SOCIAL SENSITIVITY AMONG HR BUSINESS PARTNERS AS DETERMINANT OF CSR ATTITUDES

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Purpose: Research is drawing attention to the roles of HR employees in supporting organisations in their efforts to achieve sustainable development. Employees of HR departments are characterised by a relatively high level of social sensitivity, which may indicate their increased commitment to the implementation of CSR. This article aims to analyse attitudes towards CSR among HR specialists and the extent to which the levels of their social sensitivity influence their attitudes towards CSR.

Design/methodology/approach: We look at CSR attitudes through the prism of their cognitive, emotional, and behavioural components. The Bochum Inventory for job-related personality description of Rudiger Hossiep and Michael Paschen (BIP) was used to diagnose the level of social sensitivity. Research was conducted among 25 HR specialists and HR business partners.

Findings: The research confirmed that the level of social sensitivity positively affects the cognitive and behavioral component of attitudes towards CSR. People with a higher level of social sensitivity tend to understand CSR more in normative terms, show a higher personal level of commitment to CSR and are more likely to take initiatives for CSR activities at work.

Research limitations/implications: Research limitations include the size of the sample and the lack of equivalence among the compared groups. The methodological difficulty resulted from the ambiguity of the concept of empathy as well as from the fact that the involvement and promotion of attitudes that are related to CSR most likely have a polymotitivational character, which may be influenced by other individual, situational, social, or cultural variables that concern both the individual and the organisation.

Practical implications: It can be concluded that the level of personal involvement in CSR – a natural training of empathy that takes place in the organisation – may increase sensitivity to others and arouse motivation to act for the benefit of the environment.

Originality/value: Research makes us look at social sensitivity as a factor that stimulates action and also structures the cognitive system by directing the attention and thinking processes and, thus, as one of the possible predictors for individuals to build attitudes that are related to CSR.

Keywords: HR Business Partner, Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR), social sensitivity, attitiudes, personality traits.

Category of the paper: Research paper.

1. Introduction

Corporate social responsibility (CSR) and sustainability have become one of the key trends in setting standards for managerial practices and strategic development. Understanding CSR through the prism of its impact towards its stakeholders, which is promoted by the institutional environment (the European Commission (2011), for example), aims at moving from the traditional understanding of the responsibility of owners and shareholders that has been presented in managerial theories to a broader understanding of the goals and interests that are characteristic of behavioural and stakeholder theories (Przybylska, 2018).

CSR and sustainability are indicated in *Human Capital Trends* (published by Deloitte in 2018) as the key factor for organisational development (Deloitte, 2021). The increasing interest in CSR can also be observed in increasing numbers of publications in scientific journals as well as in the trade press regarding the field of human resource management (Klimkiewicz, Kowalik, 2020). The importance of social sensitivity in shaping CSR attitudes towards managers has also become important in the context of emerging critics around the CSR concept (Kowalski, 2016), which is a starting point for shaping sceptical attitudes towards CSR. Therefore, we pose a question in this article that is related to the attitudes among HR specialists towards CSR and to which extent the levels of their social sensitivity influence their attitudes towards CSR. In the current research, we look at CSR attitudes through the prism of their cognitive, emotional, and behavioural components (Ajzen, Cote, 2011; Klimkiewicz, Oltra, 2017) and present results that were based on research that was conducted among 25 HR specialists and HR business partners.

2. Social sensitivity as predictor of attitudes towards corporate social responsibility

Reflections on social sensitivity most often concern the possibility of diagnosing and shaping it as well as its significance for the quality of human functioning, organisations, and societies. The concept of sensitivity itself has been discussed in the context of its biologically determined aspects (in its relationship with sensory sensitivity and neurosensitivity). It also describes the combined threads that are related to the biological and emotional components of sensitivity, discussing them in terms of selected theories of temperament (Eliasz, 1990; Strelau, 2019). In this context, there are also issues regarding the factors that determine the way we experience it as well as the competences that allow people to effectively manage their own emotions and understand other people's emotions (such as self-regulation, emotional intelligence, and empathy) (Gulla, 2021). It is worth noting that it is the

