees (volunteers), communities are prioritised in community engagement. The difference in priorities are visualised in figure 1 which have been constructed by the authors based on the above characterisations of stakeholders provided in existing community engagement and employee volunteering scholarship.

Figure 1: overview of stakeholder relationships in community engagement and employee volunteering
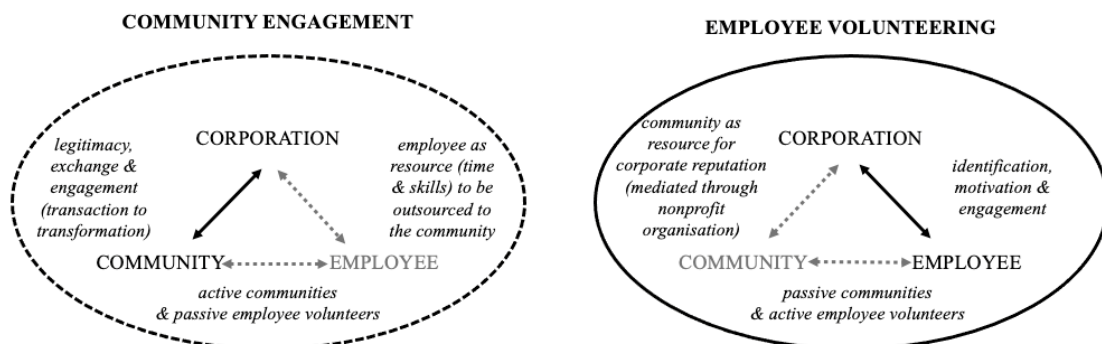
Elaborating on figure 1, community engagement highlights the corporation-community relationship and views employees as assets or resources that can be provided to the community. Communities, and the causes they represent, are – with some exceptions (e.g. Maher, 2019) – seen as active participants with decision-making capabilities when it comes to planning, managing and controlling the help offered by corporations (Swainston & Summerbell, 2008). As mentioned above, the type of relationship strategy potentially holds implications for how community as a stakeholder is perceived. Transactional strategies imply a single transaction from corporation to community; transitional strategies potentially allow for the community to take part; and transformational strategies, focused on mutual learning and collaboration, empower the community (Bowen et al., 2010). Delannon et al. (2016) show how corporations adopt flexible community engagement approaches by drawing on all three strategies to better accommodate multiple stakeholders and different issues. As it is the corporation who decides what strategy to use for engaging the community, the active role lies with the corporation – who can articulate the community as a passive receiver of services (transactional strategy) or as a collaboration partner (transitional or transformational strategy) – privileging a corporate centric point of view when it comes to stakeholder relationship building. Communities are frequently treated as means to corporate ends (Gold et al., 2018) leaving them potentially vulnerable to co-optation (Maher, 2019). Moreover, although transitional and transformational strategies are aimed at empowerment, communities are frequently not treated as equal partners and communication from the corporation is characterised by "the intent of one actor to persuade, influence and dominate another actor" (Maher, 2019, p. 1048).

Community engagement has, thus, been criticised for being "paternalistic", "context insensitive" and "corporate centric" (Muthuri et al*.,* 2012, p. 364). The corporation is "the point of definition around which "the community" forms" (McLennan & Banks, 2019, pp. 119-120). Despite corporate rhetoric suggesting that community engagement is central, the community perspective is largely overshadowed by corporate interests (Gold et al., 2018; Kemp, 2010; Maher, 2019; McLennan & Banks, 2019) and marginal levels of engagement (Sharmin et al., 2014). Accordingly, Baba et al. (2021) have called for a reciprocity approach to community engagement focused on the issue of the community in question instead of corporate interests.

Whereas community engagement literature reduces employees to passive resources to be outsourced by corporations to community groups (Muthuri, 2008), employee volunteering literature emphasises building and maintaining strong employee relations stressing the opportunity to volunteer as an internal corporate social responsibility activity that can further employee identification, motivation and engagement (Aluchna, 2015; do Paço & Nave, 2013) as well as learning and skill development (Dempsey-Brench & Shantz, 2023). Simultaneously, the community aspect of volunteer initiatives is ignored or downplayed, and community is regarded as a resource for facilitating corporation-employee relations. As such, communities are articulated as passive recipients of services delivered by active corporate volunteers. Volunteerism is secondarily approached as an external reputation management tool (Caliguiri et al., 2013; Peterson, 2004; Plewa et al., 2015).

