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ORIGINAL PAPER

Saving the World? How CSR Practitioners Live Their Calling by Constructing Different Types of Purpose in Three Occupational Stages

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Abstract

Much attention in the meaningful work literature has been devoted to calling as an orientation toward work characterized by a strong sense of purpose and a prosocial motivation beyond self-gain. Nonetheless, debate remains as to whether individuals change or maintain their calling, and especially whether they live their calling differently in different occupational stages. In this article, we respond to this conundrum through an analysis of the corporate social responsibility (CSR) occupation—substantiated by interviews with 57 CSR practitioners from Swedish international companies who are living their calling. We demonstrate that social/commercial tensions affect these CSR practitioners, fueled by a divide between their social aspirations and the commercial goals, and prompt them to respond in a way that impacts how they construct the purpose of their work. Subsequently, we induce three stages of the CSR occupation—*early-, mid- and late-stage*—and conceptualize three types of purpose in each stage—*activistic*, *win–win* and *corporate purpose*. By uncovering how and why CSR practitioners respond to social/commercial tensions and construct different types of purpose in each stage of the CSR occupation, we show that individuals can live the same calling in multiple ways. Hence, our article advances the meaningful work literature as well as studies of micro-CSR.

Keywords Meaningful work · Calling · Purpose · Occupational stages · Social/commercial tensions · CSR practitioners · International companies

Introduction

In a bid to better understand meaningful work (Bellah et al., 1985; Lepisto & Pratt, 2017), calling has recently gained momentum among scholars (Cinque et al., 2020; Lysova et al., 2018; Schabram & Maitlis, 2017). This is defined as an orientation toward work, characterized by a strong sense of purpose and a prosocial motivation beyond self-gain (Bunderson & Thompson, 2009; Dik & Duffy, 2009; Duffy et al., 2012). While originating from humanism, a calling is often attributed to work that addresses human and environmental (hereafter: social) issues (Michaelson & Tosti-Kharas, 2019; Wrzesniewski et al., 1997, 2003) and therefore is seen as more than "just a job" (Molloy & Foust, 2016). A calling is deemed inherently ethical as it allows individuals to accomplish their prosocial ambitions—often through bottom-up initiatives in their organization (Dik & Shimizu, 2019; Dobrow & Tosti-Kharas, 2012; Elangovan et al., 2010). Notably, a calling needs to be lived for work to be perceived as meaningful. When living a calling, the

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work is seen as meaningful in that it has a purpose. This has practical significance because it is conducive to fulfillment and higher psychological well-being at the individual level (Berg et al., 2010; Hirschi et al., 2019; Lysova & Khapova, 2019) but also to superior commitment and identification with their organization (Bloom et al., 2021; Duffy et al., 2012; Kim et al., 2018; Lysova et al., 2018).

However, substantial debate remains as to whether individuals change or maintain their calling (Dobrow, 2013; Hirschi et al., 2019; Kolodinsky et al., 2018). In particular, little is known as to whether individuals live their calling differently in different occupational stages. This debate finds its roots in the modern formulation of a calling as an orientation toward work, where the purpose is derived after a long and self-oriented journey of "searching for" and then "finding" it (Berg et al., 2010; Duffy & Sedlacek, 2007; Wrzesniewski et al., 2003).

In this article, we problematize this modern formulation of a calling as the end of a self-oriented journey at a specific point. Instead, we propose to envision a calling as a point of departure where the journey of living such calling is characterized by organizational tensions and responses to these—rather than a process of inward-looking soul-searching. Hence, we argue for the need to account for the ways through which individuals try to attenuate the tensions that unfold from working in organizations. Individuals are often subjected to tensions because, as they embark on an occupation, they access organizations in which collective expectations frequently collide with their calling (Berkelaar & Buzzanell, 2015; Michaelson, 2021; Vuori et al., 2012). These tensions are likely to spur reflections about the purpose of their work, encouraging individuals to embrace responses that have a bearing on how they construct such purpose. Although individuals display distinct behaviors at work in relation to their occupational stage (Arthur & Rousseau, 2001; Evetts, 1992), systematic evidence on the ways they attenuate tensions as they live their calling and subsequently construct their purpose remains embryonic. Understanding the latter is essential not only to comprehend what makes individuals perceive their work to be meaningful as they grow professionally, but also the implications of living a calling and the future of work. This raises multiple ethical questions for organizations, including their moral obligation to make work meaningful (Michaelson & Tosti-Kharas, 2020; Michaelson et al., 2014).

In light of this oversight, our study offers a qualitative analysis of the CSR occupation through interviews with 57 CSR practitioners employed by 52 Swedish international companies and who are living their calling. While positioning our article in line with broader conversations on micro-CSR (Brès et al., 2019; Girschik et al., 2020; Gond & Moser, 2021; Tams & Marshall, 2011), we draw attention to the CSR occupation as an ideal setting to study meaningful work (Aguinis & Glavas, 2019; Michaelson et al., 2014; Mitra & Buzzanell, 2017). Although not all CSR practitioners are altruistic and actively seek to attain a common good, many have strong ideals and passion for social issues (Carollo & Guerci, 2018; Fontana, 2020; Wesselink & Osagie, 2020; Wright & Nyberg, 2012). Examining these CSR practitioners is particularly important because they often grapple with social/commercial tensions as they try to reconcile their social aspirations with the commercial goals of their work. These tensions provoke inner conflicts and ethical dilemmas, prompting them to continuously reflect upon the purpose of their work (Brès et al., 2019; Wickert & de Bakker, 2018; Wright & Nyberg, 2017). While echoing recent calls to further examine the relationship between calling and meaningful work (Dik & Shimizu, 2019; Lysova et al., 2018) and integrate it into the context of the CSR occupation (Aguinis & Glavas, 2019; Carollo & Guerci, 2018), our article asks the following question: *How do the CSR practitioners who are living their calling construct the purpose of their work?*

We offer three main theoretical contributions.

First, we advance the meaningful work literature by demonstrating that individuals construct the purpose of their work differently as they live their calling in different occupational stages. Based on our data from the CSR practitioners, we conceptualize *activistic*, *win–win* and *corporate purpose* in the CSR occupation. Against this backdrop, we indicate that individuals holding the same calling can live it in multiple ways, and that a calling is an inherently contested and malleable orientation.

By uncovering *how* CSR practitioners construct different types of purpose from their work, we make a second contribution to the meaningful work literature. In particular, we identify *emotional*, *identity* and *strategic struggles* and indicate that individuals differently perceive and respond to tensions in the organization depending on whether they are in the *early-, mid-* and *late-stage* of their occupation. This allows us to propose that a calling represents a point of departure—rather than the end of a journey—to better understand meaningful work.

Our article finally advances the literature on micro-CSR by outlining *why* CSR practitioners reconfigure their social aspirations. While drawing on the lived experiences of CSR practitioners in three occupational stages, we provide an account of the problem of the commodification of CSR work. In doing so, we offer important implications for business ethics and the future of CSR as meaningful work.

In the next section, we present calling as part of the literature on meaningful work. Before unveiling the findings, we present our research methods. Our article concludes with a discussion on the theoretical contributions, implications for business ethics and the future of CSR as meaningful work as well as its limitations and avenues for future research.

Theoretical Background

Calling as Meaningful Work

Calling, meaningful work and purpose are three concepts that are tightly connected and often defined with overlap. Work is perceived as meaningful when it is personally gratifying and ethically valuable, beyond monetary rewards (Hurst, 2014; Inkson et al., 2014; Lysova et al., 2019; Michaelson, 2021; Rosso et al., 2010). Meaningful work is a "subjective experience of the existential significance or purpose" (Lips-Wiersma & Morris, 2009) and is related to living a "meaningful life" of contributing to the greater good, a higher cause (Michaelson & Tosti-Kharas, 2020). Meaningful work requires individuals in organizations to ask "why am I here?" (Pratt & Ashforth, 2003, p. 311) and has been regarded as an outcome of leaders' top-down policies to cultivate a morally responsive climate and redesign job tasks (Bailey et al., 2019; Carton, 2018; Costas & Kärreman, 2013). Recently, meaningful work scholars have, however, suggested the significance of pursuing a more humanistic pathway that views the meaningfulness of work as rooted in a sense of self (Lepisto & Pratt, 2017; Lips-Wiersma & Morris, 2009; Michaelson, 2021; Michaelson & Tosti-Kharas, 2020). This has prompted the examination of individuals' bottom-up efforts to manage and embody their feelings of meaningfulness (Inkson et al., 2014; Rosso et al., 2010; Vuori et al., 2012), thereby bringing attention to calling. Although research on calling is relatively unestablished (Byington et al., 2019; Dik & Shimizu, 2019), it is increasingly "central"[1] to examine the meaningfulness of work (Lepisto & Pratt, 2017, p. 101).

Calling is rooted in the neoclassical connotation that God exists as the external caller (Novak, 1996), reiterated in Dik and Duffy's (2009, p. 327) conception of "transcendent summons." This aligns with Martin Luther and John Calvin's reformation of the Church in the sixteenth century where a calling is viewed as a sense of duty and sacrifice. However, meaningful work scholars today agree on a modern and secular formulation of calling as an orientation toward work, characterized by a strong sense of purpose and a prosocial motivation beyond self-gain (Bunderson & Thompson, 2009; Hall & Chandler, 2005). The purpose is often seen as "highly valued [and] overarching goals" (Lysova et al., 2019, p. 376).

The prerequisite of calling in its modern formulation is an inner journey of "searching for" it (Dobrow, 2013; Duffy & Sedlacek, 2007). In this context, a purpose is the reflection of an individual's self, inner fulfillment and passion (Dik & Shimizu, 2019; Dobrow & Tosti-Kharas, 2012). Calling, seen as an inner journey, provides space for self-discovery and the realization of a purpose (Hall & Chandler, 2005), while embodying an ethical platform on which individuals can act prosocially (Michaelson & Tosti-Kharas, 2019) and feel that their work is meaningful (Bloom et al., 2021; Dik & Duffy, 2009; Duffy et al., 2012; Molloy & Foust, 2016).

Fundamentally, individuals need to live their calling to feel that their work is meaningful. Being unable to live a calling leads to negative emotions and can be worse than having no calling at all (Duffy & Autin, 2013). Bellah et al. (1985) for instance show that living a calling makes people feel that their work is meaningful to the extent that it becomes indistinguishable from their nonwork activities. As a result, a calling becomes analytically distinct from "having a job" because work is seen as more than "just a job" or "just a career" (Bunderson & Thompson, 2009; Molloy & Foust, 2016; Rosso et al., 2010). A prosocial- and other-oriented motivation helps individuals manifest their self while accumulating value at the individual, organization and society levels (Wrzesniewski et al., 1997, 2003). For instance, Dobrow and Tosti-Kharas (2011, p. 1001) discuss calling as "a consuming, meaningful passion people experience toward a domain." Still, Elangovan et al., (2010, p. 430) add that it is an orientation toward prosocial work and based on an intrinsic motivation "spurred and directed by particular [social] causes."

