Communication Practitioners' Views on the Economic and Ethical Dimensions of Corporate Social Responsibility: A Case of Slovenia

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Abstract

This study examined how communication practitioners working in Slovenia perceived corporate social responsibility (CSR). Specifically, this research draws on qualitative interviews in order to explore the ways in which participants understood and problematized the ethical and economic dimensions of CSR, including their assessment of work as practitioners who are involved in CSR projects. The findings suggest that participants viewed CSR as an economic investment that may help companies succeed in their business, while also help address needs in communities in which their companies operate. However, contextual constraints, such as limited financial resources as well as value alignment and prioritization, present a challenge for practitioners to engage in CSR work, and the ways they come to understand CSR. This study adds to the literature by offering empirical insights into the underlying meanings, values, and tensions that communication practitioners in the distinct sociocultural and economic environment of Slovenia face, as well as the different dimensions of CSR in this country. As such, this study contributes to an understanding of the link between public relations and CSR in a new international setting, given that there are few studies on the topic from Slovenia.

Keywords: corporate social responsibility; CSR; practitioners; public relations and CSR; CSR in Slovenia

Introduction

Ever since Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) became popular, public relations scholars have studied various dimensions of CSR and its nexus between public relations. As public relations practice evolved into a strategic management function (Grunig, 2006), scholars began to question this profession's social responsibilities, including its value for contributing to the betterment of society (Daugherty, 2001; Kim & Reber, 2008; L'Etang, 1994; Munshi & Kurian, 2005; Vercic & Grunig, 2000; Wright, 1976). In addition, with increased interest in CSR as a practice that can help further and/or improve corporations' role in society, questions concerning public relations practitioners' role in management of, and communication about,

CSR practices and strategies have been brought to attention (Brønn, 2010; Coombs & Holladay, 2009; Kim & Reber, 2008). For instance, Kim and Kim (2010) noted that "CSR can be understood as one of the fundamental strategies of public relations for attuning a mutually beneficial relationship between business and society" (p. 485).

In response to greater institutionalization and spread of the idea of CSR around the world, in recent years more public relations scholars have emphasized, and contributed to, the need for understanding CSR practices in different parts of the world (e.g., Coppa & Sriramesh, 2013; Dhanesh, 2013; Kim & Kim, 2010; Pastrana & Sriramesh, 2014; Sriramesh, Ng, Soh, & Luo, 2007). Recent studies have suggested that meanings that individuals associate with CSR, and the different values they attach to this practice across culturally diverse contexts, may affect their perceptions of, and expectations from, CSR (e.g., Dhanesh, 2015a; Kim & Kim, 2010). Moreover, sociocultural environments in which individuals, including public relations practitioners, conduct their work have been considered important in both informing and shaping the ways those individuals carry out, and engage in, corporate practices that they consider socially responsible and/or ethically sound (Dhanesh, 2012; Sriramesh et al., 2007).

Even though public relations practitioners' perceptions of, and attitudes toward, CSR have been partly addressed by scholarship (e.g., Dhanesh, 2013; Kim & Kim, 2010; Kim & Reber, 2008), there continues to be a paucity of research aimed at understanding how practitioners around the world perceive CSR. This is particularly evident with regard to addressing culturally diverse perspectives and the different values that come into play when trying to make sense of, and practice, CSR. In particular, an understanding of how practitioners across the globe understand and negotiate different dimensions of CSR, such as its economic and ethical aspects, is rather limited.

We contend that such questions are important for public relations scholars and practitioners for several reasons. First, while public relations and CSR may be considered as separate management functions, public relations practitioners are often asked to manage and communicate CSR-related information (Clark, 2000; Kim & Reber, 2009; L'Etang, 1994; Ruiz-Mora, Lugo-Ocando, & Castillo-Esparcia, 2016). Indeed, practitioners often have to navigate through various meanings, interests, and values associated with CSR both within and outside their organization (Dhanesh, 2012; Dhanesh, 2013; Kim & Kim, 2010; May, 2008).

Second, public relations practitioners are expected to act ethically on behalf of their organizations, where organizational and individual values may sometimes be in conflict (Bowen, 2004). For instance, practitioners need to find a way to align core organizational values with that of CSR as well as the public relations profession (Kim & Reber, 2008). Further, as suggested by Dhanesh (2013), the public relations practitioner nowadays needs to "navigate the dialectical complexities of being an organizational representative and activist at the same time" (p. 398).

Third, despite the growing body of literature on global public relations (see Sriramesh & Vercic, 2009; Sriramesh & Vercic, forthcoming), much of the scholarship on public relations and CSR remains ethnocentric (Sriramesh, 2002). A closer look into how practitioners in different parts of the world perceive CSR, and what drives their understandings and practices in regard to CSR, helps to expand our knowledge of the nexus between public relations and CSR from a global perspective (Dhanesh, 2013; Kim & Kim, 2010; Sriramesh, 2002).