The level of active employee participation is potentially related to employee volunteering types (Peloza et al., 2009). Extra-organisational voluntarism frames the volunteers as the sole, active decision makers; inter-organisational voluntarism frames corporate support as passive as it is the employees who facilitate activities (although with workplace approval); and intra-organisational voluntarism privileges the corporation as the designer of initiatives that employees have the opportunity to opt in to on a, more or less, voluntary basis. Employees are essentially choosing whether to participate or not; a choice that may not be a choice at all as the corporation decides which volunteer types are available to them (Grant, 2012). Thus, volunteer programmes, acting as a subtle form of control, potentially offer normalised or idealised identity positions for employees to inhabit (Johansen, 2024). Moreover, Cook et al. (2023) demonstrate how employees assign meaning and value to the volunteer experience by connecting with the cause; not their employer, and thereby they challenge the idea of volunteering as a source of identification and belonging. Finally, it is questionable whether or not volunteer programmes result in greater employee participation in corporate management and governance (Alchuna, 2015). Accordingly, the corporation's goals are in focus reflecting the corporate centric view embedded in the corporation-employee dyad as highlighted by Knox's (2020) study on how businesses benefit from increased employee productivity following employee volunteering.

In order to highlight the corporate centric nature of community engagement and employee volunteering, we combine the two separate areas into an integrative corporate community engagement volunteering (CCEV) framework (cf. figure 2).

Figure 2: an integrative stakeholder CCEV framework
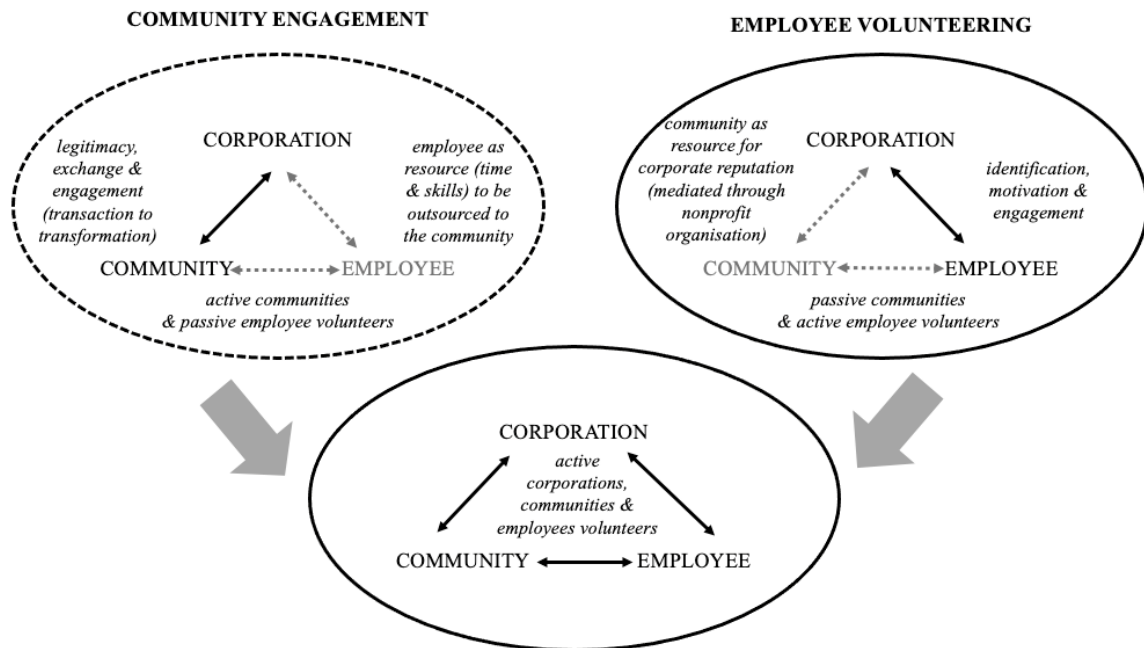
As addressed above, employee volunteering literature has a blind spot when it comes to community which is infrequently addressed and treated as a resource for employee motivation and reputation management; whereas community engagement literature frequently ignores the central role of employees in establishing and maintaining community relations treating them as assets to be used as the community sees fit. The integrative framework (cf. figure 2) replaces the dyadic stakeholder relationships in existing community engagement and employee volunteering scholarship with a triad. In doing so, it presents a possible alternative to the instrumental articulation of certain stakeholders as means to furthering relationships with other stakeholders, e.g. the focus within parts of the community engagement literature on nonprofits as intermediaries between corporations and communities or the focus within parts of the employee volunteering literature on communities as convenient resources in corporate efforts to foster employee development and motivation (as discussed above).