The literature has provided abundant evidence on how individuals live their calling, principally with work requiring voluntary efforts in connection with social causes such as peace, environmentalism, education and public health (Elangovan et al., 2010). These studies have examined such examples as zookeepers (Bunderson & Thompson, 2009), animal shelter workers (Schabram & Maitlis, 2017), theater actors (Cinque et al., 2020), nurses (Afsar et al., 2018), video game company founders (Lysova & Khapova, 2019) and clergy parish ministers (Sturges et al., 2019). Lysova and Khapova (2019), for instance, connect the calling of video game directors with their gaming experiences during childhood.

Living a calling can also be associated with negative consequences or conceal a dark side. Meaningful work scholars have for instance discussed about a higher psychological burden (Berg et al., 2010; Berkelaar & Buzzanell, 2015), including workaholism and addiction (Cinque et al., 2020; Hirschi et al., 2019). Despite these concerns, living a calling is commonly credited with spurring desirable outcomes at the individual level, including fulfilment and happiness (Berg et al., 2010; Novak, 1996), enthusiasm and passion (Dobrow & Tosti-Kharas, 2012), less anxiety and stress

[1] There are opposite fields of research that try to understand meaningful work, beyond calling. Spurk, Hirschi, and Dries (2019), for instance, compare objective with subjective career success based on the evaluation of personally meaningful career outcomes and the importance of resources to attain personal and contextual aims. We thank one of the reviewers for highlighting the connection between career success and meaningful work.

(Afsar et al., 2018; Duffy et al., 2017), nonwork enrichment (Hirschi et al., 2019) and stronger self-identity (Duffy & Sedlacek, 2007). At the organizational level, it is conducive to affectionate commitment (Duffy et al., 2012; Kim et al., 2018), less turnover (Afsar et al., 2018), and occupational identification and engagement (Duffy et al., 2014; Lysova et al., 2018; Xie et al., 2016; Zhang et al., 2021), which all ultimately raise performance (Bunderson & Thompson, 2009).

While the meaningful work literature on calling has progressed "from infancy to toddlerhood" (Dik & Shimizu, 2019, p. 333), the question remains as to whether individuals change or maintain their calling over time (Dobrow, 2013; Hirschi et al., 2019; Kolodinsky et al., 2018). In particular, little is known as to whether individuals live their calling differently in different occupational stages. This debate finds its roots in the modern formulation of a calling as orientation toward work whose purpose is derived after a self-oriented journey and search for self-actualization (Berg et al., 2010; Duffy & Sedlacek, 2007; Wrzesniewski et al., 2003).

In this article, we problematize this modern formulation of calling and suggest focusing on calling as the start of a journey rather than the end of it. Individuals, as they embark on an occupation, become part of organizations as social systems (Schabram & Maitlis, 2017; Vuori et al., 2012). They are often exposed to tensions because of the divide between their own agenda and the collective—often commercial—expectations of their organization (Berkelaar & Buzzanell, 2015; Michaelson, 2021; Michaelson et al., 2014). Against this backdrop, we argue that these tensions may prompt individuals to try to attenuate them, to further reconsider the purpose of their work and to live their calling in multiple ways. Although individuals behave distinctively in relation to their occupational stage (Arthur & Rousseau, 2001; Evetts, 1992), relatively little evidence exists about their responses to these tensions and the ways these may impact how they construct the purpose of their work. We bridge this gap through an analysis of the CSR occupation and, more specifically, by examining how the social/commercial tensions of CSR practitioners influence how they construct their purpose.

Social/Commercial Tensions of CSR Practitioners

Under mounting pressure to demonstrate their engagement with society, companies' introduction of CSR work has increasingly appealed to the interest of scholars (Aguinis & Glavas, 2019; Borglund et al., 2021; Mitra & Buzzanell, 2017; Prasad & Elmes, 2005; Tams & Marshall, 2011; Wright & Nyberg, 2012). In this article, we embrace broader conversations on micro-CSR (Brès & Gond, 2014; Brès et al., 2019; Carollo & Guerci, 2018; Girschik et al., 2020) to study the lived experiences of CSR practitioners. CSR practitioners are a key group of professionals officially appointed to help their company satisfy their social stakeholders' needs (Margolis & Walsh, 2003) and who often support the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (Rasche et al., 2017; Williams et al., 2019). Although CSR practitioners are differently labeled in the literature, including CSR managers (Risi & Wickert, 2017), CSR workers (Fontana, 2020), sustainability specialists (Wright & Nyberg, 2012) and sustainability practitioners (Mitra & Buzzanell, 2017), scholars concur about their function as social change agents. They collaborate with multiple departments to develop and promote CSR work, thereby formulating CSR policies and reports (Brès et al., 2019; Risi & Wickert, 2017; Tams & Marshall, 2011).

CSR practitioners are especially valuable in studies of meaningful work. According to Aguinis and Glavas (2019, p. 1057), "CSR expands the notion of work to go beyond a task, job, intraindividual, intraorganizational, and profit perspective and provides an ideal conduit for individuals to seek and find meaningfulness through work." At the same time, the way CSR practitioners perceive their work is largely conditioned by tensions in their workplace. As Gond and Moser (2021, p. 7) lay out in their explanation of the psychological and sociological streams of the micro-CSR literature, CSR practitioners "perceive, evaluate, and react to CSR" a priori at the level of the self, but are prone to tensions that emerge a posteriori and beyond the self as they "concretely experience and carry out CSR" in their company.

Although not all CSR practitioners are altruistic and actively seek to attain a common good, many have a burning passion and enthusiasm to address social issues that draw them toward joining the CSR occupation (Fontana, 2020; Wesselink & Osagie, 2020). The insatiable motivation of these CSR practitioners to fulfil their social aspirations helps them perceive their work as deeply meaningful, irrespective of monetary opportunities (Brès et al., 2019; Mitra & Buzzanell, 2017). However, once they join the CSR occupation, they are expected to meet the social and commercial goals of their work concurrently (Carollo & Guerci, 2018; Daudigeos, 2013). As "they are permanently navigating and oscillating between these two [social and commercial] contradicting discourses" (Brès et al., 2019, pp. 249–250), CSR practitioners grapple with social/commercial tensions and seek to make sense of their work (Hahn et al., 2014; Wesselink & Osagie, 2020). These tensions result in negotiating and repositioning their social aspirations (Daudigeos, 2013), often to win the favor of their colleagues (Wright & Nyberg, 2012, 2017).

Subsequently, to capture CSR practitioners' feelings of work meaningfulness, it is key to understand how they engage with these tensions. Wickert and de Bakker (2018), for instance, propose that CSR practitioners strategically promote social issues to suppress their tensions and build

legitimacy in the company; however, this may also lead to psychological damage and social marginalization at work (Mitra & Buzzanell, 2017; Prasad & Elmes, 2005). Fontana (2020) shows that CSR practitioners in Japanese multinational enterprises "accept" he useless tasks they are assigned due to the decoupled nature of their work in the company. This aligns with Brès and Gond's (2014) argument that CSR work can lead to commodification and poor credibility, highlighting the difficulty of pairing social aspirations with commercial goals.

With the scope to better understand meaningful work and the implications of living a calling, it is significant to examine how CSR practitioners construct their purpose. This is especially the case for those CSR practitioners who are living their calling and therefore put a considerable effort in reconciling their social aspirations with the commercial goals of their work. This is what we, in this article, aim to explore.

Research Methods

To answer our research question, our study adopts a qualitative approach based on primary data gleaned from exploratory, open-ended, in-depth and semi-structured interviews (Golden-Biddle, 2020; Langley & Klag, 2019). Qualitative research is a preferred method of social constructivist inquiry suitable "to identify the multiple realities to be found in the data" (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 40). Understanding how individuals live their calling demands asking them to reflect on the nature of their work (Bunderson & Thompson, 2009). According to Dik and Shimizu (2019, p. 328), "qualitative studies reveal the unique and complex ways that people discern and interpret their callings, offering a very personal and in-depth look at participants' lived experiences." Specifically, we used interviews to capture how CSR practitioners experience and react to the social/commercial tensions (Carollo & Guerci, 2018; Wickert & de Bakker, 2018).

Theoretical Sampling

Our study is operationalized through 66 interviews with 57 CSR practitioners employed by 52[2] Swedish international companies that exemplify the best practice of CSR work. Swedish international companies have been applauded for investing heavily in solving social issues in recent decades to the extent that they "can effectively serve as inspiration for CSR" work globally (Strand et al., 2015, p. 13). In particular, they were among the first to adopt CSR reporting, encouraged by the Swedish state (Strand, 2013).

Consistent with Risi and Wickert's (2017) research approach, we distinguished the CSR practitioners in the sample based on their title, either manager ($N = 28$) or senior manager ($N = 29$), as shown in Table 1. Compared with managers, senior managers had more responsibility as representatives of the CSR department; however, their title did not reflect their occupational stage, as some early-stage CSR practitioners were already senior managers, while some late-stage CSR practitioners were *only* managers. This shows that professional attitudes in Swedish international companies are often based on merit decisions (Strand et al., 2015). We recruited CSR practitioners across 10 industries, ranging from the financial to the real estate industries.

On average, each interview lasted 1 h and 34 min—from a minimum of 45 min to a maximum of 2 h and 50 min.[3] This accrued to 103 recorded hours notwithstanding the unrecorded conversations before and after the formal interview. Given the sensitivity of the topic, the extended interview time was crucial to minimize any possible social desirability response bias and capture the value CSR practitioners assigned to their work (Randall & Fernandes, 1991).

Of the CSR practitioners, 20 identified themselves as male and 37 as female. Except for Wilma, they all had at least a Bachelor's degree and most held a Master's. Except for Greta, they were all Swedish citizens. Their age range also varied from their early twenties to their mid-sixties. We adopted pseudonyms in compliance with nondisclosure agreements.

To ensure internal validity and rigor in the sample (Yin, 2003), we shortlisted all the CSR practitioners based on the following three eligibility criteria. First, because of the definition of CSR practitioners as professionals officially appointed to help their company satisfy their social stakeholders' needs (Margolis & Walsh, 2003; Risi & Wickert, 2017), all the CSR practitioners we recruited had to be situated in the CSR department. Although we carried out two additional interviews with two CSR consultants, we later excluded them from the sample due to a lack of compatibility (Brès & Gond, 2014).