Based on this rationale, this study delved deeper into meanings and values that practitioners working in the field of public relations and CSR associated with this practice.

Specifically, we brought into focus the economic and ethical dimensions of CSR (Carroll, 1991) by studying perceptions of CSR among a sample of CSR and communication practitioners working in Slovenia. Due to its unique culture and economy, with a record of slow development of CSR in the country (Golob, 2015; Golob & Bartlett, 2007), we found Slovenia to be an environment worthy of exploration with a potential to add to a global understanding of CSR from the perspective of practitioners from Europe.

By bringing into focus the contextual constrains that participants in this study described as limiting their companies' involvement in CSR, this study offers new empirical insights into the ways practitioners in Slovenia negotiated various dimensions of CSR with respect to the environment in which they work. Thereby, this study contends that a culture-sensitive approach to studying practitioners' perceptions of CSR is needed for a thorough understanding of the link between public relations and CSR. Such an approach should not undermine, or ignore, a culturally specific understanding of CSR among practitioners themselves. In addition, this study unearths tensions in participants' understanding of CSR as value-driven (Kim & Reber, 2008). It adds to previous discussions of value alignment and value prioritization in CSR work, and the ways such tensions may challenge CSR practice in the field of public relations (May, 2008). Finally, this study responds to recent calls by communication scholars (e.g., Dhanesh, 2015a; May, 2011) to look beyond the instrumental and normative views of CSR as such, while delving deeper into the underlying meanings and values that practitioners in this distinct sociocultural and economic environment associate with various dimensions of CSR. Accordingly, this study adds to empirical research that puts forward the interpretive lens to studying CSR perceptions and CSR practices (May, 2011).

In presenting our study, we begin with a review of literature on public relations as it pertains to practitioners' perceptions of CSR concept and practice. Second, we describe the methodology used, as well as our analytical approach to interpret data. Next, we present and discuss the main findings, as they respond to current literature on this topic. Finally, we conclude with the theoretical and practical contributions of this study, along with its limitations and our suggestions for future research.

Literature Review

While CSR has become a rather institutionalized concept and practice around the world (Campbell, 2007; Carroll, 1999), practitioners and scholars across different fields and disciplines continue to debate the meaning(s) of CSR, and how CSR should be practiced and studied (Okoye, 2009). Being a multilayered concept, CSR can be explored through various theoretical and conceptual lenses, and at different levels of analysis (Aguinis & Glavas, 2012; Garriga & Melé, 2004; Gond & Matten, 2007). Further, there are different values associated with CSR that may derive from, and be shaped by, various interrelated individual, organizational, cultural, and institutional drivers of CSR (Angus-Leppan, Metcalf, & Benn, 2010; Dhanesh, 2015a; Habisch, Jonker, Wegner, & Schmidpeter, 2005; Matten & Moon, 2008). Such considerations speak both to the conceptual, and pragmatic, complexity of CSR.

Taking into account the economic and political environment in which this case is situated, we followed the European Commission's definition of CSR as a practice referring to

"companies taking responsibility for their impact on society" 0n a voluntary basis (Corporate social responsibility, 2017). This study also puts forward the operationalization of CSR proposed by Carroll (1991) who suggested that a "company "should strive to make a profit, obey the law, be ethical, and be a good corporate citizen" (p. 43). In other words, he proposed that CSR consists of four main responsibilities: economic, legal, ethical, and philanthropic. We contend that employing such an open, yet systematic definition (Matten & Moon, 2008) allows us to best capture the different dimensions of this complex concept without limiting the possibility of various interpretations of such term and practice by participants in this study.

Moreover, as we explain presently, along with the economic, legal, and philanthropic dimensions (Carroll, 1991), the ethical dimension is one of the main pillars of CSR that is still highly relevant to explore within the field of public relations today.

Public Relations and CSR

Public relations scholars studying CSR have primarily used the instrumental (strategic management) and normative lenses to explore the link between public relations and CSR. Recent studies have assessed how CSR should be managed strategically, and how various organizations communicate their socially responsible practices and initiatives, both internally and externally (Dhanesh, 2015b; Golob, Podnar, Elving, Nielsen, Thomsen, & Schultz, 2013; May, 2011, Sriramesh et al., 2007). In addition, the nexus between public relations and CSR has been explored with respect to questions, including how public relations practitioners perceive their role in CSR, and their contributions to CSR programs (e.g., Kim & Reber, 2008; Preciado-Hoyos, 2013; Ruiz-Mora et al., 2016), as well as how public relations professionalism may influence CSR (e.g., Kim & Reber, 2009).