However, whereas the integrative framework seeks to include the three central stakeholders in a tripart relationship, it still privileges the corporation as the key decision and meaning maker in that the corporation is envisioned as being in a position to choose which roles to assign to the other stakeholders and which types of relationships to enter into. Thus, it mirrors what has been referred to as a calculative stakeholder approach based on costs and benefits (Muthuri, 2008) as visible in the business case for voluntary community engagement where activities are motivated with reference to corporate goals and benefits (Cook et al., 2023). It thus fails to acknowledge an altered reality where business organisations are increasingly called upon as political, democratic actors with the responsibility to respect, protect, facilitate and defend the social, civil and political rights of citizens (Matten & Crane, 2005).

Within such an instrumental perspective, a stakeholder is "any group or individual who can affect, or is affected by, the achievement of a corporation's purpose" (Freeman, 1984, p. 25). Stakeholder theory redirects corporate attention away from shareholders and owners towards a broader array of actors, including employees, customers, suppliers and society at large. The corporation is seen as the relational centre leading to a focus on the "discrete, dyadic, 'hub and spoke' relationships between the organization and its stakeholders" (Neville & Menguc, 2006, p. 377). In short, stakeholders are seen as means to corporate ends (Frooman, 2010; Steurer, 2006). Accordingly, within the instrumental perspective on stakeholders, communication is seen as the means of furthering corporate strategy, goals and objectives by managing stakeholder relationships (Falkheimer & Heide, 2018; Zerfass et al., 2018).

As illustrated above, employee volunteering and community engagement literatures tend to approach stakeholders as resources for corporate relational gains. However, the overt corporate-driven focus has been shown to be problematic in different contexts. Cook et al. (2023) show how an emphasis on organisational outcomes in employee volunteering activities are not aligned with the actual experiences of employee volunteers whose main motivations are altruistic, prosocial and connected to helping local communities. Moreover, as demonstrated in Cook and Burchell's (2018) study on nonprofits in the context of employee volunteering, corporate centricity may also prevent the achievement of community-oriented development goals as it prompts corporations to choose causes that suit business goals instead of choosing causes which are in the greatest need. Gold et al. (2018) similarly argue that corporate centricity leads corporations to focus too much on short term business goals rather than long term community development goals that can bring about real societal change. Moreover, they account for how such an

instrumental community engagement approach has negative implications for both communities and corporations centring their critique on the questionable effectiveness of corporate centricity along with its negative consequences such as high transaction costs for corporations and dependency for communities. They suggest that instrumental community engagement initiatives are both expensive for businesses and ineffective in reaching their declared community goals (Gold et al., 2018).

Within a general corporate social responsibility framework, Crane et al. (2014, p. 137) point to similar problems when corporations turn complex societal challenges into supposedly win-win situations without solving the underlying issues arguing that corporations may be driven to "invest more in easy problems and decoupled communication strategies". First, they suggest that corporations are more likely to choose to invest in problems that can easily be solved instead of focusing on the more difficult challenges that underly the visible problems (e.g. supporting mentoring programmes for young people in underprivileged communities instead of addressing underlying societal structures leading to poverty). Second, they argue that corporations are tempted to disconnect their communication strategies from reality; and thereby emphasising the talk over the walk (cf. Ali Gull et al, 2023; Schoeneborn et al., 2020). In addition, corporate social responsibility scholarship has criticised the so-called 'hub and spoke' approach for marginalising the very same stakeholders that corporate social responsibility initiatives are said to benefit (e.g. Werhane, 2011; 2018). Speaking of a centre implies the existence of margins; consequently, all stakeholders who are not placed at the centre "are externalised and become marginalised by default" (Stormer, 2003, p. 284). Managers operating based on a corporate centric approach are potentially in danger of not recognising stakeholder perspectives relevant to their operations (Werhane, 2018) and of losing sight of the stakeholders affected by the corporation, focusing only on those who have the ability to affect the corporation (Eikeleboom & Long, 2023; Roloff, 2008). Business interests are over-represented at the expense of e.g. community stakeholders who often are not involved in decision-making (Eikeleboom & Long, 2023). Thus, there is a need for viewing stakeholders as more than either resources or constraints for the realisation of corporate goals and objectives (Dorstewitz & Lal, 2022). In order to overcome these potential problems, the integrative CCEV framework is reoriented to address stakeholders from within issue centred networks.