Second, we interviewed only CSR practitioners who are living their calling. We asked them beforehand why they initially joined the CSR occupation, and they all confirmed they deeply loved their work, wished to continue to pursue it in the future and joined it because they felt that

[2] As shown in Table 1, there is a discrepancy in the number of interviews, CSR practitioners and companies because we interviewed 9 CSR practitioners twice given the depth of their knowledge as well as 10 CSR practitioners from five companies—two in each company.

[3] Out of 66 interviews, 4 interviews had a duration of less than one hour and 6 interviews were longer than 2 h. Three of the 4 CSR practitioners whose interview lasted less than one hour were however interviewed a second time to really capture their views and understand their lived experiences at work.

Table 1 The sample of CSR practitioners

#	Name	CSR Years	Stage	Title	Age group	Sex	Industry	Education	Interviews (66)
1	Filippa	0.5	Early	Manager	26–30	F	Retail and consumer goods	BSc, MSc, Business and Politics	(1) Face-to-face
2	Anna	0.5	Early	Manager	21–25	F	Consulting	BA, Development Studies	(1) Face-to-face and (1) phone
3	Alice	0.5	Early	Senior Manager	36–40	F	Real Estate	BSc, MSc, Business	(1) Face-to-face
4	Olivia	1	Early	Manager	26–30	F	Retail and consumer goods	BSc, MSc, Business and Sustainability	(1) Face-to-face
5	Oscar	1	Early	Manager	36–40	M	Logistics	BSc, MSc, Business	(1) Face-to-face
6	Hugo	2	Early	Manager	36–40	M	Real Estate	BSc, MSc, Business	(1) Phone
7	Klara	2	Early	Senior Manager	46–50	F	Finance	BSc, MSc, Economics	(1) Face-to-face
8	Astrid	2	Early	Senior Manager	61–65	F	Natural resources	BSc, MSc, Chemical Engineering	(1) Face-to-face
9	Agnes	2	Early	Manager	61–65	F	Finance	BSc, Business	(1) Face-to-face
10	Thea	2	Early	Manager	31–35	F	Consulting	BSc, MSc, Mechanical Engineering	(1) Face-to-face
11	Leo	3	Early	Manager	21–25	M	Real Estate	BSs, Sustainability and Geography	(2) Phone
12	Ester	3	Early	Manager	36–40	F	Finance	MSc, BSc, Economics	(1) Face-to-face
13	Axel	3	Early	Senior Manager	45–50	M	Finance	BSs, MSc, MBA, Business	(1) Face-to-face
14	Viktor	3	Early	Senior Manager	61–65	M	Natural resources	BSs, Mining Engineering	(1) Face-to-face
15	Anton	4	Mid	Senior Manager	51–55	M	Retail and consumer goods	BSc, MSc, Business	(1) Phone
16	Minna	5	Mid	Manager	31–35	F	Finance	BSc, MSc, Business	(1) Face-to-face and (1) phone
17	Sam	5	Mid	Manager	36–40	M	Gaming	BA, MSc, International Relations and politics	(1) Face-to-face
18	Elina	5	Mid	Manager	36–40	F	Consulting	BSc, MSc Business	(1) Face-to-face
19	Ebba	5	Mid	Senior Manager	41–45	F	Finance	LL. B., LL. M	(2) Face-to-face
20	Moa	5	Mid	Senior Manager	51–55	F	Natural Resources	BSc, MSc, Chemical Engineering	(2) Phone
21	Alma	6	Mid	Senior Manager	36–40	F	Real Estate	BSc, MSc Civil Engineering	(1) Face-to-face
22	Nicole	6	Mid	Senior Manager	36–40	F	Finance	BSc, MSc, Accounting	(1) Face-to-face
23	Linnea	6	Mid	Manager	41–45	F	Retail and consumer goods	BSc, Business	(1) Face-to-face
24	Julia	6	Mid	Senior Manager	56–60	F	Security	BSc, MSc, Economics	(1) Face-to-face
25	Milo	7	Mid	Senior Manager	46–50	M	Finance	BSc, Politics	(1) Face-to-face
26	Arvid	7	Mid	Senior Manager	51–55	M	Finance	BSc, MSc, PhD, Business and Finance	(2) Face-to-face
27	Carl	8	Mid	Manager	31–35	M	Consulting	LL. B., LL. M	(1) Face-to-face
28	Otto	8	Mid	Senior Manager	56–60	M	Natural Resources	BSc, Environmental Engineering	(1) Face-to-face
29	Amelia	9	Mid	Manager	31–35	F	Finance	BSc, MSc, Business	(1) Face-to-face
30	Luna	9	Mid	Manager	36–40	F	Finance	MSc, BSc, Business	(1) Face-to-face
31	Elisa	9	Mid	Manager	36–40	F	Consulting	BSc, MSc, Economics	(1) Face-to-face
32	Ture	10	Mid	Manager	36–40	M	Retail and consumer goods	BSc, MSc, PhD, Chemical Engineering	(1) Face-to-face
33	Maja	10	Mid	Manager	36–40	F	Natural resources	BSc, MSc, Business	(1) Face-to-face
34	Eddie	10	Mid	Manager	36–40	M	Retail and consumer goods	BSc, MSc, PhD, Biology and Business	(1) Face-to-face

Table 1 (continued)

#	Name	CSR Years	Stage	Title	Age group	Sex	Industry	Education	Interviews (66)
35	Elvin	11	Mid	Senior Manager	41–45	M	Finance	BSc, MSc, Business and Computer Science	(1) Face-to-face
36	Ida	12	Late	Senior Manager	36–40	F	Media	BSc, MSc, Politics and International Studies	(1) Face-to-face
37	Stella	12	Late	Manager	36–40	F	Retail and consumer goods	BSc, MSc, Environment	(1) Face-to-face
38	Ines	12	Late	Manager	36–40	F	Real Estate	BSc, MSc, Civil Engineering	(1) Face-to-face
39	Nellie	12	Late	Senior Manager	41–45	F	Manufacturing	BSc, MSc, Politics and International Relations	(1) Face-to-face
40	Isabelle	12	Late	Senior Manager	36–40	F	Retail and consumer goods	BSc, MSc Business	(1) Phone
41	Tilde	12	Late	Senior Manager	46–50	F	Finance	BSs, MSc, Business	(1) Face-to-face
42	Stina	13	Late	Manager	36–40	F	Real Estate	BSc, MSc, Environment	(1) Face-to-face
43	Felicia	13	Late	Senior Manager	51–55	F	Finance	BSc, Business	(1) Face-to-face
44	Nora	15	Late	Senior Manager	41–45	F	Finance	BSc, MSc, Business	(2) Face-to-face
45	Cornelia	15	Late	Manager	51–55	F	Finance	BA, MSc, PhD Political Science	(1) Face-to-face
46	Felix	18	Late	Manager	41–45	M	Consulting	BSc, MSc, Biology	(1) Face-to-face and (1) phone
47	Liam	16	Late	Senior Manager	41–45	M	Consulting	BSc, MSc, Civil Engineering	(1) Phone
48	Emil	18	Late	Senior Manager	41–45	M	Real Estate	BSc, MSc, Environment	(1) Face-to-face
49	Gustav	18	Late	Senior Manager	41–45	M	Natural resources	BSc, MSc, Biology	(1) Face-to-face
50	Vera	18	Late	Manager	61–65	F	Real Estate	BA, Nursing	(1) Face-to-face
51	Loui	20	Late	Manager	41–45	M	Telecommunication	BSc, Physics	(1) Face-to-face
52	Joline	20	Late	Manager	51–55	F	Finance	BSc, Environment	(1) Face-to-face
53	Colin	20	Late	Senior Manager	51–55	M	Consulting	BSc, Politics	(1) Face-to-face
54	Greta	20	Late	Senior Manager	56–60	F	Natural Resources	LL. B., LL. M	(1) Face-to-face
55	Wilma	20	Late	Manager	61–65	F	Retail and consumer goods	Fashion Certification	(2) Face-to-face
56	Svea	21	Late	Senior Manager	51–55	F	Natural Resources	LL. B., LL. M	(1) Face-to-face
57	Lisa	30	Late	Senior Manager	56–60	F	Natural Resources	BSc, Environment	(1) Face-to-face

Early Early-stage ($N=14$), *Mid* mid-stage ($N=21$), *Late* late-stage ($N=22$)

BA Bachelor of Arts, *BSc* Bachelor of Science, *MSc* Master of Science, *MBA* Master of Business Administration, *PhD* Doctorate of Philosophy, *LL. B.* Bachelor of Laws, *LL. M.* Master of Laws

they could make a difference in the world. Such response is largely warranted by cultural and institutional factors in Sweden. The Swedish society exhibits "deep-seated traditions around stakeholder engagement" and "a reverence for democracy" that explains why many Swedes support social causes (Strand et al., 2015, p. 5). Despite the growing popularity, the CSR occupation in Sweden is not particularly lucrative and most CSR practitioners continue to remain outside the top management teams (Borglund et al., 2021). To get their position, the CSR practitioners we interviewed had to go through harsh competition (e.g., Elina, Minna, Oscar) and gave up more lucrative management jobs (e.g., Carl, Cornelia, Milo). Subsequently, they may differ from those in contexts where joining CSR work is less about fulfilling social aspirations (Fontana, 2020; Wesselink & Osagie, 2020).

Finally, given the importance of Swedish international companies as examples of best practice with CSR (Strand, 2013), we focused on CSR practitioners from firms headquartered in Sweden but operating in at least one other country. Hence, we ruled out CSR practitioners working in small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). Although

we initially interviewed a CSR practitioner from a Swedish SME,[4] we excluded her before analyzing the data.

Data Collection

We collected our interview data during three sequential research phases that lasted approximately eight months, from April to December 2018. We conducted the interviews face-to-face in a meeting room at their company or at the university, but we also completed 11 interviews over the phone to accommodate the CSR practitioners' busy schedules.

During the initial phase between April 2018 and June 2018, we followed Mitra and Buzzanell's (2017) purposive sampling strategy by first screening potential candidates online based on their professional social media profile (LinkedIn). Purposive sampling aims to select participants with a variety of experiences and backgrounds to enrich the research with nonconforming viewpoints (Patton, 2002). Using purposive sampling by screening social media profiles helped us ensure that the CSR practitioners in our sample had a variety of educational backgrounds, professional experiences and industry knowledge (Mitra & Buzzanell, 2017). We detected them through keywords in Swedish—*Hållbarhetschef* (sustainability manager), *Hållbarhetsdirektör* (sustainability director), *Hållbarhet Sverige* (sustainability Sweden), and *Företagens sociala ansvar* (corporate social responsibility)—and English—*CSR manager Sweden*, *CSR director Sweden*, *Sustainability manager Sweden*, and *Sustainability director Sweden*. To increase analytical rigor, we complemented our initial list with additional candidates from our university database of CSR practitioners in Sweden who have consented to be contacted for research aims.