While the strategic role of public relations in CSR has been commonly emphasized in the literature (Kim & Reber, 2008), many scholars remained both skeptical and critical of CSR as it relates to this profession. For instance, in her critical account, L'Etang (1994) interrogated the motives behind public relations using CSR as a "tool" to address social problems. Along with such considerations, the questions of ethics as one of the main responsibilities of for-profit organizations have been commonly put forward (L'Etang, 1994; May, 2008), thus, aiming to better understand the degree to which ethical responsibilities need to be prioritized over other responsibilities of organizations (Garriga & Melé, 2004). In line with such normative approach to CSR, being ethical conscious in conducting public relations work has been regarded as an essential part of this practice's professionalism, integrity, and social responsibility (Bowen, 2004; Kim & Park, 2011). Indeed, current literature supports the idea of ethics as a critical component of public relations socially responsible work. For instance, Kim and Park's (2011) empirical study showed that prospective public relations practitioners viewed CSR as an important condition for an ethical fit between them and their future employer.

In particular, the tensions between the ethical (commonly understood in terms of morals, norms, and values) and economic dimensions of CSR have been a critical point of discussion in considering the role of public relations in CSR, or vice versa—and one that warrants further exploration. For example, in her recent research on business leaders and senior managers' perceptions of CSR in India, Dhanesh (2015a) suggested that the moral and economic imperatives are the two key co-existing drivers of CSR in that country. She further argued that

culturally situating CSR is critical to be able to explore the complexities in what gets to drive CSR, and implications of such drivers (Dhanesh, 2015a).

In this study, we draw on May (2011) that there is a need for an interpretive approach to address the questions of how public relations practitioners across different cultural environments perceive CSR, including their own work in this area. First of all, as this study contends, a closer look into practitioners' perceptions of CSR can aid in a better understanding of contextual constraints that practitioners working in a distinct sociocultural and economic environment may be dealing with when conducting CSR-related work. In this sense, this study does not only question *whether* practitioners value CSR as such, but *how* they come to understand CSR, by taking into account their own work in this area, while also considering environmental conditions that their CSR work is depended upon.

Second, we posit that such lens can contribute to the body of knowledge of public relations and CSR by adding to an understanding of the individual tensions that practitioners recognize with respect to such corporate efforts. Previous research on perceptions of CSR among public relations practitioners prioritized the organizational level of analysis over the individual level. Yet few studies explored how practitioners' understanding of their role in CSR is affected by their individual ethical values and beliefs, beside that of their organization (Kim & Reber, 2008).

Accordingly, this study focused on the economic and ethical dimensions in the ways communication and CSR practitioners perceive CSR. Specifically, we explored how practitioners in Slovenia perceived the concept and practice of CSR vis-à-vis ethics, and how such an understanding might be reflected in the ways these practitioners recognized their work in the area of CSR. We proposed two main research questions to guide our study:

RQ1: How do participants perceive CSR in regard to the economic and ethical dimensions of CSR?

RQ2: What tensions and/or constraints do participants recognize in regard to the economic and ethical dimensions of CSR?

Before describing the methodological approach used in this research, we introduce the case of CSR in Slovenia where the two research questions had been explored.

CSR in Slovenia

The ideas that pertain to CSR are not new in Slovenia, especially in regard to "a high concern for workers and for the community in general" (p. 5) that were important values and ideologies of Slovenia's socialists regime in the past (Golob & Bartlett, 2007).
Yet, as one of the smallest and youngest countries in the European Union, Slovenia has undergone significant political, cultural, and economic changes over the past two decades, moving from a socialist system as part of Yugoslavia to a market economy with increasing foreign investments (Golob & Bartlett, 2007). Golob and Bartlett (2007) suggested that, due to the aforementioned transition, "Slovenian companies became more profit oriented, and many new privately owned companies did not actively express willingness to participate in socially responsible practices" (p. 5).

As a result, Slovenia has been relatively slow in embracing the concept and practice of CSR (Golob, 2015). Golob (2015) observed that such slow progress appears to be marked by a rather low level of trust in institutions among the general public, and increasing corruption and malpractices by managers and public authorities. Although the European Union has put a lot of efforts into promoting CSR policies and practices among EU member states, the Slovenian government's interest in CSR has remained relatively low (Golob, 2015).

Despite this, there is a growing interest in CSR efforts initiated by various NGOs and a few large corporations operating in this country (Golob, 2015). Furthermore, more public relations agencies now offer services that pertain to CSR, and public relations practitioners are increasingly engaged in CSR projects and CSR-related work. This trend calls for further exploration of perceptions of CSR among practitioners working in Slovenia, and the ways in which their perceptions may be influenced by various environmental factors.