5 Reorienting the CCEV framework in an issue centric perspective

Having presented and problematised the predominant corporate centric conceptualisation of stakeholders within community engagement and employee volunteering scholarship, we introduce networked stakeholder approaches from within corporate social responsibility scholarship in order to reorient the framework towards issue centricity. The networked approaches share a critical view on corporate centricity and propose alternative understandings where stakeholders, including corporations, are positioned within complex networks instead of dyadic relations (e.g. Bevan & Werhane, 2010; Roloff, 2008; Werhane, 2018).

Roloff (2008, p. 238) places stakeholder thinking within the context of multi-stakeholder networks where stakes are not conceptualised in relation to a corporation but in relation to a concrete issue – i.e., the "reason for action" – that stakeholders jointly are seeking to address. Consequently, a stakeholder is defined as "any group or individual who can effect or is affected by the approach to the issue addressed by the network" (Roloff, 2008, p. 238). In issue focused stakeholder management, the corporation is not the master of stakeholder interactions, but a partner in collaboration processes where the modes of interaction are different from traditional stakeholder management as they focus on trust, mutual understanding and knowledge (Roloff, 2008).

Bevan and Werhane (2010, p. 135) equally argue in favour of decentring the corporation also when it comes to visualisation in the form of stakeholder maps: "When our mental model of corporate governance and corporate responsibilities is framed with a firm at the centre, the way we think about corporate responsibility is different, say, than when that model is altered". Suggestions for decentred models include replacing the corporation with a key stakeholder or a specific individual (Werhane, 2018). This could involve using a concrete name and face to represent the main external or internal beneficiaries of corporate social responsibility activities, e.g. a pharmaceutical company placing people with diabetes at the centre of its stakeholder map or a crop company placing the picture of a child worker employed to harvest its products at the centre (Werhane, 2018). Another suggestion is to decentre stakeholder thinking completely by seeing all stakeholders as embedded in complex networks of interrelationships but without any single actor being assigned a privileged, central position in the network (Bevan & Wehane, 2010; Werhane, 2011; 2018). In such a network, every actor, including the corporation, becomes "a stakeholder of everyone else in the network, and there is no clear focal point" (Frooman, 2010, p. 164).

Networked stakeholder approaches point to another way of conceptualising and visualising the relationships amongst corporations, communities and employees as they offer an alternative to the 'hub and spoke' thinking, with its inherent focus on particular dyadic relationships favouring the corporation at the centre, visible in existing community engagement and employee volunteering literatures. The reoriented framework (cf. figure 3) depicts the main stakeholders involved in corporate community engagement volunteering activities as overlapping entities which equally hold stakes in the societal problem or issue at hand (Roloff, 2008).

Figure 3: an issue-centric networked CCEV framework

An example of such an issue centric framework is visible in Eikelenboom and Long's (2023) study on a multi-network community engagement initiative aimed at creating a circular neighbourhood. With reference to Roloff (2008), they place the initiative at the centre or hub of their stakeholder map positioning the involved stakeholders (e.g. businesses, the local community, the municipality and a social housing association) as the spokes (Eikelenboom & Long, 2023). Stakeholders are defined not as a function of their relationship to the corporation, but as a result of their stake or interest in the issue in the form of shared grievances, resources or opportunities (Frooman, 2010). An issue focused approach is potentially better aligned with the definition of community engagement as "the pattern of activities implemented by firms to work collaboratively with and through groups of people to address issues affecting the social well-being of those people" (Bowen et al., 2010, p. 297).