ability to empathise (the readiness to perceive even the smallest signals in an environment, which requires compassion) that is a prerequisite for the emergence of social sensitivity. In the studies on empathy, three research trends can be found: the first emphasizes its emotional aspect; the second focuses on the cognitive aspect; and the third complementary approach takes these two processes into account. Definitions of empathy that are based on its affective aspect emphasize such states as emotional consonance with another person, so empathy is understood as an emotional response to the perceived emotional experience of others (Stotland, 1963; Mehrabian, Epstein, 1972). Stressing the cognitive component, it is emphasised that an empathic observer is a person who tries to understand the essence of another person's experiences as well as their thoughts and motives for action (Mead, 1934; Dymond, 1950; Hogan, 1969). Currently, however, the term "empathy" is most often used to describe those phenomena that are related to affective responses to the situation of another on the one hand (empathising with the state of another person) and with understanding what this person feels on the other (with a cognitive assumption of roles) (Feshbach, 1975; Frączek, 1986; Eliasz, 1980; Davis, 2001). One can also find an understanding of empathy that, in addition to the existence of an emotional and cognitive component, also assumes its behavioural aspect that is defined as a "compassionate response to someone's discomfort" (Dolan, Fullam, 2007) or being part of the emotional aspect of "concern" (Decety, Bartel, Uzefovsky, Knafo-Noam, 2015). Although elements such as emotional compassion, compassion and care for another person, or understanding another person's feelings and point of view are emphasized to varying degrees in the definitions of empathy, all attempts to define empathy have one thing in common – an especially important feature; namely, active interest in other people's needs, motives, or problems. By "active interest", one means a specific orientation towards other people that leads to specific actions to improve their well-being and, at the same time, improve their individual social functioning. Particularly noteworthy are helpful behaviours that offer support (in general – altruism). Many authors have combined these behaviours with the ability to empathise with others (Eisenberg, Miller, Schaller, Fabes, Fultz, Shell, Shea, 1989; Batson, 1991; Kaźmierczak, Plopa, 2007). It has been pointed out that it is empathy (the ability to take on someone else's perspective in various social situations) and compassion that have become the predictors of effective help. Thus, people can better understand another person's problems by empathising with his/her situation (Davis, 2001).

Empathy has been indicated as crucial from the point of view of actions that are taken by managers in the field of corporate social responsibility (Cartabuke, Westerman, Bergman, Whitaker, Westerman, Beekun, 2019). Therefore, it is important to estimate to what extent the creation of attitudes in the field of socially responsible behaviours depends on individual factors like emotional sensitivity and are understood as the ability to empathise (Jaworowska, Brzezińska, 2014). This question is particularly justified in the context of people who, in connection with their function in an organisation can influence the formation of attitudes towards CSR among other members of an organisation. HR professionals play an important

role in the development of managers, the selection of training, and the training content; they can also assume the roles of sustainability coaches as related to line managers (Klimkiewicz, Staszkiewicz, 2021). Research shows that the level of empathy of someone who is responsible for training and development is one of the features that distinguishes the representatives of this profession (Sundstrom, Lounsbury, Gibson, Huang, 2016).

In this article, we propose to verify the following hypothesis (along with the related auxiliary hypotheses):

H1: The level of social sensitivity positively affects the attitude towards CSR.

- H1.1: People with a higher level of social sensitivity have a higher level of CSR knowledge.
- H1.2: People with a higher level of social sensitivity perceive CSR to a greater extent in normative terms than in instrumental terms.
- H1.3: People with a higher level of social sensitivity are more likely to positively evaluate CSR activities.
- H1.4: People with a higher level of social sensitivity show a higher personal level of commitment to CSR.
- H1.5: People with a higher level of social sensitivity are more likely to take initiatives for CSR activities at work.

3. Methodology

This research used judgmental sampling and was carried out among specialists in human resource management (HRM). In this study, the Bochum Inventory for job-related personality description of Rudiger Hossiep and Michael Paschen (BIP) was used to diagnose the level of social sensitivity (Jaworowska, Brzezińska, 2014). Due to assure high quality of results the research was conducted under supervision. This assumption strongly limited the number of respondents taking part in the study. This restric BIP is a tool that makes it possible to describe personality in a professional context and is designed to measure those personality dimensions that are important for effective professional functioning in various positions. In the research, one measure from the area of social competences ('social sensitivity') was used to verify the hypotheses. A 'social sensitivity' measure is understood as the ability to empathise by perceiving emotional signals in a social environment. People who score high on this measure are able to receive even weak signals from other people in social situations and easily interpret them. They are empathetic, and they like people. This means that this measure allows us to estimate not so much a readiness to respond with specific behaviour to observed social situations but rather a readiness to perceive even the slightest signals in an environment that require compassion (Jaworowska, Brzezińska, 2014).