Methodology

This study was conducted as a part of a larger research project, supported by the Arthur W. Page Center for Integrity in Public Communication, aimed to explore cross-cultural and cross-national differences in practitioners' perceptions of CSR with respect to different dimensions of this phenomenon (see Carroll, 1991). We conducted qualitative interviews with 12 practitioners involved in communication and CSR for companies in Slovenia to study the underlying meanings, values, and tensions in these individuals' perceptions of CSR in this unique cultural environment. According to Tracy (2013), qualitative inquiry is "well suited for accessing tacit, taken-for-granted intuitive understanding of a culture" (p. 5). As such, it also offers the opportunity to study how individuals, in their everyday work, use and live out their values (Tracy, 2013). In fact, qualitative interviews proved to be a valuable method to gain a context-specific understanding of CSR by allowing us to explore participants' own perspectives on, and experiences with, the issue at hand (Patton, 2015; Tracy, 2013).

To ensure that our study complied with the ethical standards and regulations, we sought an Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval at our affiliated university before conducting this research. We then used both our professional networks and publicly available information to recruit participants. In an invitation letter sent to all potential participants via email, we explained the grounds of our research project and its overall purpose. We chose purposive sampling because we wanted to include practitioners working across different industries and in different positions within CSR and/or communication. The rationale for using this sampling technique was not to look for generalizations within a specific industry or across companies of a similar size, but to gather practitioners' diverse understandings of, and views on, the topic (Patton, 2015). After interviewing 12 practitioners who expressed interest in participating in this research, we concluded that the number of interviews was sufficient, given the nature of our study and the richness of data collected (Tracy, 2013). We think it is important to note that the relatively "small" sample size should be juxtaposed with the size of Slovenia's population itself – just above 2 million as of 2016. In our view, the size of this sample does not diminish the value of the findings.

Among the interviewees were two males and 10 females from nine companies of various sizes operating in different industries, such as communication consulting, retail, pharmaceutics, recruiting, and manufacturing. Participants held different positions in their respective companies, with the majority of them in senior management and leadership positions within communication (see Table 1). The interviews lasted approximately 45 minutes (with the shortest lasting 30 minutes and the longest, 1.5 hours), and were conducted either in person, over phone, or via Skype. To ensure accuracy of the answers given, all interviews were audio recorded and later transcribed for analysis.

The interviews were conducted using the protocol we had created prior to data collection. Before beginning each interview, participants' informed consent to participate in this research was sought. In addition, in order to protect participants' identities, anonymity of their participation in the study was ensured. To allow all participants to share their views and experiences in their mother tongue, all interviews were conducted in Slovene by the first author, a native Slovenian. The researcher used a set list of questions that guided each interview. Participants were asked questions, such as: How would you define CSR? What is the role of your company in society? How would you define ethics? and, Tell me about the role of CSR communication, generally, and in your organization. The researcher also posed questions regarding other dimensions of CSR (legal, economic, cultural), as previously identified in the literature (see Carroll, 1991).

Table 1: Participant Demographics

Pseudonym	Gender	Position	Industry Sector	Company Size
Suzana	female	Director	Public Relations & Marketing	2-10
Rok	male	Director	Marketing & Advertising	2-10
Maks	male	Director	Public Relations & Communications	10-50
Maja	female	Senior Consultant	Public Relations & Communications	10-50
Aleksandra	female	Head of Communications and Government Affairs	Electrical & Electronic Manufacturing	51-200
Tamara	female	Senior Consultant	Communication & Consulting	51-200
Eva	female	Head of Corporate Communications	Telecommunications	201-500
Barbara	female	Environmental Manager	Telecommunications	201-500
Sanja	female	Head of Marketing and Public Relations	Staffing & Recruiting	1,000+
Timotej	male	Senior Vice President of Corporate Communications	Retail	1,000+
Sonja	female	Director of Corporate Communications	Pharmaceuticals	1,000+
Tina	female	Communications Manager	Pharmaceuticals	1,000+

Upon collecting data, all interviews were transcribed by the first author, yielding 193 typed pages. We then followed the *iterative approach* to analyze and interpret data to consider

both "emic, or emergent, readings of the data, and "an etic use of existing models, explanations, and theories" (Tracy, 2013, p. 194). Using such approach, we could engage in discussing and reflecting upon key findings—as emergent from data on the one hand, and as informed by previous literature on the other (Tracy, 2013)—at several occasions throughout the research process.

The data analysis process followed several steps. The first author started by reading through each interview and jotting down initial thoughts about the three main topics covered in each interview: understanding of CSR, understanding of ethics, and the role of CSR communication. Following Tracy (2013), data were then approached using two cycles of coding. In the first round of open coding, we looked for participants' descriptions of the concept of CSR, and CSR practices with respect to their organization (Tracy, 2013). To help aid the later analysis and interpretation processes, analytic memos were used at this stage to reflect upon deeper meanings in the ways participants talked about the issues at hand (Saladaña, 2016).