In addition to placing emphasis on the issue (i.e. a specific initiative or cause) that calls for collaboration, an issue centric approach to stakeholder networks illustrates that stakeholders and relationships are complex and overlapping. Therefore, stakeholders are not fixed, stable categories, but "emergent, negotiable and malleable" actors whose boundaries, strategies and purposes change and evolve over time (Dorstewitz & Lal, 2022, p. 91). A networked conceptualisation of corporate community engagement volunteering potentially entails rearticulating the stakeholders' roles, respective interests and benefits; and empowers employees and communities (and others) as it emphasises collaboration over corporate control (Roloff, 2008). In such multi-stakeholder networks, collaboration becomes a matter of engaging the interdependent stakeholders with a shared interest in the issue in "an interactive deliberation using shared rules, norms, and structures, to share information and/or take coordinated action" (Eikelenboom & Long, 2023, p. 33). This means that before collaboration can take place, all stakeholders establish and negotiate the shared rules, norms and structures for the partnership meaning that otherwise marginalised stakeholder groups become actively involved in defining the collaboration. This, in turn, is said to ensure that stakeholders, e.g. communities, are equal participants in decision-making (Eikelenboom & Long, 2023). In working towards solving a particular issue, stakeholders other than the corporation are equally, or perhaps even more, important because of their unique expertise concerning the challenge at hand (Roloff, 2008). Finally, the relationships between stakeholders are dynamic and changing as the focal issue potentially is resolved, develops or is replaced by other issues.

6 Discussion

In the following, we address scholarly and practical implications of the issue centred CCEV framework. In addition, we discuss how issue centricity can act as a foundation for sustainable communication within employee involved community activities, before addressing the framework's limitations as well as potentials for future research.

In terms of research implications, adopting an issue centred, networked approach to corporate community engagement volunteering offers an alternative mental model (Werhane, 2011) with the potential to generate new insights into how to define and study stakeholders in the context of community engagement activities involving employees. The framework focuses on the issue as the focal point for stakeholder relationships suggesting that research on engagement and volunteering should take its point of departure in the societal issue rather than in the actors. Accordingly, the issue centric vantage point differs from the main body of community engagement and employee volunteering scholarships which tend to frequently address initiatives in light of corporate interests (e.g. Alchuna, 2015; Dare et al., 2014; Denni & Cardeaux, 2014; Glińska-Neweś et al., 2022) or, less frequently, in light of the interests of other stakeholders such as communities (e.g. Samuel et al., 2016), employees (e.g. do Paço & Nave, 2013; Oliveira et al., 2022) or nonprofits (e.g. Burchell & Cook, 2013; O'Connor & Shumate, 2014; Samuel et al., 2016). Attention should be directed at the complex interplay between stakeholders as they form networks to address specific societal issues. These dynamic interlinkages may point researchers to explore how stakeholders construct and communicate particular ideas about themselves and each other. As issue centric networks are constantly changing, researchers need to explore ways of tracing and capturing the evolving nature of stakeholder roles and relationships. In order to explore these potential research implications, further studies are required (see below).

When it comes to practical implications, the proposed CCEV framework offers corporations, communities and employees a chance to reflect on how they view their roles and relationships in the context of corporate social responsibility activities. From an employee perspective, an issue focused approach can be argued to be better aligned with the altruistic motivations of employees (Cook et al., 2023). As it is focused on the employees´ interest in the issue or cause, rather than in their employer, it potentially enhances the value employees get from engaging in volunteering activities. From a community perspective, issue centricity offers a potential for greater autonomy which minimises the risk of communities falling victim to co-optation and marginalisation (Maher, 2019). Maher (2019) argues that corporations' use of relational and communicative strategies has the potential to restrict the psychological freedom of choice in a community by taking away their autonomy and possibilities for acting thus giving way to corporate goals. However, by focusing on the issue (and not the corporate interest in the issue), the freedom of choice of such vulnerable community actors is likely to be less under pressure from more powerful (i.e. corporate) actors. Thus, an issue based approach may help to mitigate the power asymmetries inherent to corporate-community and corporate-employee relationships.