The respondents also answered questions about their attitudes towards CSR (Klimkiewicz, Oltra 2017). The indicators referred to three dimensions of attitude towards CSR: cognitive, emotional, and behavioural components (Ajzen, Cote, 2011). Following measures were used:

- Cognitive component:
  - CSR knowledge: a self-assessment of one's level of knowledge in the field of CSR and sustainable development.
  - Understanding CSR (I/N): an instrumental perception of CSR (vs. normative) – this means relativising the value of CSR due to the benefits that it brings to an organisation. A normative perception means an attitude that is consistent with principles regardless of the possible consequences for an organisation.
- Emotional component:
  - CSR assessment: a positive-vs.-negative attitude towards CSR that is related to the perception and assessment of the impact of CSR activities on an organisation and its surroundings.
- Behavioural component:
  - CSR involvement: behavioural determinants that indicate the personal involvement of the respondents in CSR; e.g. social engagement, consumer decision-making.
  - CSR initiative: behavioural determinants that indicate involvement in the CSR activities that are undertaken by an employer and initiating CSR activities in a workplace.

The respondents answered questions that were formulated on a five-point Likert scale (1 – "I strongly disagree"; 5 – "I strongly agree"). The reliability of the measures was tested (Table 1).

Table 1.
Reliability levels for used measures

Measure	Cronbach's alpha
CSR Knowledge	0.831
Understanding CSR (I/N)	0.735
CSR Assessment	0.753
CSR Involvement	0.840
CSR Initiative	0.828

Source: Own study.

4. Results

The study involved 25 people – 3 men, and 22 women. In all, 33% of the respondents were 25-30 years old, 18.5% were 30-35, 14.8% were 35-40, 22.2% were 40-45, and the rest were more than 45 years old. The work experience is presented in Figure 1.
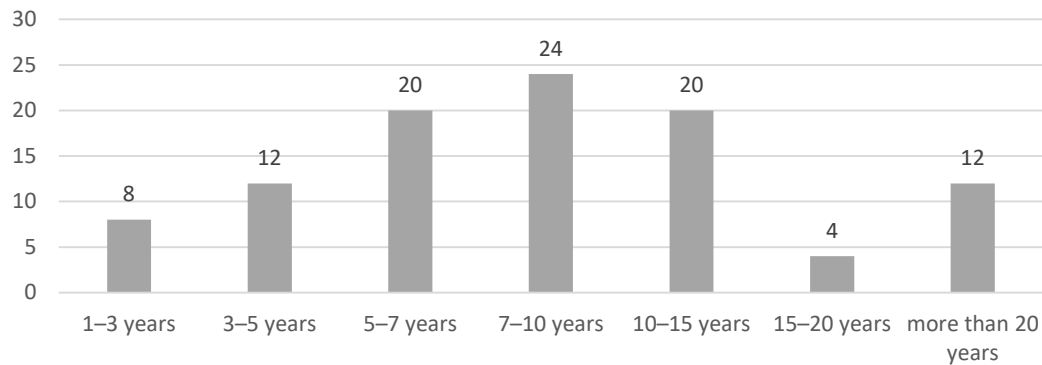
Figure 1. Work experience of respondents [%].

Source: Own study.

More than half of the respondents (52%) worked in companies with more than 1000 employees, while 20% worked in companies (251-1000 employees), 20% in medium-sized enterprises (51-250 employees), and the rest in small and micro enterprises. Most of the respondents were employed in manufacturing companies (40%), HR services (24%), and sales (12%), while the rest represented various industries (automotive, insurance, financial, and logistics). A full 60% of the respondents did not have any managerial experience, while 40% performed or had held managerial positions. Table 2 presents the basic descriptive statistics for the variables that were analysed. It is noteworthy that the level of one's self-assessment of knowledge about CSR was the lowest-rated aspect when compared to the other measures. However, the respondents very clearly indicated a normative understanding of CSR and were more likely to positively assess the concept of CSR (Table 2).

Table 2.