We formally contacted 12 CSR practitioners via email and conducted exploratory interviews with them as part of a pilot study to glean insights into meaningful work in Sweden. Pilot studies aim to test and polish the interview guide and any other data collection instrument (Bunderson & Thompson, 2009). Following Patton (2002), we started by crafting a set of broad, theory-driven queries derived from the meaningful work literature and studies of micro-CSR. We were particularly inspired by the debates in the literature as to whether people change or maintain their calling and how they derive the purpose of their work (Dobrow, 2013; Hirschi et al., 2019). Hence, we segmented the interview guide into three themes: personal journey with your work, engagement with work in the company and the value of your work. During the pilot interviews, we observed a clear phenomenological difference between the responses of the CSR practitioners depending on their years of experience with CSR work. Hence, we focused on the influence of their work tenure on their calling by including queries such as "Can you elaborate on why you decided to work in CSR?", "Has the meaning of your work changed during your career as a CSR practitioner? If so, how?", "What are the expectations of your company and colleagues about your work?", "How do you think you have changed the ways you work?", "What are your work ambitions?" and "How do you overcome work obstacles in your company?" We designed our interview guide to move from broader questions about work experiences to more personal and sensitive queries on feelings about work meaningfulness and occupational challenges.

The second phase ran between July and November 2018. In July, we formally invited about 50 CSR practitioners for an interview. Although the response rate was initially around 50%, we utilized snowball sampling to bolster the sample, resulting in interviews with 38 CSR practitioners. Garnering acceptance from CSR practitioners was facilitated by the seemingly high degree of social cohesiveness of the CSR community in Stockholm as well as the openness of CSR practitioners in Sweden to informally discuss their work outside their company. While rereading the transcripts, we noted that issues related to calling and occupational stages emerged from most interview data, channeling our analysis toward this topic.

While the number of interviews was not predetermined, we reached theoretical saturation at the end of the third phase in December 2018. As the responses from new interviews with the CSR practitioners did not provide novel information but rather corroborated they construct distinct types of purpose in relation to their occupational stage, we felt we had sufficient data to inform our theorizing and conclude the data collection process (Guest et al., 2006). During this month, we arranged 7 additional interviews with 7 new CSR practitioners as well as completed 9 follow-up interviews with 9 previously interviewed CSR practitioners. We asked them about their everyday work to validate but also disconfirm some of our prior assumptions. We remained in touch with them and maintained informal conversations after the end of the research process.

Data Analysis

We conducted all the interviews in English and audiotaped them, before transcribing them verbatim. This generated 2290 pages of cumulative transcripts, or more than 855,000 words of empirical material. We adopted abductive reasoning for our theorizing, which requires going back and forth

[4] We found that the interview of the CSR practitioner from a Swedish SME were highly compatible with the interviews from the other CSR practitioners in the sample. As a mid-stage CSR practitioner, she also perceived identity struggles in her everyday work and tried to minimize this struggle in a similar way as the other mid-stage CSR practitioners. Due to the small size of her company, we have left out this interview to strengthen the internal validity of the sample.

between empirical observations and preexisting theory to uncover new theoretical propositions (Sætre & van de Ven, 2021). Abductive reasoning is especially appropriate when theorizing idiosyncratic responses during change (Golden-Biddle, 2020). One of the initial 'mysteries' (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2007) we found based on our data was the fact that all interviewed CSR practitioners explained that working with CSR was right for them, that they wanted to pursue in the future and they felt that it allowed them to make a difference in the world. We saw this as evidence that they all experienced a calling towards their CSR work. Interestingly, despite the similar orientation towards work, they appeared to be living their calling in multiple ways as they described the purpose of their work differently. This sparked our curiosity and motivated us to attend to the coding process by investigating in our data the multiple ways of living a calling and how the purpose of the CSR work was constructed.

Building on Corbin and Strauss's (2008) guidelines for thematic coding, we first identified empirically grounded themes through open coding. We highlighted the unfolding relationship between the everyday work of CSR practitioners and their sense of meaningfulness. Our scholarly engagement with CSR work and lives in Sweden guided our interpretation of CSR practitioners' view of their work while also remaining outsiders (Langley & Klag, 2019). As part of the open coding process, we performed an in-depth and iterative reading of the transcripts, systematically comparing and questioning the raw text before repositioning it into empirical themes ordered into a Microsoft Excel file. Microsoft Excel was particularly helpful to arrange our codes through tables as well as sort the data through rows and columns. For instance, we condensed the text describing the answers of CSR practitioners about "avoiding displaying negative emotions in the company" into an empirical theme (Table 2).

Subsequently, we relied on axial coding to articulate the abstract themes as recursive patterns from the open codes. We abductively garnered hypothetical relationships from the previous body of scholarship that we compared with and verified against the incoming data multiple times. While systematically considering the variation of the claims made by the CSR practitioners, we looked for repetition and discarded single incidents emerging from the data, specifically evaluating theory against the provisional patterns explained by the majority of the data (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). For instance, we initially observed the constructs documented in prior micro-CSR studies of the social/commercial tensions of CSR practitioners (Risi & Wickert, 2017; Wright & Nyberg, 2017). Hence, we distinguished between the struggles and responses of CSR practitioners to these struggles, while grouping them into more abstract themes. Some of the abstract themes emerging from the axial coding converged around topics present in the literature. For instance, what we labeled "selling responses" to strategic struggles supported Wickert and de Bakker's (2018) notion of the strategic promotion of social issues in CSR work. On the contrary, other abstract themes did not fit extant propositions and needed to be accounted for. Statements such as "I don't try to be a missionary" (Nellie) together with "[…] I always try to figure out if I talk the right language with them […]" (Felix) appeared as the managerial equivalent of trying to adjust behavior and language to strategically garner acceptance in the company. We defined these responses as "chameleoning." Triangulation with handwritten notes taken at the time of the interview process—including notes on the informal conversations held before and after the formal interviews—helped us better understand how they constructed the purpose of their work.

We conducted selective coding as the last step of the process of abstraction to create core categories with conceptual density. We classified three core categories, namely, *emotional struggle*, *identity struggle* and *strategic struggle*, after aggregating the abstract themes from the responses of the CSR practitioners. We then linked these three core categories with *activistic purpose*, *win–win purpose* and *corporate purpose*. In line with Lysova et al.'s (2019, p. 376) view of purpose as the "highly valued [and] overarching goals", we coded purpose by observing how CSR practitioners gave meaning to their work by relating it to various overarching goals.

During the selective coding, we also defined occupational stages and their boundaries. Motivated by the fact that individuals display distinct behaviors in relation to their occupational stage (Arthur & Rousseau, 2001; Evetts, 1992), our understanding of occupational stages aligns with the understanding of calling as an orientation that does not evolve within a specific organization but remains within the boundaries of an occupational domain (Dik & Shimizu, 2019; Duffy et al., 2012). The interviewed CSR practitioners changed companies and industries during their professional lifetime, but remained in the occupational domain of CSR work.

Hence, we defined occupational stages in line with the CSR practitioners' rhetoric and selective coding process. Those who perceived social/commercial tensions as an emotional struggle and exhibited an activistic purpose were predominantly CSR practitioners who had three or fewer years of experience with CSR work. Emotional struggles were less evident for more experienced CSR practitioners, while identity struggles seemed more prevalent as they pursued a win–win purpose. By contrast, CSR practitioners who had at least 10 years of experience with CSR work perceived a strategic struggle and clearly showed a corporate purpose. Hence, we classified CSR practitioners with 3 or fewer years of experience with CSR work in the *early-stage* group ($N = 14$), those with more than 10 years of experience with CSR work in the *late-stage* group ($N = 21$), and

Table 2 Abductive process of the thematic analysis

Categories (selective coding)	Abstract themes (axial coding)	Empirical themes (open coding)	Representative quotes
Activistic purpose (early-stage CSR practitioners)			I found it is me wanting to change the company because it is so far away from my social mandate. I think that we should definitely focus more on this [social issue]. But then we are three hundred people in the Nordics and thousands of people in the world. And to reach all those people, it won't ever happen. You feel like you can't have an impact and that is super frustrating. (Filippa)
			I feel bad because we get stuck easily [in CSR projects]. At the beginning of a project, the managers think they are not good projects. Then, they cost a lot of money. It takes too much time to go all the way to the [field] managers who are actually going to implement them. (Olivia)
Emotional struggle	Neutralizing responses	Minimizing their negative emotions to avoid being submerged by them	You have to stay positive as a CSR person because uh [sigh] it would otherwise consume you. I mean all the frustrations and everything. It would consume you. You would hate people too much. (Leo)
			Regardless how people perceive it, you need to be positive […] not overly positive, but you can really become worried and negative. Because I can really feel that these [CSR] issues are very important for me. (Klara)
		Avoiding displaying negative emotions in the company	At an intellectual level, everybody is into CSR. But when it's about change, it's difficult. I motivate myself to think that's where we need to have discussions. But it is frustrating […] you see, I get emotional now, but I try my best not to show my frustration. (Ester)
			When things are unfair, I get angry and I want to do something. In 2015, many refugees came to Sweden. Now I am saying, what can we still do? But I can't be emotional with colleagues when they disagree. I try to show I understand their points. (Hugo)
	Spiriting responses	Getting energized with other CSR practitioners	CSR people are more open to share things and to talk about what they do […] some [CSR] people are really engaged in a lot of different groups and that creates a lot of energy. (Oscar)
			I have a lot of energy from CSR. It is the hope for change. I think this is especially when you meet with CSR people who are also at the beginning. (Alice)

Table 2 (continued)

Categories (selective coding)	Abstract themes (axial coding)	Empirical themes (open coding)	Representative quotes
		Sharing energy by leveraging on mutual social aspirations	It's fun, you get energy from working with it [CSR]. I talk to other [CSR] people about my experiences. I love that. We do that quite a lot actually. We have different programs and we talk about values. I certainly find energy in that. (Viktor)
			I think most CSR people are dedicated to social issues. And that's also why you get so much energy when you sit with them in meetings. They are people genuinely interested in this area. (Astrid)
Win–Win purpose (mid-stage CSR practitioners)			I need to be naïve with CSR and keep building business cases over and over and over again. That's hard. The business case, of course, needs to be very thoroughly created. But you need to have the energy to keep building those business cases, keep promoting them and feel that you are part of the company. (Maja)
			Of course, it's important that we can show that we are making money for the company [with CSR]. These are the expectations […] I still believe personally that you should work with these [social] issues regardless of how it affects the bottom line of your company. However, I am realizing that you need to bring in that [business] perspective when talking and trying to get others on board. (Carl)
Identity struggle	Incorporating responses	Interiorizing the commercial goals of the company	If the customer has demands and needs information in a certain way or view us in a certain way, if I am able to present the CSR agenda in such a way that makes business sense, it's much easier for me to get it accepted. Because if I come in and say, we are going to be doing good all the time. That is sort of, no. We're here to make money. (Ebba)
			For a personal perspective, the CFO and CEO would like to invest more in being fossil fuel-free. But they don't feel confident doing it. That's why they have hired me, so that I can help them with the business case. (Maja)
		Accepting that producing a corporate self may lead to blindness in the company	The importance I assign to different [CSR] things is also based on our global strategy. I am probably blinded by having worked with our global strategy, so I couldn't even see the outside the space, what would be the most important things. (Elina)