According to Saladaña (2016), analytic memos can be described as "a place to "dump your brain" about the participants, phenomenon, or process under investigation by thinking and thus writing and thus thinking even more about them" (p. 44). As such, analytic memo writing can serve as an important investigative activity to critically think about qualitative data at hand, while also documenting the researcher's thought process and decisions making (Saladaña, 2016). These memos, yielding 10 typed pages, also helped to draw possible connections between various meanings in participants' answers (Tracy, 2013). We then proceeded with the second round of coding. This step allowed us to look for patterns in the initial codes across our data set, while reorganizing and grouping these codes into larger categories (Saladaña, 2016). These large groupings of data (i.e., CSR as an economic investment, CSR as a tool for being ethical, and CSR as being value-driven) are presented in the Findings section.

Findings

This study aimed to explore practitioners' perceptions of the economic and ethical dimensions of CSR, along with their views of constraints and tensions concerning these two dimensions. The findings from the interviews suggested three common understandings of this phenomenon among participants working in communication and CSR for companies in Slovenia: (1) CSR as an economic investment, (2) CSR as a tool for being ethical, and (3) CSR as being value-driven.

The Economic Dimension of CSR
To begin with, the findings indicated that participants in this study employed a rather instrumental view of CSR as an *economic investment*. Seven of our participants understood CSR (in Slovene, CSR is commonly referred to as "social responsibility") in terms of economic benefits or advantages that such corporate efforts can bring to a company while adding to society at large. Maks, Director of a public relations agency, described CSR as an "investment." Similarly, other practitioners also perceived CSR as being a good way for a company to sustain its business and relationships with its stakeholders, while also contributing to the greater good of

society. The comment of Head of Communications for a manufacturing company Aleksandra is typical of the sample's sentiment in this respect:

> I believe it would be responsible from the one who takes care of social responsibility that he does not forget that one needs to create value for certain stakeholder groups. With this, one creates value for owners of the company, of course, but also others. Here I would not put aside the economic aspect. … That the one who invests money in a certain socially responsible activity asks himself what value does he create.

Aleksandra went on to suggest that "in each decision making [process] about what to invest in there should be a check list [for] what value does it bring." According to her, such criteria "are critical also because these are otherwise very subjective issues."

The findings also suggested that such "value" creation, as well as the "economic success" that CSR can bring along to an organization, were commonly problematized in light of a lack of financial resources. In fact, notions of CSR as an *expense* were evident in the interviews with practitioners working in companies of various sizes. Four participants suggested that scarce budgets may limit a company's involvement in CSR, while two participants said that evaluating expenses used for CSR projects is important. Such results may be interpreted with respect to the economic crisis (and a rather slow recovery from the crisis) in Slovenia, as well as through the position of the Slovenian economic market that many companies in this country need to cope with. Indeed, Rok, a CEO of an advertising company, stated that some corporate owners "are maybe in a tougher position because they have to deal with survival more so than with some social activities." According to him, it was therefore "important to find a balance." Two other participants also described the current situation in Slovenia being prone to various societal problems, such as increasing poverty. Timotej, who worked in Corporate Communications for a large retail company, commented that due to a lack of "social transfers" provided by the state and its institutions, "the pressure on companies is so much higher." In this sense, CSR was seen by participants as being more than just companies' economic responsibility for profit-making (Carroll, 1991). Rather, the interviewees considered other conditions that are specific to this cultural sociocultural and political environment (e.g., expectations toward companies engaging in CSR projects due to a lack of support by the government).

Despite such challenges, the findings indicated that participants shared a rather optimistic view of the crisis situation, and the ways in which their respective companies engage (or could engage) in CSR. For instance, Barbara, Environmental Manager in a telecommunications company, stated:

> Currently, the situation in Slovenia is really more difficult and you can see it everywhere. But there are still enough actions that you can join, where there is no need for a lot of costs … It is still possible. [We] search for other alternatives so that you can still keep that responsibility in the company.

In this sense, CSR was seen as worthwhile to proceed with and/or invest in regardless of its cost. Indeed, in considering CSR as an investment, participants described CSR also as a *self-help effort*. Specifically, three participants noted that CSR can help companies succeed. Sanja, who served as a Head of Marketing and Public Relations in a recruitment company, stated that her company's CSR efforts may not "result directly in our business results" but the company is

"aware that we benefit from [socially responsible voluntary activities] as well." She further suggested that "One is that you help yourself because with your actions you create your environment and this environment then has an impact on you. The second thing is maybe this philosophical aspect … what you do affects how you feel." In a similar manner, Eva, who worked in corporate communications in the telecommunications sector, said that "in the first place companies do [CSR] for themselves … because then they can always tell to [their] consumers [that they] do [CSR]." She further elaborated that if her own company says it does CSR, employees are able to pass such a message onto their consumers so that they can "in some way, follow this example."