Descriptive statistics for analysed measures

Measures	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Standard deviation
CSR Knowledge	25	1.00	5.00	2.96	1.05
Understanding CSR (I/N)	25	2.25	5.00	4.96	0.61
CSR Assessment	25	3.20	5.00	4.17	0.53
CSR Involvement	25	1.14	4.71	3.19	0.84
CSR Initiative	25	1.00	5.00	3.08	1.14
Social sensitivity (BIP)	25	38	64	52.96	6.248

Source: Own study.

With the results that were obtained by the subjects on the individual measures, a normality of distributions test was carried out using Kolmogorov-Smirnov. Therefore, it was decided that the Rho-Spearman correlation coefficient would be used for the calculation due to the lack of normality of most of the distributions (Table 3).

Table 3.

Rho-Spearman correlations among analysed measures

		Social sensitivity [1]
CSR Knowledge	Rho-Spearman	0.202
	Significance (bilateral)	0.332
	N	25
Understanding CSR (I/N)	Rho-Spearman	0.592**
	Significance (bilateral)	0.002
	N	25
CSR Assessment	Rho-Spearman	0.217
	Significance (bilateral)	0.298
	N	25
CSR Involvement	Rho-Spearman	0.445*
	Significance (bilateral)	0.026
	N	25
CSR Initiative	Rho-Spearman	0.462*
	Significance (bilateral)	0.020
	N	25

Note. * Correlation is significant at level of 0.05 (bilateral); ** Correlation is significant at level of 0.01 (bilateral).

Source: Own study.

The H1.1 hypothesis that says that there is a relationship between the level of social sensitivity and the level of CSR knowledge was not confirmed. In turn, Hypothesis H1.2 (referring to the connection of social sensitivity with the normative understanding of CSR) was confirmed. Hypothesis H1.3 (related to the correlation between the level of social sensitivity and the assessment of CSR) was not confirmed. The last two hypotheses (H1.4 and H1.5 (on the intervariation of the level of social sensitivity and behavioural components of attitude towards CSR)) were confirmed. In summary, three out of the five auxiliary hypotheses that made up the main hypothesis were confirmed. Therefore, it can be assumed that the main hypothesis that states that the level of social sensitivity positively affects attitudes towards CSR was partially confirmed.

5. Discussion

The research that has been reported in this article is an attempt to explore the importance of social sensitivity for attitudes towards CSR among HR business partners. According to the research, HR business partners are characterized by a high level of social sensitivity (Sundstrom, Lounsbury, Gibson, Huang, 2016). This was also confirmed by the results of a personality survey using the BIP inventory, which was carried out on representatives of various professions in Poland. HR employees obtained the highest scores on the following measures: social sensitivity, team orientation, openness to relationships, and leadership motivation (Jaworowska, Brzezińska, 2014). The analysis of the personalities of HR business partners also indicates that they achieved some of the highest results in the area of such variables as social sensitivity and openness to relationships (Staszkiewicz, 2021).

The obtained results indicate the important role of social sensitivity in shaping attitudes towards CSR and sustainable development. Research on the importance of empathy for developing ethical competences and the methods of making decisions indicates that this trait may be particularly important in the case of people who are responsible for the development of others, as empathy strengthens their motivation to improve the well-being of others (Pohling, Bzdok, Eigenstetter, Stumpf, Strobel, 2016). An analysis of the obtained research materials allows us to conclude that people with higher levels of social sensitivity are more likely to perceive CSR in normative terms (referring to moral values and accepted ethical standards). The results suggest that the attitudes of HR professionals may be different than those of most line managers. The research that was conducted among Polish managers regarding their attitudes towards CSR indicates a willingness to act according to market expectations. The factor that makes managers recognise the value and importance of CSR for the development of their companies are the image benefits that are obtained from participating in pro-social and pro-environmental activities (Cierniak-Emerych, Mazur-Wierzbicka, Rojek-Nowosielska, 2021, p. 289). This means that HR business partner as manager's coach (Klimkiewicz, Staszkiewicz, 2021) may direct managers towards understanding CSR as an autotelic value. Some studies suggest that the instrumental view of CSR among managers is natural, as it allows them to apply appropriate activities that are aimed at increasing efficiency in their daily work (which is beneficial for a company) (Amaeshi, Adi, 2007). On the other hand, the normative approach leads to value-based leadership; this allows managers to make ethical decisions in any situation, not merely when this comes with specific benefits (Gond, Matten, 2007). In addition, strengthening managers' normative perceptions of CSR can allow them to improve their communication with their employees and other stakeholder groups (Marais, 2012).