Table 2 (continued)

Categories (selective coding)	Abstract themes (axial coding)	Empirical themes (open coding)	Representative quotes
			It is our CEO who always asks us if we strike a true balance between finances, environment, and social aspects, so that we don't overweigh society or the environment, but also ensure the financial dimension. I think these continuous questions has just strengthened me […] and have made me buy into my role [with CSR]. (Moa)
	Compartmentalizing responses	Fully separating the private self from the corporate self when it comes to social aspirations	If you implant too many idealistic objectives, I'm pretty certain it won't work. You need to translate them into something that's workable in the company. I'm not saying that's a good thing. Having idealistic objectives is probably good, but you might want to leave them to your private life. (Ture)
			We try to make the three parts of CSR [economic, social and environmental] work together, but we have to make choices that, on a shorter scale, affect economic results. Because what motivates me is change, I ask whether I am just telling myself that my work is important for me or is it actually doing something good for the company. One way for me is now to be more strategic at work and leave my personal goals aside. (Alma)
	De-responsibilizing responses	Minimizing feelings of accountability	I entitle myself to not having that much of regret for the climate because I say, at least I've done what I can do. (Maja)
			We shouldn't feel guilty if we don't [socially] succeed. (Elvin)
			I think you need to be humble and realize that it's very difficult to change the world on your own. I think I have a personal responsibility to just do what I can. (Nicole)
		Letting commercial goals crowd out your social aspirations	The way you really take responsibility on those issues is not on sort of the whole world because then you would lose half of the gang. (Arvid)
			I think when you start with CSR, you want to save the world. You want to change the climate. Then, you realize you need to interlink these issues with the business case within the company to survive. At first, it is really difficult. (Amelia)

Table 2 (continued)

Categories (selective coding)	Abstract themes (axial coding)	Empirical themes (open coding)	Representative quotes
Corporate purpose (late-stage CSR practitioners)			I think my first role is to be a professional. I have to be darn good at what I do. I happen to be doing it in a field that I think is fantastic […] But it's not good enough. CSR has to bring returns. I have metrics. I mean, I'm being judged by colleagues on, well, show us the proof that what you're doing with CSR brings returns like everybody else in the company. (Greta)
			I take the perspective of the company because I'm doing this [CSR] work for the company. What's in it for [company name]? What's most important for [company name]? Where do we get most output? As I do this work for the company, I must have the owners and peers in mind. Why should we in CSR do it? Because we show it's good business. It contributes to our corporate goals. (Stina)
Strategic struggle	Selling responses	Appearing extrovert to stir interest in CSR work	You need to engage people. You cannot be seen as someone working in a corner or just doing your work. You need to be extrovert, definitely, and laugh together with people. You need to be able to connect with people [to get them interested in CSR work]. (Vera)
			You have to show that you're really passionate, this is the strategy. Be self-confident and have a positive extrovert approach. There are some introverts, but there's a risk that they don't get promoted. (Ida)
		Acting as a salesperson to engage with others and "sell" CSR work	You've to be strategic […] you need to sell your [CSR] work so that all employees feel that what you're doing feeds into the main objectives of the company. Otherwise, they won't give you any attention. (Joline)
			I've become strategic, so, if I know that this person is going to tell me no, I don't go to that person. I go to someone else and then I engage with people and build my network. That's how I sell CSR. More people will accept you and will open doors for you. (Svea)
	Chameleoning responses	Understanding colleagues to appear as a contributor to the commercial goals of the company	I think that other CSR people who are devoted [to social issues] might look upon me as a hypocrite. But I must be like my colleagues and that has been the price I'm willing to pay. If I can affect the way we do business, that's a bigger goal for me than being a role model for the activists. (Liam)

Table 2 (continued)

Categories (selective coding)	Abstract themes (axial coding)	Empirical themes (open coding)	Representative quotes
			I'm not going around and telling everyone to take the bike to work. I think people expect that in a way. I don't try to be a missionary […] It could be working with people's prejudice on what is CSR if you're too much of an activist. (Nellie)
		Reformulating the language to appeal to colleagues	You really have to be quite creative to get the message out and you have to be inspiring […] You have to be able to create trust and confidence, which entails speaking the same language of your colleagues. (Nellie)
			When I talk to colleagues or go to meetings, I always try to figure out if I talk the right language with them […] I need to speak the same language as my audience. (Felix)

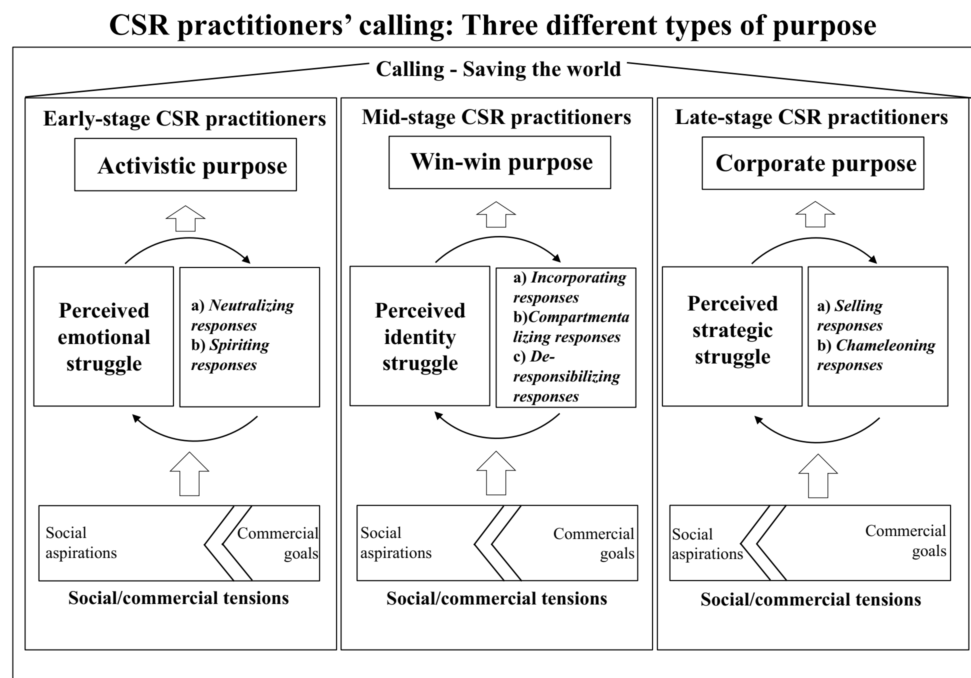

Fig. 1 CSR practitioners' calling: three different types of purpose

those between 4 and 10 years of experience with CSR work in the *mid-stage* group ($N=22$). The classification was, in other words, based on the identified purposes and the occupational stage of the majority of the CSR practitioners who expressed these three purposes. 11 (out of 14) early-stage CSR practitioners expressed an activistic purpose, 17 (out of 21) mid-stage CSR practitioners expressed a win–win purpose, 20 (out of 22) late-stage CSR practitioners expressed a corporate purpose. As we note in the limitation section at the end of the article, we acknowledge that some individual variations exist in the accounts offered by the CSR practitioners within each stage. Pursuant to qualitative coding traditions (Corbin & Strauss, 2008), we have however focused on identifying the most prevalent patterns and themes in our data. Figure 1 shows the framework, based on struggles and responses, through which the CSR practitioners came to construct different types of purpose. Table 2 lists the categories and abstract themes obtained from the abductive process of the thematic analysis.

Findings

Our data showed that the CSR practitioners interviewed perceive the social/commercial tensions in their work predominantly as emotional, identity and strategic struggles in relation to their occupational stage. By continuously engaging with the responses to attenuate these struggles in their everyday professional life, CSR practitioners construct three types of purpose in three occupational stages. We conceptualize these types of purpose as *activistic*, *win–win* and *corporate purpose* that manifested in CSR practitioners' early-, mid- and late-stage of their occupational tenure. Table 2 presents additional representative quotes linked with the thematic analysis.

Activistic Purpose Among Early-Stage CSR Practitioners

Our interviews indicated that when CSR practitioners began their occupational journey, they largely constructed an *activistic purpose* in relation to their work. The early-stage CSR practitioners we interviewed valued their work predominantly because of its normative ideal to tackle social issues and fulfil their social aspirations or "personal mission." However, they found the commercial goals of their work to be relatively irrelevant and their company's reaction to social issues too slow. As a result of the activistic purpose, these early-stage CSR practitioners "bring hope and are really determined to make work faster, try new things, really questioning why things are as they are" (Filippa). On the contrary, they were seen by more experienced CSR practitioners as people who "are doing their work more from an ideological point of view rather than the business side of it" (Carl). Leo's resistance of the status quo was indicative of the activistic purpose:

> You have to be an activist in some way. Perhaps you have written in the contract that you're loyal to the company and stuff like that. But to me, being loyal is about talking about social issues and describing what kinds of risks the company is taking by not working

> with these issues […] I see that's lacking. A lot of the work that the company does is greenwashing. In my mind, it's very important that you practice what you preach.

Although many early-stage CSR practitioners were fulfilled by the social promise of their work, they had negative feelings about what they often perceived to be thin achievements of their company. Anna's activistic purpose transpired through her irritation about the limited social accomplishments at work:

> My frustration comes from [the company] being really proud with CSR when we have not reached our social goals at all. Why are we like, already stopping? We are really not there. People are being discriminated for their religion, sexual orientation, color of skin. Nazis are marching on our streets. I'm just saying it's not time to sit back. It makes me angry.

Many late-stage CSR practitioners revealed their experiences with junior colleagues who struggled to find meaningfulness in their everyday work and whose purpose was, to them, difficult to comprehend. Lisa, for instance, noted that, "if you're young in CSR today, you think everything is going too slow, nothing is happening and you get frustrated and angry." Loui's personal experiences with early-stage CSR practitioners delineated the "problem" of having an activistic purpose:

> As I'm getting older, I know there are new generations, of course […] I met certain [early-stage] CSR people and their [social] mission is like, I think they are too ambitious to manage the challenges. In our case, we cannot manage climate change and water consumption at the same time; we have limited resources. In CSR, you need to decide strategically, and the focus is the company. So, you cannot be naïve. I believe in teams, not superheroes.