The framework suggests that corporations consider how they address initiatives involving communities and employees. In line with Werhane (2011; 2018), we argue that corporations and managers benefit from disengaging themselves from traditional mindsets and dominant business logics. Management practice should take an interest in how mental models are constructed and frame dominant logics and behaviour (Werhane, 2018). In that light, the reframing of the corporation's position in relation to stakeholders in connection with corporate community engagement volunteering activities potentially paves the way for stakeholder inclusivity and sensitivity, countering the tendency to focus mainly on business benefits while ignoring or marginalising stakeholders. This requires that the corporation relinquishes some of its strategic decision-making power to other stakeholders in favour of shared goals and visions (Gold et al., 2018). As argued by Deetz (1995), there is a need to improve collaborative decision-making when it comes to business decisions that also have societal impact.

This argument points towards sustainable communication practices aimed at benefitting all stakeholders as well as society in general. As Ditlevsen & Johansen (2024) suggest, sustainable communication rests on ethical, reflexive and critical mindsets. Mindsets which are linked to understandings of 'the other' in the communication process. Ethical communication implies recognising 'the other' as more than a means to an end (cf. Pearson, 1989); reflexive communication calls for the active exploration of how both 'the self' and 'the other' are perceived (cf. Cunliffe, 2016); and critical communication addresses taken for granted, implicit ideological structures and power dimensions that influence perceptions of 'the other' (cf. Deetz & McClellan, 2009).

A key touchpoint for sustainable communication is its ethical mindset. According to Bowen (2010, p. 573), ethical communication is linked to dialogue and collaborative decision-making as: "it allows people to share in creating their own destiny rather than having that outcome decided arbitrarily by others". Decision-making is defined as good or ethical when it respects the interests of multiple stakeholders instead of one actor's self-interest. Thus, ethical communication can be said to be contingent on issue centricity which seeks to eliminate self-interest and replace it with societal needs. Accordingly, it mirrors a reflexive approach to stakeholders and communication as reflexivity is said to foreground moral and ethical responsibilities for others (Cunliffe, 2016). Reflexive practices involve e.g., paying attention to differences of ideas as well as engaging in open dialogue: it is about enacting ethical responsibility by making communicative opportunities available to others (Cunliffe & Jun, 2005). The issue centred CCEV framework prompts corporations (and their managers), communities and employees to practice reflexivity (e.g. Cunliffe, 2016) by acknowledging and exploring inherent assumptions and by asking different questions when it comes to addressing other stakeholders in the network. Where a corporate centric view suggests that corporate managers ask e.g., 'who are our stakeholders?' and 'what do they want from us?', an issue centric view prompts questions such as 'what issues are salient in society?' and 'who has a potential interest in the issues?' (cf. Frooman, 2010). Moreover, reflexivity directs attention to the constant construction of meaning and social realities in the context of ongoing interactions and conversations (Cunliffe, 2016; Cunliffe & Jun, 2005). Consequently, all stakeholders, corporations included, are continuously redefining roles and relationships as they co-participate in activities to solve greater societal issues.

An ethical, reflexive approach to communication and decision-making is contingent upon acknowledging and addressing issues of power, domination and resistance (Deetz & McClellan, 2009). As suggested by Deetz (1995, p. 256): "Attention to stakeholders are often strategic attempts to increase loyalty and commitment or decrease resistance rather than seeking genuine decisional input." Thereby, stakeholders are not recognised as active decision and meaning makers. As further argued by Deetz & McClellan (2009), communication is frequently seen as a tool for influence, control and persuasion intended to promote organisational purposes. Alternatively, Deetz and McClellan (2009, p. 445) suggest focusing attention on communication as "normative means for free and open forms of interaction". Consequently, a critical perspective on corporate community engagement volunteering would suggest sensitivity towards all actors with a focus on how meanings emerge in interactions and conversations embedded in explicit and implicit power structures.