The research also allowed us to confirm hypotheses that indicate the correlation between one's level of social sensitivity and the behavioural component of their attitude towards CSR (measured as personal commitment to CSR) and initiatives that are undertaken for CSR in the workplace. In this context, it is also worth bearing in mind that empathy is associated with better social functioning (Kaźmierczak, Plopa, 2007) and is one of the significant motives that leads to pro-social behaviour (Reykowski, 1986). Therefore, it is worth emphasizing that not only is sensitivity to the needs of another person important but it is also an important behavioural aspect in the discussed research; this is manifested through respect for one's dignity, compliance with the principles of social justice and honesty, and taking responsible actions (or even the "intensification of help") (Davis, 2001; Hoffman, 1990; Mirowska, 1994). The literature indicates that people with high levels of empathy have stronger senses of social justice, which contributes to a better recognition of ethical situations and the impact that stakeholders have on an organisation and its financial results (Cartabuke, Westerman, Bergman, Whitaker, Westerman, Beekun, 2019). Research suggests that there is a relationship between the level of empathy and the level of personal involvement in CSR; this is expressed through consumer

decisions, interest in exploring a topic, or social activity as a part of volunteering (outside the workplace) as well as the level of employee involvement in the workplace that is expressed through taking initiatives that help protect the natural environment and solve social issues. Similarly, Tian and Robertson's (2019) research shows that people with higher levels of empathy identify more with an organisation if they see it as being socially responsible. These results are important for both the formation of communication and training policies in the field of CSR.

Although awareness of the importance of CSR, is also becoming more and more visible in HR (Deloitte, 2021), the respondents rated the level of their knowledge of CSR relatively low in the sample. This may have been relevant to the results, which did not allow us to confirm the hypothesis of the relationship between the level of social sensitivity and the self-assessment of the knowledge about CSR. However, this may have been due to the fact that knowledge about CSR is not yet widespread in Poland (Cierniak-Emerych, Mazur-Wierzbicka, Rojek-Nowosielska, 2021). The variety of the results in this regard suggests the need for further exploration. The second hypothesis that was not confirmed in our research was the hypothesis of the relationship between the level of social sensitivity and the (positive) assessment of CSR. In the light of the available research results (in particular research that indicates differences in the perception of CSR in Polish society – Furman, Maison, Sekścińska, 2020), it seems that the positive or negative assessment of CSR may depend on many factors (including the level of scepticism. It can be assumed that people with high levels of social sensitivity may have high expectations towards organisations that are engaged in CSR, which may make them more critical about the concept itself. However, these issues require further analysis.

6. Conclusions

The article indicates the importance of social sensitivity and empathy among HR employees (who are responsible for the development of soft skills among decision-makers). The conducted research allowed for a partial confirmation of the primary hypothesis – particularly regarding to the importance of social sensitivity for formulating the cognitive component of CSR and the behavioural component. This makes us look at social sensitivity as a factor that stimulates action and also structures the cognitive system by directing the attention and thinking processes (Oatley, Jankins, 2003) and, thus, as one of the possible predictors for individuals to build attitudes that are related to CSR.

When discussing the obtained results, it can be also concluded that the level of personal involvement in CSR – a natural training of empathy that takes place in the organisation – may increase sensitivity to others and arouse motivation to act for the benefit of the environment. Questions arise here about how so-called sensitive organisations (Kisil, Moczydłowska, 2014) can awaken the social sensitivity of their members.

The obtained results are also important from the perspective of designing organisational processes. Our research has confirmed the importance of social sensitivity as a trait that should be taken into account in selection processes (Pohling, Bzdok, Eigenstetter, Stumpf, Strobel, 2016) – particularly in the case of people who are responsible for the development of other members of an organisation. Summing up the research results one should remember its limitations; these undoubtedly include the size of the sample and the lack of equivalence among the compared groups. The methodological difficulty also resulted from the ambiguity of the concept of empathy (which still remains a complicated construct) as well as from the fact that the involvement and promotion of attitudes that are related to CSR most likely have a polymotitivational character, which may be influenced by other individual, situational, social, or cultural variables that concern both the individual and the organisation (which are not included in this research).

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