The Ethical Dimension of CSR

In addition to the economic dimension of CSR, this study also explored how practitioners perceived CSR with respect to its ethical dimensions. The findings revealed that participants commonly viewed CSR as *being ethical*. For five participants, CSR was an outcome of ethics including organizational norms and values, as typified in Maks's comment: "Social responsibility is a consequence of some ethical standards, if you ask me. If part of your ethical norms is that you will help people in need, that you will not look away, then social responsibility is a logical consequence of your ethical norms." In fact, all participants perceived ethics and CSR as being related to each other in one way or another. Again, Ana's response can be used as an illustration. She said: "if you don't have ethics, if you don't have morals, if you are not at least somewhat aware what all this social responsibility means, then you will have [a] hard time [to] follow such (standards) of what is right and what is wrong." For one of the participants, Rok, there was no real difference between these two terms: "Social responsibility is a more concrete term that people find it easier to imagine. They cannot imagine ethics. … This means, there is a one hundred percent relationship [between the two], but it is stated differently."

However, it is important to note that participants did not see the ethical and economic dimensions as independent or exclusive from one another, but rather as interrelated. Such findings correspond with previous research on the economic and ethical (moral) dimensions of CSR as co-existing (e.g., Dhanesh, 2015a). For instance, Aleksandra stated that, as a "clearly written business category," CSR can only exist if "the company has made its business ethical standards clear." In a similar manner, Suzana, who worked as a public relations agency executive, shared a her opinion of the link between the economic and ethical dimensions of CSR:

> There has been quite many debates about that, also in our field. Of course many people then accuse companies that [with CSR] they hope to have some economic interest and so on. But in reality these accusations are nonsense to me. Because if someone does a good job, if he sets an example to others and encourages that others also get involved in such projects, then I don't see a reason for what he does wrong or what he does bad. Even if he has an economic interest.

Suzana added that she does not see such coexistence as being problematic.

Finally, the results of this study suggested that notions of ethics being a critical component of CSR were also problematized by participants' perception of CSR as a set of values. In this sense, CSR was perceived as *value-driven* (Kim & Reber, 2008), and understood beyond the economic and ethical dimensions of CSR as such. In particular, two interviewees noted that CSR may mean more than just being ethical. Timotej disclosed that CSR and ethics

may be related, but not always. He illustrated his point with the following example: "If we talk about the support for athletes, I would have a hard time saying that this is ethical. Maybe it is, but generally [it is] not." He went on to suggest that in some cases there might be other "levels" of CSR at play that do not necessarily concern ethics. In a similar manner, Maja, a Senior Consultant at a public relations agency, described CSR as a "much broader term." She explained: "[CSR] is not just a matter of ethics, but … what I find perhaps even more important are values. Because ethics is more on a declarative level, whereas values are something that guides your everyday behavior." According to Maja, ethics can then be regarded as "a compass" that can lead CSR efforts.

Understanding CSR as *value-driven*—rather than with an ethical vs. economic prism—suggests that the ways participants in this study viewed CSR was dependent not only on the environmental factors (e.g., lack of financial resources due to the crisis) but also on practitioners' individual values and beliefs (Kim & Reber, 2008). For instance, Maja, when asked how she would perceive CSR in light of the ethical and economic dimensions of CSR, stated:

> I would say that it is neither one nor the other. I think it is very much a matter of value. Meaning, what is your belief. Something that you just believe is it is good … or you work or operate according to those values. … Social responsibility can nevertheless also be profitable. But if this is your main goal, that you will be socially responsible to make money, then you missed the purpose here. So for me, more than a question of ethics or being economically justified, it is a matter of value.

The importance of values—and value alignment, respectively—was commonly emphasized by other practitioners as well. Specifically, five interviewees provided examples of value relevance, such as rejecting a client's offer or a project that speaks against their individual and/or organizational values, and choosing who to work with during their companies' hiring processes.