As they were committed to an activistic purpose, early-stage CSR practitioners often perceived social/commercial tensions as an emotional struggle. They found themselves questioning if they could live their prosocial ambitions in a corporate context. Hence, they primarily tried to manage their emotional struggle in everyday work through *neutralizing* and *spiriting* responses in order to continue to pursue an activistic purpose.

Neutralizing responses comprise efforts to minimize and avoid displaying negative feelings inside the company, and instead show assurance and a jovial mood. Neutralizing responses were performed by early-stage CSR practitioners as they appeared burdened by their negative feelings toward the uncertainty about being able to pursue their social aspirations through their work. These responses were exacerbated by the apparent lack of interest of others in their social aspirations. Early-stage CSR practitioners all believed that because CSR work "can be a frustration and a challenge every day" (Olivia), they must be careful that "if it is too many feelings, you're really in a fighting mode, and you won't come through" (Alice).

Thus, they similarly adopted neutralizing responses to avoid feelings of sorrow and social exclusion in their company. Thea's efforts not to exhibit her true feelings characterize neutralizing responses:

> Even if I feel like I'm on a mission here, it is not easy at all. People do not listen. I cannot fight all the time, so I have to be smooth about how I want to go about it. There is a lot of frustration within me, but I need to try to stay positive […] It doesn't mean I'm like, "Oh, I'm so happy, so whatever small change we do is enough!" But I need to be careful with my feelings if I want to continue with this [CSR].

Spiriting responses refer to the reciprocal efforts to boost energy and solicit positive feelings at work despite perceived adversity in pursuing an activistic purpose. Because the catalyzed energy derives from sharing their social aspirations and problems, spiriting responses were typically shown by early-stage CSR practitioners when they shared and discussed ideas during the formal and informal CSR meetings outside their company. Hence, "meeting other CSR managers is something that gives you a lot of energy and creates a lot of hope" (Leo). Filippa's vignette of the energy she shared at a recent meeting exemplified spiriting responses:

> We sat around a table, like this. There were 10 people. We started to discuss what everyone did and what we wanted to achieve with this [CSR] network. I remember, walking away from that meeting, I was like jumping. I was like, "This is so [woah]!" You know, we have to work together and really join forces to make things happen, and benefit really. It's like new energy, to keep on working. It's like you can almost touch the energy.

Win–Win Purpose Among Mid-Stage CSR Practitioners

The majority of the mid-stage CSR practitioners constructed what we conceptualized to be a *win–win purpose*. This emerged as they perceived their work to be meaningful not only because of their work's promise to tackle social issues, but also because they believed that it could largely support the commercial goals of their company with which they increasingly identified. A win–win purpose materialized as mid-stage CSR practitioners displayed an increasing allegiance to their company and contributing to its

commercial goals was seen as a means to strengthen their sense of belongingness. By contrast, it also prompted them to gradually downsize their social aspirations. Elisa's efforts to integrate the commercial goals of her work provided a concrete example of the win–win purpose. She specifically reflected on her job's current "mission" compared with that earlier in her occupation:

> I still have it somewhere deep down. I think I'm moving broadly in the right direction, but I don't know exactly how to pinpoint what my mission would be. I think that if you articulate it too clearly, then you're bound to be disappointed. I have articulated a big part of that mission into our new CSR strategy, and I'm really happy because the whole leadership has bought into that […] I would say, it [the CSR strategy] has become a little bit of my own.

Arvid's win–win purpose also emerged as he started to reframe and interiorize the commercial goals of his work:

> I mean, you see the climate change. That is not the issue. We all see the climate change. Everybody would agree, that's why I tell you it's not difficult to convince somebody on a personal level, everybody agrees. But when it comes to changing the organization, then you become somebody else. It's like you become somebody else by working every day. It makes sense in that sort of [corporate] environment, that is something else than your personal life.

Mid-stage CSR practitioners appeared very open about how they downsized their social aspirations and increasingly aimed to influence their surrounding environment as well as increase the perceived commercial value of the CSR work in the company. While underlining the importance of showing commercial potential through his work, Sam provided an additional account of the win–win purpose:

The company's goal is to make money. Your personal goal is to make a positive change. So, you're kind of over here and there and your work as a CSR manager is to show the company that if you do this, you're gonna be better off here as well. So, I think it's that bridge, creating a link from the CSR department to the revenue interest of the company. If you can't show that link, then you're going to be in a bubble all the time as a CSR manager.

As mid-stage CSR practitioners constructed a win–win purpose and increasingly adopted the commercial goals of their work, they perceived the social/commercial tensions associated with their work as an identity struggle. While primarily demonstrating a win–win purpose, they actively sought to increase their identification with their company and contribute to the commercial goals of their work through *incorporating*, *compartmentalizing* and *de-responsibilizing* responses. These helped them shift their attention from their social aspirations to the commercial goals during their everyday activities in order to fulfill a win–win purpose.

Incorporating responses involve seeking to interiorize and approve of the commercial goals of their work. Mid-stage CSR practitioners adopted incorporating responses to personify the corporate mindset in their work and be seen as part of its collective. Because "it's difficult, but you need to play the business role that you have in the company to get support" (Amelia), incorporating responses prompted a sense of higher social acceptance and personal value as they contributed to the commercial 'wins' of the company. Nonetheless, "the importance of really seeing and connecting [CSR] into the business" (Moa) through one's corporate self may also lead to conscious blindness. Sam's vignette hinted at the implications of performing incorporating responses on his social aspirations:

> The first thing is that everything has to have business value. I had other ideas when I came there that I would do certain projects, and so I think they molded me by making me think in a more of a business mindset than I had before. I used to think in more of a humanitarian mindset and now it has to be business mindset, which is fine […] I mean, you want to be valued as a person, right? So, I always try to think with a business mindset when I think of my CSR work.

Compartmentalizing responses refer to the efforts of divorcing social aspirations from everyday work by rearticulating social aspirations as a private objective unrelated to the activities in the company. This downplaying of social aspirations becomes a means to be seen as someone who is more concerned with commercial goals while at work. Compartmentalizing responses were about ensuring that "if I'm convinced about something [social] I want to achieve, it should not spill over from my private life to my work" (Maja). The mid-stage CSR practitioners who engaged with compartmentalizing responses admitted they sought to accomplish their social aspirations outside of work while increasingly justifying commercial goals while at work. An excerpt from our conversation with Maja delivered a tangible account of compartmentalizing responses. While reflecting upon her social drive earlier in her work with CSR, she explained how her efforts to separate her personal aspirations contributed to increasing her acceptance of her work and the company's decisions:

> I'd like to tell my colleagues that selling my car is the best thing I've ever done and I feel excellent about it. But I can't say that because I have a job. I cannot bring my private decisions into my colleagues' private zone. People get offended and that is not part of the job.
> *Interviewer: What Do You Do Then?*

> I can only look at the job like, what our company can do when it comes to resources and how to manage them. And I leave my environmental goals out of the job.

De-responsibilizing responses pertain to the attempts to reduce social aspirations to ensure their compatibility with the work's commercial goals so that "at least we do what we can and it will be better than not doing it" (Klara). These responses were vital for the mid-stage CSR practitioners to feel successful in achieving a win–win purpose. De-responsibilizing responses were rooted in the belief that having too ambitious social aspirations in everyday work is counterproductive: "[you] have to go down a little bit because if you are aiming too high, it won't happen" (Felix). Carl clearly demonstrated de-responsibilizing responses:

> I often asked myself "am I actually contributing to change?" I do believe that I can contribute to change even if it's not saving the world, even if it's just [saving] one person. I work a lot together with people from big law firms. If I can just influence a few of those people, if I can get them to understand why they need to do business differently, then that's already a success.

Among the mid-stage CSR practitioners performing them, de-responsibilizing responses led the commercial goals of their work to crowd out their social aspirations, reduced their sense of accountability for major social changes, yet still maintaining a sense of accomplishment.

Corporate Purpose Among Late-Stage CSR Practitioners

The CSR practitioners in the late-stage of their occupation primarily construct a *corporate purpose* in relation to their work. We conceptualized corporate purpose as the desire to contribute to the company's prosperity, thereby wishing to make their work valued by colleagues. In our interviews, corporate purpose was relatively unrelated to social aspirations. Most late-stage CSR practitioners strongly identified with their company and disclosed that "our [CSR] work must be practical and hands-on" (Nora) or that we must ensure minimum social goals because "our world is anyway much better now" (Loui). During the interviews, many late-stage CSR practitioners reflected on their earlier approach with CSR work and felt that "of course, I know more now about the challenges and opportunities of a big organization than earlier, but I had to be patient" (Nellie). Ida's views about how she gained a business mindset at work epitomized the corporate purpose:

> I mean, I was naïve at the beginning of my career. It's not about saving the world. You are working for a company. And you have to think about its interests […] We are doing a lot of things. We don't communicate everything that we're doing, of course […] But it's a balance. You can't just come in and push for everything at the same time and expect everyone to change.

Isabelle's remarks also outlined the connection between corporate purpose and business success:

> It's important for all of us to know that it's not enough to just walk around and feel that CSR is important. We need to do business. We need to make our work part of the business because otherwise it's just going to be philanthropy or something social that's not linked to the business.

Because "for the good companies that are profitable, CSR is not the only driver and the main driver cannot be to save the world" (Liam), a corporate purpose appeared to lead CSR practitioners to overidentify with their company and its bottom line to the extent that "CSR makes sense for business" (Greta). The example of Greta, who rejected the accusations of major human right abuses in Africa against her company, illuminated the problem of overidentification because of the corporate purpose:

Have I had moral dilemmas at certain times? Yes, of course. I think the reason why I have stayed so long in the same company, despite the fact that there's a serious allegation against it, is that that we're fairly clear on what happened and our innocence.

Although late-stage CSR practitioners appeared more confident with their work and social environment, some confessed that "it's very hard to be an activist within the corporate sphere" (Nellie) and exhibited mixed reactions when reflecting on their occupation and how their social aspirations had transformed. A few, remarkably, appeared critical of how they had increasingly diluted their social aspirations at work: "I was an activist earlier on, but had to take a more realistic approach in my work" (Stina). Tilde's vignette highlighted that fewer and fewer CSR practitioners who have a corporate purpose were still driven by their social aspirations. Instead, CSR work has become similar to any other corporate job:

> If you compare then and now, there's more rationality and fewer feelings today [...] There was more [passion] before. I guess maybe it [CSR] was less of a mainstream topic. It was more of a margin crowd that was doing this. And I guess for me personally, I had more to learn at that time [...] I don't have the need to be as pushy because things are happening anyway. Maybe I would put it as mission accomplished, you know, the [social] mission I felt I had. So, people that are long term in the CSR business, who I've known for years, I think they are on a mission at a personal level. But I

> think [CSR] has changed. It's become a job. Just like any other job.