In terms of limitations, the framework's point of departure is the overlaps between community engagement and employee volunteering literatures. Therefore, it focuses solely on three central stakeholders present in those two streams of literature i.e., the corporation, the community and the employees. However, this view is restrictive in relation to the stakeholders who potentially are involved in issues that can be addressed from within corporate community engagement volunteering e.g., nonprofits who are described as beneficiaries, intermediaries or partners. There is a limitation in ignoring other stakeholders such as nonprofits, shareholders, consumers and the general public who may also act in the context of corporate community engagement volunteering and have a stake in central societal issues. Following Roloff's (2008) and Frooman's (2010) argument that stakeholders become stakeholders if they have an interest in a particular issue, there is a need to extend the framework to include a wider range of

stakeholder groups, as illustrated in studies on multi-stakeholder initiatives (e.g. Clarke & MacDonald, 2019; Eikelenboom & Long, 2023).

A source of inspiration could be found in cross- and multi-sectoral partnership literature focusing on interorganisational collaboration and stakeholder co-creation between nonprofits, government agencies and businesses as a prerequisite for implementing innovative solutions to societal problems (Dentoni et al., 2016, p. 35; Selsky & Parker, 2005). Cross- and multi-sectoral partnerships are particularly designed to manage a broad range of stakeholder needs, interests and forms of value creation (Pedersen et al., 2021). Accordingly, partnership constructions and operations may provide a future avenue for conceptualising corporate community engagement volunteering networks that are better aligned with today's complex, challenging societal agendas and issues, which explicitly call for mutual understanding and interaction between actors (Schumate et al., 2017). Moreover, such focus could be explored in connection with sustainable communication given that sustainable communication practices equally seek to promote collaboration, co-creation and shared decision-making.

Finally, as the framework has been developed conceptually based on existing literature, it needs to be further advanced through empirical insights. Empirical studies of corporate community engagement volunteering may contribute with knowledge on communication, interaction and relationship building amongst the involved stakeholders, as well as insights into how decision-making is practiced among corporations, employees, communities and other stakeholders (e.g. nonprofits) involved in the activities. In order to accommodate an issue centric approach, and to overcome the corporate centric nature of present understandings, these explorations should not restrict themselves to dyadic, or even triadic, relationships. Consequently, there is both a need to address how to study corporate community engagement volunteering with a point of departure in the issues that are being addressed as well as how to explore the continuous, mutual constitution and reconstitution of networks and stakeholders in the context of particular issues. As such, a holistic research approach is required. In addition to addressing how to study the phenomenon, research is needed to address multiple questions including: how issues are perceived by the various stakeholders; how such perceptions influence and construct relationships among stakeholders; how they evolve with the shifting nature of issues; and how the stakeholders communicate about and with each other in relation to the issue. Responding to these questions potentially calls for a wide range of quantitative and qualitative studies to add more nuanced understandings of the complexities, dynamics and communication practices involved in issue driven corporate community engagement volunteering.

7 Conclusion

Through theory adaptation (Jaakkola, 2020), the article develops an issue centric CCEV framework as groundwork for sustainable communication in connection with corporate social responsibility initiatives involving both employees and communities. In doing so, the article contributes to community engagement and employee volunteering scholarships in three ways. First, it outlines and problematises the corporate centric view which prioritises the corporation over the communities and employees, highlighting potential problems associated with corporate centricity, including the marginalisation and exclusion of stakeholders.

Second, by drawing on issue centred, networked stakeholder perspectives, the article provides an alternative to corporate centricity, offering a balanced approach to the complex, interconnectedness of stakeholders constituted by, and constitutive of, corporate community employee volunteering initiatives. The reoriented CCEV framework decentres the corporation and balances stakeholders (corporations, communities and employees) by centring collaboration around the shared issue that a given initiative aims at solving. Thereby, it offers an alternative view on collaborations, roles and relationships with a point of departure in societal problems rather than societal actors. Accordingly, an issue centric approach may help transcend the actor focused approach applied in the so-called win-win-win situation embedded in community engagement and employee volunteering, where benefits and outcomes are tied to the goals of individual stakeholders, mainly corporations, and not to the betterment of society per se.

Third, issue centricity aligns with the central ethical, reflexive and critical mindsets of sustainable communication when it comes to recognising all participants as active decision and meaning makers. Thereby, the CCEV framework also holds potential in relation to how to approach the communication processes, interactions and conversations that arise surrounding complex issues where multiple actors need to collaborate in order to solve societal challenges.

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