Yet participants' perceptions of CSR as *value-driven* can be further complicated by other constraints and opportunities for companies to engage in CSR. For instance, Maja shared that having values "written down somewhere" is different from having those values actually guide you. She offered that meeting certain values, such as complying with regulation, may also be seen as socially responsible. However, she questioned whether such "very minimum level" of CSR is all that a company can "give away." Maks, her colleague in the same public relations agency, stated: "I am sure that sometimes, somewhere a certain company acts against local laws, values, beliefs, if it thinks that it does something good." Differently, two participants also spoke of concern with value alignment and value prioritization, when individual and organizational values and/or priorities are in conflict. For instance, Timotej described his active involvement in CSR and other voluntary work: "Not only at work … I often do other things when I really didn't need to, and given that I have relatively little time, I still do it. On the other hand, this of course means that I'm not home. Now, if this is ethical. We have a certain norm that we call family." Yet another participant, Maks, questioned how such value alignment might work when a person performs two different roles: "In that role of a capitalist … you're not interested. What interests you is the value of [your] share. … when you expect certain return [on the investment], the last thing you will ask is how they're making their money." Here he offered the instance when an

employee of a company may also be a shareholder, which may present a tension in ways a person behaves in what she or he consider a socially responsible way.

Taken together, the findings offer in an insight into interrelated, rather than exclusive nuances in the ways participants in this study understood and problematized CSR with respect to its economic and ethical dimensions, including their own work in this area. In the following section, we further discuss these findings, while also contextualize them within the broader sociocultural and national environment of Slovenia, a country that has not been widely covered by public relations literature.

Discussion

This study went beyond the instrumental and normative views of CSR commonly used in public relations literature, and thus used the interpretive lens to explore public relations practitioners' perceptions of CSR (Dhanesh, 2015a; May, 2011). Specifically, we examined the case of practitioners working in Slovenia to aid in understanding how CSR is perceived with respect to its economic and ethical dimensions. By bringing into focus three common understandings of CSR in this country, we provided new empirical insights into practitioners' perceptions of different dimensions of CSR by taking into account the socioeconomic and political environment in which they operate. This study's contributions to research and practice, as driven by its main findings, are further discussed in the following paragraphs.

First, this study suggests that perceptions of CSR among practitioners in Slovenia may need to be understood as an *investment-expense duality.* In other words, seeing CSR as an investment, or something worthwhile to invest in, may explain *why* some participants found it necessary to explain the importance of having necessary resources to be able to engage in CSR. Indeed, participants reported a lack of financial resources as one of the constraints preventing companies from actively engaging in CSR. Such notions may be partly explained by the economic crisis that has hit Slovenia in recent years, while the recovery after this crisis appears to be still ongoing. For instance, searching for alternatives, and being innovative in using smaller budgets, was something that two participants mentioned as valuable and needed to keep CSR initiatives going, despite the economic and sociopolitical circumstances.

In addition, understanding CSR as an *investment-expense duality* can also be explained in the broader context of CSR development in the Slovenian socioeconomic and political environment that appears to be rather slow (Golob, 2015). Participants' emphasis on the economic value of CSR as a way a company can "help oneself" may suggests that the understanding of CSR was rather instrumental, and thus viewed as an instrument or a tool that helps companies to meet their economic responsibilities. In this sense, the concern that participants in this study put forward was not whether or not CSR was an integral, sustainable part of companies' core operation that contributes to society. Rather, the comprehension among participants was that companies themselves can gain from being involved in CSR efforts. Accordingly, public relations (communication) was commonly regarded as a function responsible for, and capable of, driving such efforts in the Slovenian context. Following such considerations, this study contends that a culture-sensitive approach to studying practitioners' perceptions of CSR is, indeed, needed for a thorough understanding of the link between public

relations and CSR—that is, one that does not undermine, or ignore, a culturally specific understanding of CSR among practitioners.

Second, this study points to the interrelated nature of dimensions of CSR that ought to be taken into consideration when studying public relations practitioners' perceptions of such corporate practice, globally. Such findings partly correspond with Carroll (1999) who suggested that different responsibilities that fall under CSR should be fulfilled simultaneously and not by following a specific order (i.e., each responsibility at the time). While ethics was commonly seen by participants as closely connected to CSR (whether as the basis for, or a consequence of, CSR), one can learn from their answers that views of the link between ethics and profit-making can be much more complex than solely viewed as an 'either–or' concern. The findings suggested that practitioners took into account both the economic and ethical aspects of CSR in that involvement in CSR not only helps companies succeed in their business, but it can also contribute to the society by "helping" and "doing good." In this sense, the economic and ethical dimensions appear to be interrelated rather than independent from one another, whereby these findings also support previous research exploring such link (e.g., Dhanesh, 2015a).

It is important to note that our findings also point to other dimensions of CSR in participants' understanding of this phenomenon. As one of participants noted, companies in Slovenia might be under greater pressure to be involved in CSR, given that current social programs by the state are limited. Such results can, again, be contextualized in the light of a relatively low interest in CSR by the government (Golob, 2015), forcing companies to be more pro-active in engaging socially responsible efforts beyond its economic responsibilities (Carroll, 1991).