As late-stage CSR practitioners constructed a corporate purpose, they were less concerned with emotional or identity struggles, but rather perceived the social/commercial tensions associated with their work as a strategic struggle. Although they had developed a strong identification with their company, many explained how they needed to show more engagement to attain its commercial goals and turn the CSR department into a "strategic" unit. They articulated the corporate purpose by predominantly engaging with *selling* and *chameleoning* responses to heighten the perceived value of the commercial opportunities of their activities. Successfully proving to advance commercial opportunities helped CSR practitioners increase the acceptance of the CSR work in their company.

Selling responses consist of seeking to appear extrovert, assertive and charismatic to widen the acceptance and collectively perceived value of the CSR work in the company. Similar to Wickert and de Bakker (2018), selling responses stress the strategic promotion of social issues, not least through appeal and eloquence. The CSR practitioners who engaged with selling responses concurred that "you have to be both extrovert and passionate. I'm always happy in meetings; I create a good vibe. I think, if I am a happier person, I can develop and make a change" (Stella). As selling responses require showing above-average presentation skills, Emil's point demonstrated how they can represent an important means to gain visibility:

> Having an enthusiastic approach that you personalize is definitely something that is contaminating for others. It's easier to drive change if you have CSR people who are really interested and enthusiastic about their area. Definitely, it's the driving force, and it's easy to be successful and to sell your work, and try to convince the company that CSR is an important area of development.

The selling responses enabled the late-stage CSR practitioners to solicit support for their ideas and thereby fulfill a corporate purpose.

Chameleoning responses regard the efforts of CSR practitioners to carefully gauge their audience's demands and cater to their behavior and language to blend in and be perceived as an in-group member. The CSR practitioners who engaged with chameleoning responses aimed to be viewed as important contributors in their company rather than social activists. Because "as you find your way through and what gets you through, the business case language becomes important" (Gustav), chameleoning responses required reframing words "to understand your audience and what is important for them" (Felix). Liam's vignette indicated how chameleoning responses helped him dispel his image as an activist and gain support from colleagues:

> It's also been important for me, especially internally, to show that I'm not the green person. I'm not a social activist. I would say that I've also tried to show that this is not something that is connected to an alternative lifestyle because then they would have dismissed me internally working with CSR. So, I feel that I've done the other way around, to eat more meat than the others to show that this is not something that is too personal to me.

Chameleoning responses become important for the late-stage CSR practitioners who ascribe a corporate purpose to their work because they want to portray themselves as vital to the commercial success of their company.

Constructing Different Types of Purpose in Three Occupational Stages

CSR practitioners grapple with social/commercial tensions that emerge after they join the CSR occupation. Although they enter because they want to change the world, in the organizational context they are expected to also attain the commercial goals of their work (Brès et al., 2019; Mitra & Buzzanell, 2017). These tensions are perceived differently in each occupational stage, that is, as an emotional struggle among early-stage CSR practitioners, as an identity struggle among mid-stage and as a strategic struggle among the late-stage CSR practitioners. They seek to minimize their perceived struggles through different responses which vary because the struggles in each stage are different.

The three smaller rectangular boxes at the bottom of each larger rectangular space in Fig. 1 signify the importance assigned by the CSR practitioners to their own social aspirations versus the commercial goals of their work. The two larger, vertical arrows pointing upwards in each of the three larger rectangular boxes are indicative of the direction, commencing from the social/commercial tensions perceived as struggles, the responses to each struggle and the purpose they construct in each occupational stage. The curved arrows illustrate how CSR practitioners continuously respond to the struggles during their everyday work. The CSR practitioners construct different types of purpose as different struggles lead to different responses, but also feel compelled to respond to these struggles as the only way to continue with their occupation and pursue their purpose.

Crucially, Fig. 1 outlines that the CSR practitioners join their occupation with a prosocial orientation (the calling). Nonetheless, they quickly encounter a divide between their social aspirations and the commercial goals of their work that they believe are prioritized in their company. In the early-stage, CSR practitioners perceive an emotional

struggle and display strong feelings because they grow aware that they cannot pursue their social aspirations through their work. Hence, they continuously engage with neutralizing and spiriting responses to overcome this emotional struggle. As a result of such responses, they construct an *activistic purpose* as a means to continue to maintain their social aspirations but also to avoid leaving the CSR occupation.

However, among the mid-stage CSR practitioners, the majority perceive an identity struggle as they have to show allegiance to their company and identify more with the commercial goals of their work if they want to grow professionally. This also entails reducing their social aspirations at work further. Subsequently, they continuously engage with incorporating, compartmentalizing and de-responsibilizing responses to overcome their identity struggle. These responses help CSR practitioners feel increasingly part of their company and interiorize the commercial goals of their work to the extent that they construct a *win–win purpose* and feel successful in accomplishing this purpose.

Finally, late-stage CSR practitioners fully rationalize their social aspirations and appear disillusioned about the social contribution of their work. Likewise, late-stage CSR practitioners perceive a strategic struggle because they have greater ambitions to make their CSR work recognized within their company. They wish to feel valued by their colleagues for being capable of steering the strategic agenda of their company and desire others to see their CSR work as profitable. To overcome their strategic struggle and gain internal recognition for their CSR work, CSR practitioners continuously engage with selling and chameleoning responses, which seem to help them gain respect from others and build a different image of the CSR work in the company. As the desire to make their work recognized never ends, the CSR practitioners conclude their work tenure by constructing a *corporate purpose* and continue to see their work as meaningful even when not fully successful in achieving their social aspirations.

Discussion and Conclusion

To better comprehend the relationship between calling and meaningful work (Dik & Shimizu, 2019; Lysova et al., 2018), we offered an analysis of the CSR occupation. In particular, we sought to understand *how* the CSR practitioners who are living their calling construct the purpose of their work. In this final section, we broaden the debate by discussing the three theoretical contributions of our findings.

We first extend the meaningful work literature by demonstrating that individuals, as they live their calling in different occupational stages, differently construct the purpose of their work. By conceptualizing *activistic*, *win–win* and *corporate purpose* from the case of the CSR occupation, we postulate that individuals holding the same calling can live it in multiple ways, and that a calling is an inherently contested and malleable orientation associated with different types of purpose.

We make a second contribution to the meaningful work literature by uncovering *how* individuals construct different types of purpose in their work. By unpacking *emotional*, *identity* and *strategic struggles*, we explain that individuals differently perceive and respond to tensions in the organization depending on whether they are in the *early-, mid-* and *late-stage* of their occupation. Against this backdrop, we speculate that a calling represents a point of departure—rather than the end of a journey—to better understand meaningful work.

We finally expand the body of the literature on micro-CSR by adding insights into *why* CSR practitioners reconfigure their social aspirations. By drawing on the lived experiences of CSR practitioners in three occupational stages, we provide an account of the problem of the commodification of CSR work. In a bid to stimulate additional conversations on meaningful work and micro-CSR, we conclude by reflecting on the implications for business ethics and future of CSR as meaningful work.

Constructing Different Types of Purpose

Our article underscores that individuals can construct different types of purpose and shines a spotlight into the implications of living a calling. While originating from humanism (Inkson et al., 2014; Lysova et al., 2019; Michaelson, 2021; Rosso et al., 2010), a calling is nowadays defined as an orientation toward work, characterized by a strong sense of purpose and a prosocial motivation beyond self-gain (Bunderson & Thompson, 2009; Dik & Duffy, 2009; Duffy et al., 2012). By theorizing *activistic*, *win–win* and *corporate* as the three different types of purpose in the CSR occupation, we add insights into the antecedents and mediators of a calling (Duffy et al., 2017; Hall & Chandler, 2005; Lysova & Khapova, 2019) and the demographics of those more likely to live their calling (Duffy & Autin, 2013).

Crucially, we add to Dik and Shimizu's (2019) call for more research on the significance of capturing whether individuals change or maintain their calling. Our findings from the CSR occupation allow us to claim that, although the calling may not change, individuals can live it in multiple ways as they are likely to construct different types of purpose in different occupational stages. In our study, the early-stage CSR practitioners construct their purpose as an *activistic purpose*, the mid-stage construct their purpose as a *win–win purpose* and the late-stage CSR practitioners construct their purpose as *a corporate purpose*. By evincing that individuals can live the same calling in multiple ways, we thus argue

that a calling is an inherently contested and malleable orientation. Such degree of contestation and malleability is linked with the emphasis in the meaningful work literature on viewing a calling as an inherently prosocial orientation (Dik & Duffy, 2009; Novak, 1996). Different from such emphasis, our article evidences that, by being associated with different types of purpose and while continuing to be perceived as meaningful, a calling may have different degrees of social-orientation. This finding is fundamental because it cautions about essentializing calling as inherently ethical (Dobrow & Tosti-Kharas, 2012; Elangovan et al., 2010). By postulating that individuals can live the same calling in multiple ways, our findings therefore resonate with recent critiques that a calling can offer "sites to examine conflicting career identities and interests" (Berkelaar & Buzzanell, 2015, p. 159).

Perceiving and Responding to Struggles in Three Occupational Stages

Our research also extends the meaningful work literature by shedding light on *how* individuals construct different types of purpose. Despite the subjective and self-oriented nature of calling, individuals operate as part of organizations as social systems of collective expectations and methods of thinking (Schabram & Maitlis, 2017; Wrzesniewski et al., 2003). Hence, they are subjected to tensions in their organization that influence their feelings of work meaningfulness (Berkelaar & Buzzanell, 2015; Michaelson, 2021; Vuori et al., 2012) and display distinct behaviors in relation to their occupational stage (Arthur & Rousseau, 2001; Evetts, 1992).

By identifying *emotional*, *identity* and *strategic struggles* in the *early*-, *mid*- and *late-stages*, our article underscores that individuals perceive the tensions in their organization as struggles, and respond to these struggles in each occupational stage to attenuate them. Our article thus highlights the continuous need to overcome these struggles and illustrates that by responding to them, individuals construct different types of purpose. For instance, the mid-stage CSR practitioners we interviewed continuously engaged with *incorporating*, *compartmentalizing* and *de-responsibilizing responses* to overcome the identity struggle that was perceived because of the difficulty to balance the commercial goals of their work with their social aspirations. These responses, conducted routinely in their everyday professional life, led them to construct a win–win purpose. Hence, by uncovering the iterative dynamics involving struggles and responses, our article analyzes occupational stages as variables that determine how individuals construct the purpose of their work. This also allows us to envision a calling as a point of departure—rather than the end of a journey—to better comprehend meaningful work.