Finally, this study also brings to light other constraints and tensions that participants associated with such corporate practice, thereby, adding to the individual level (rather than solely the organizational level) of analyzing practitioners' perceptions of CSR in this country (May, 2008). The findings from the interviews revealed the challenges and concerns that participants identified in regard to CSR as well as their involvement in, and work within, this area—that is, next the aforementioned contextual constraints (e.g., struggle with financial resources). Common examples of such nuances in their perceptions were tensions concerning value alignment and value prioritization (e.g., employee vs. shareholder role, family vs. organizational values).

Specifically, there are two implications of this study that are worthy of discussion in this respect. First, by focusing on the challenges and tensions that participants perceived and/or experienced regarding CSR, we illustrated, empirically, the ways in which individuals who work in the field of public relations go about problematizing CSR work. As such, this empirical study responds to previous literature concerning different meanings, interests, and values that public relations practitioners need to navigate through when considering CSR, including their work in this area (Dhanesh, 2012; Dhanesh, 2013; Kim & Kim, 2010; May, 2008).

Second, the findings of this study also point to critical areas in studying practitioners' perceptions of CSR, and their own involvement in CSR, as *value-driven*, whereby their individual values and interests should not be taken aside (Kim & Reber, 2008; May, 2008). While empirical insights concerning this issue may still be scarce in public relations literature, as noted by Kim and Reber (2008), public relations practitioners' personal values and beliefs are important to take into consideration in order to better understand the role of public relations in CSR. Although we acknowledge that more empirical exploration is needed in this respect, this

study nevertheless made an empirical attempt to put forward the questions regarding value alignment and value prioritization in CSR work, and the ways such tensions may challenge CSR practice in the field of public relations in distinct cultural environments (May, 2008).

Taken together, this study contributes to the literature on public relations and CSR by focusing on a case of practitioners' perceptions of CSR in Slovenia where such questions were not widely explored. Concretely, it delved deeper into how practitioners in this country came to understand and problematize CSR, including their work in this area, to aid in understanding of the link between public relations and CSR, globally.

Practical Implications

In addition to its empirical contributions, this study also offers implications for public relations and CSR practice. First, this study provides insights into the manifestation of CSR (including its meaning) in the Slovenia, a member of the EU, which can help inform practitioners' decision-making when planning and managing specific CSR programs and activities in this country and in the EU. As illustrated by the findings, such an outlook of unique environmental conditions can reveal potential practical constraints pertaining to practitioners' CSR work in their environment (e.g., CSR as an expense vs. CSR as an investment), while also point to (needed) solutions by practitioners and their respective companies for addressing such concerns in the future (e.g., taking into account the interrelatedness of multiple dimensions of CSR). We believe that such a culture-sensitive approach to CSR would prove frutitful and insightful for public relations practitioners working in other countries as well.

Furthermore, by uncovering unique features that may inform and shape the ways practitioners in Slovenia carry out CSR work, this study alludes to the need for considering the socioeconomic and political environment in which CSR strategies, projects, and initiatives get realized not only in, but *across,* diverse countries (Sriramesh & Vercic, 2009). As such, this research also serves as a practical case to spur further discussions about the development of CSR as a global practice.

Limitations and Future Research

We acknowledge that there are several limitations of this study. We used convenience sampling, with only 12 participants who expressed interest in participating in this research. While the purpose of this study was not to generalize our findings to the broader community of communication and CSR practitioners working for companies in Slovenia, a greater number of interviews could provide a deeper understanding of different meanings and values that individuals in various organizations associate with CSR. Thus, we recognize that differences in the size of companies represented in the sample, as well as the industries in which these companies operate, could have influenced the ways our participants understood and practiced CSR (for instance, given the financial constraints in conducting CSR projects).

We suggest that future studies look closely into practitioners' perceptions in companies of distinct sizes and sectors to provide a deeper insight into how these two aspects may shape

how practitioners understand and practice CSR. In addition, we propose that scholars address similar questions in other sociocultural environments in order to contribute to a more global insight into the ways CSR is understood, and practiced, in different parts of the world.

Conclusion

This study presents evidence on CSR from Slovenia, a country from which such data are not easily forthcoming. Its aim was to look beyond the instrumental and normative approaches to studying CSR by delving deeper into meanings and values that practitioners in this environment associated with CSR, generally, as well as with respect to their work in CSR area. The findings point to the complexity of dimensions of CSR that, along with other factors, shape and inform the ways practitioners perceived CSR and their involvement in CSR projects. In addition, this study identified the contextual constraints and tensions in participants' perceptions of CSR and their work, while it also brought to light the individual (and not solely the organizational) level of analyzing the economic and ethical dimensions of CSR. It is our aim and hope that by addressing some of the complexities concerning these two dimensions, this study will open up new questions concerning the ways in which other public relations scholars may approach the issue at hand, while also appreciate the need to gather data from diverse sociocultural and political environments.

Acknowledgments

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