Viewing calling as a point of departure means recognizing that individuals may be living the same calling in multiple ways. Such a perspective is fundamental to unpack the concealed dynamics of how individuals make sense and reframe the meaningfulness of their work. Irrespective of their seniority, the interviewed CSR practitioners lived their calling: they relished their work, felt accomplished by it and wished to continue to pursue it in the future. Although, at face value, they were all living the same calling, a closer investigation revealed that they responded differently to the question "why am I here?" (Pratt & Ashforth, 2003, p. 311). The reasons why they found their work to be meaningful appeared to vary in relation to their occupational stage. Rather than "finding" a calling (Dobrow, 2013), we highlight that individuals live the same calling in multiple ways because they construct different types of purpose as they try to respond to tensions that emerge from working in organizations.

Against this backdrop, we depart from the prior literature that views calling as a solely cognition-based orientation (Xie et al., 2016; Zhang et al., 2021) and the result of a self-oriented journey (Duffy & Sedlacek, 2007). We pinpoint that individuals indeed join an occupation because of their personal desire to do good for society (Bloom et al., 2021; Elangovan et al., 2010), but they might associate their calling with different types of purpose because of how they react to the struggles they perceive when living their calling in an organizational context. These struggles are exacerbated by the divide between their social aspirations and the commercial goals of their work. We demonstrate that organizations hold an important sense-giving function that indirectly reshapes the purpose of work. The fact that a calling can be lived in multiple ways paves new avenues for research about a calling as a point of departure after which individuals might be prone to find new meaningfulness in their work.

Theorizing CSR Work: Implications for Micro-CSR and Business Ethics

By drawing on the case of the CSR occupation, our article sheds light on *why* CSR practitioners reconfigure their social aspirations. Our findings extend the body of knowledge on micro-CSR (Brès et al., 2019; Girschik et al., 2020; Mitra & Buzzanell, 2017; Tams & Marshall, 2011) and allow us to elaborate on the ethical implications of working with CSR.

Aguinis and Glavas (2019, p. 1058) postulate that CSR represents "an ideal conduit for individuals to make sense of and find meaningfulness through work." Although CSR work is often applauded for its normative foundation (Margolis & Walsh, 2003; Rasche et al., 2017; Wesselink & Osagie, 2020), our article elucidates that CSR practitioners construct different types of purpose and perceive their work to be meaningful for different reasons. Perhaps counterintuitively, it illustrates that CSR practitioners with a longer tenure in the CSR occupation have a higher proclivity of

letting the commercial goals outweigh their social aspirations, thereby highlighting the problem of the commodification of CSR work (Brès & Gond, 2014; Fontana, 2020; Wright & Nyberg, 2017).

Through their activistic purpose, early-stage CSR practitioners feel their work to be meaningful because of its normative ideal. Their voices, however, fail to be heard by the rest of their company. As they grapple with social exclusion, their feelings of work meaningfulness are somewhat spurred by wishful thinking and they can do little to mobilize efforts for society. By contrast, most late-stage CSR practitioners pride themselves on their achievements with rankings, branding and budgets, but have sidelined the social premise of CSR work. While they still feel their work to be meaningful, they exhibit a corporate purpose and overidentify with their company. Arguably, the rationalization of their social aspirations is ethically problematic because it jeopardizes their firm's ability to socially innovate and be socially helpful.

This evidence challenges the assumptions made in prior micro-CSR studies (Brès et al., 2019; Risi & Wickert, 2017; Wickert & de Bakker, 2018) and begs the question as to which extent can CSR work truly be about social change agency, especially as *not* prioritizing the commercial goals of the work limits promotion opportunities. When embarking on the CSR occupation, profound social aspirations and a strong moral drive are necessary yet often insufficient conditions to spearhead social change. This follows Gond and Moser's (2021) analysis of the psychological and sociological streams of micro CSR. Although CSR practitioners have strong social aspirations that attracts them to CSR work a priori, their social change agency appears to be inevitably shaped by collective expectations of their company a posteriori. Consequently, while conforming with existing views that acknowledge the need for compromises under a regime of shareholder primacy (Brès & Gond, 2014), our article suggests that the longer the tenure in the CSR occupation, and the longer the work of CSR practitioners in the company, the higher the likelihood that CSR practitioners will construct different types of purpose. This shift is particularly relevant and adds to Mitra and Buzzanell's (2017, p. 595) point on the importance to pay more attention to the "shifts in meaning-making" of CSR work, including the need of examining how the meaningfulness of CSR work is perceived at different occupational stages.

The Future of CSR as Meaningful Work

As the world of work continues to evolve, companies gradually invest in the market for meaningful work by attracting "employees who seek to fulfill a normative purpose through association with an organizational mission" (Michaelson, 2021, p. 425)—a phenomenon also dubbed the "purpose economy" (Hurst, 2014). The evidence in this article raises two fundamental questions about the organization of meaningful work, specifically CSR work, in the future.

First, how can companies encourage CSR practitioners to bring their social aspirations to their work? Our article shows that social aspirations are fundamental in CSR work. In particular, we expose the harmful consequences of companies' failure to live up to CSR practitioners' social aspirations and the over prioritization of commercial goals in CSR work. Although the degree to which social/commercial tensions motivate some CSR practitioners to switch to new careers remains unanswered, our findings pinpoint that those who choose to remain in the CSR occupation overcome these tensions by constructing the purpose of their work in different ways. Different from prior studies that highlight the potentially dark side of CSR as addicting work (Cinque et al., 2020; Hirschi et al., 2019), our article uncovers another dark side of CSR work that results from the existence of different types of purpose. Because they cannot fulfil their social aspirations as well as advance their position in the company, especially in a world of work precariousness (Michaelson et al., 2014), CSR practitioners become corporate and, possibly, unethical. Although it is hardly possible to address each employee's volition for meaningful work (Michaelson et al., 2014), how companies value and respond to CSR practitioners' social aspirations is fundamental to ensure that they maintain the spirit, motivation and passion for social change that lies at the foundation of CSR work's meaningfulness.

Second, to paraphrase Girschik et al. (2020), how can CSR work be reframed so that it counters business-as-usual behavior? In the future of work, companies are expected to hold the ethical responsibility of attaining social goals, meaning that business-as-usual behavior will no longer be an option. However, to attain these social goals, companies will need to survive and, to do that, they must retrieve the necessary financial resources. We believe that the relation between social and commercial goals will grow progressively stronger, and companies will increasingly need to genuinely benefit society to survive. Hence, understanding and prioritizing the social goals of CSR work will become a pragmatic issue in addition to a moral obligation because of the need to recruit and train professionals (Michaelson & Tosti-Kharas, 2020; Michaelson et al., 2014). Companies must recognize the need to change their approach to CSR work, not only to align with the trends of the "purpose economy" (Hurst, 2014), but also to attract and retain talent, do good and redefine their economic reality. This is likely to generate new challenges for companies as they try to reframe CSR work.

Answering these questions requires companies not only to cultivate a deeper understanding of moral arguments, but also to make these moral arguments central to their approach

to work. For instance, companies might meet the needs of CSR practitioners to promote a culture of openness. They might also involve CSR practitioners in projects that validate their prosocial values while also stimulating more ethical leadership and amplifying their social aspirations. These actions are likely to require increasingly egalitarian structures and an unbiased evaluation system in which progression opportunities and rewards are equally predicated upon social attainments. Arguably, they will also help shift to a more inclusive climate that is more receptive of diverse ideas and approaches.

Although work is, and will continue to be, a formidable source of meaningfulness (Michaelson, 2021), CSR work ought to be understood as a sharp double-edged sword. While it may enable social change, it also supports unethical and opportunistic behaviors when abused or improperly administered. Because social challenges require a genuinely normative and concerted intervention to be eradicated (Williams et al., 2019), it will be increasingly incumbent upon companies in the future to conceive an ethical work climate that emancipates CSR practitioners as social change agents. This could offer transformational promise for CSR work as a normative and meaningful career path.

Our findings also raise a final question: are companies really willing to do that? They point to the risk of the commodification of CSR work. This risk is especially prominent in a world of work in which meaningfulness is hailed as the new frontier of work, but also where the neoliberal nature of companies continues to require compromises with market rules and pressures for economic payoffs.

Limitations and Avenues for Future Research

Our article is not without limitations. In our sample, we focused on 57 CSR practitioners working in Swedish international companies and who are living their calling. Thus, the generalizability of the findings remains to be proven. We encourage scholars to explore the lived experiences of CSR practitioners at work in different occupational stages and other geographical settings. Individual attitudes are often context-dependent and fundamental to comprehend the ways work meaningfulness is perceived (Michaelson et al., 2014). Hence, taking account of how the responses of the CSR practitioners interviewed in our study differ from those of CSR practitioners in other contexts might inform whether universal features of meaningfulness in the CSR occupation exist.

Second, our article was based on a cross-sectional sample of CSR practitioners in three occupational stages. Consequently, our correlational data could show the types of purpose associated with CSR work in these stages, but could not prove how CSR practitioners' purpose changed over time, that is, as a temporal process during their professional lifetime (Mitra & Buzzanell, 2017). Whether in a qualitative or quantitative fashion, future research would greatly benefit from focusing on a narrower but homogeneous sample of CSR practitioners studied longitudinally over time. This might help unpack the additional reasons why their purpose changes and the drivers of this change.

Third, and as displayed in Table 1, the CSR practitioners we interviewed for this research also had a different biological sex (e.g., male or female), pursued different educational paths (e.g., some received a more technical educational while others had a business background) and were employed by international companies that operate in different industries (e.g., in the financial industry as opposed to the retail and manufacturing industries). We consequently acknowledge the existence of different individual factors that might implicitly shape how the CSR practitioners construct the purpose of their work and that we could not measure due to the qualitative nature of this study. We especially encourage scholars to conduct more quantitative studies (e.g., Hirschi et al., 2019; Zhang et al., 2021) that could help uncover whether and to which extent personal factors at the level of the single CSR practitioners have a bearing on how they live their calling, including how they perceive their work to be meaningful.

Finally, we did not consider the impact of biological age on the ways CSR practitioners construct the purpose of their work. Although biological age appeared in our data to be significantly less relevant than occupational stage, we acknowledge that the CSR practitioners were trained and entered their occupation during different periods of the life. Hence, we encourage future researchers to consider whether and how biological age has an impact on how a calling is lived. Some research on calling, for instance, has examined the work choices of millennials as a specific age group (Berg et al., 2010). More research cross-fertilizing the dimensions of occupational stage and biological age could provide more details about the purpose of work, and how it can change over time.

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Declarations

Conflict of interest We the authors confirm that there are no financial and personal relationships with other people or organizations that could have inappropriately influenced our work. We the authors also confirm that the paper is our own and does not include any conflict of interest. The CSR practitioners that we interviewed volunteered to disclose their knowledge.

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