"Giving people like me bones to gnaw on": environmental employee activists contesting and fitting in CSR boundaries

Arthur Gauthier-Penhirin, ESCP Business School

Aurélien Acquier, ESCP Business School

Jean-Pascal Gond, Bayes Business School

Résumé :

Businesses face mounting pressure from societal groups to deal with critical social and environmental issues. Inside organizations, this translates into the formalization of CSR policies and roles, as well as employee activism coming from outside official channels. Little is known, however, about how those two types of insider social change efforts interact. Drawing on the concept of boundary work, we conducted a qualitative study of five cases of environmental employee activism within five MNCs, where employees formed bottom-up networks outside formalized CSR and raised thorny issues. From a longitudinal analysis, we induced a four-stage model whereby 1) employee activists first contested CSR's symbolic boundaries, 2) which led them to breaching CSR's jurisdictional boundaries, 3) before being channeled by the organization, 4) and finally fitting in and overflowing redrawn CSR boundaries. Our analysis contributes to the literature on insider social change agents by unveiling how institutionalized CSR acts simultaneously as a resource provider and a gatekeeper for employee activism.

Mots-clés : activisme interne, activisme environnemental, RSE, travail sur les frontières, professions

The critical degradation of environmental conditions on Earth has transformed the way people view their work. While part of them reject traditional businesses as complicit in this situation and turn to alternative employment, others try to transform their organizations from within through activism. For instance, workers from Google, Amazon and Microsoft have organized climate strikes and issued public letters demanding climate action from their employers (The Guardian, 2019). In France, for over five years, employees have been organizing into collectives for the environment within their organizations; they are now present in some 200 organizations (Brisepierre, Demoures, & Joly Pouget, 2023). Employee or insider activism is nothing new (Briscoe & Gupta, 2016; Zald & Berger, 1978), and scholars have studied cases of employees mobilizing for LGBT and minority rights in the US (DeJordy, Scully, Ventresca, & Creed, 2020; Raeburn, 2004; Scully & Segal, 2002) and in France (Buchter, 2021). They have explored the tactics and effects of this form of activism, as well as the tensions and risks involved (Briscoe & Gupta, 2016; Meyerson & Scully, 1995).

However, the phenomenon of insider activism for the environment (Skoglund & Böhm, 2020) brings two novelties. First, whereas insider activism for the rights of minorities started at a time when those topics were mostly unaddressed, organizations have now built corporate social responsibility (CSR) and sustainable development (SD) departments to tackle societal and environmental issues, leading to the emergence of new professional groups (Augustine, 2021; Risi & Wickert, 2017). Second, environmental issues fundamentally challenge the economic and business models based on growth and are inherently difficult to tackle for most for-profit organizations (Wright & Nyberg, 2017). In this context, the irruption of groups of employee activists for the environment can disturb organizations. By claiming a role in environmental issues and trying to push them further, they challenge the organizational boundaries on CSR, both in terms of who can handle environmental topics and what should be done regarding them.

To dive into those dynamics, we draw on the concept of boundary work, as defined by (Langley et al., 2019): "purposeful individual and collective effort to influence the social, symbolic, material or temporal boundaries, demarcations and distinctions affecting groups, occupations and organizations". Hence, our research question: How does environmental employee activism affect the boundaries around CSR?

To answer it, we rely on a multiple-case study design (Yin, 2018) focused on five groups of employees within five multinational corporations headquartered in France, who gather outside institutional channels (e.g. CSR and SD departments or employee representative bodies) and act for bottom-up change for the environment. Our findings uncover a four-step process through which 1) employee activist form epistemic communities and start contesting CSR's symbolic boundaries based on knowledge and values, 2) activist groups breached CSR's jurisdictional boundaries by starting actions and engaging with stakeholders, 3) organizations react by channeling employee activism back into CSR boundaries, 4) which leads employee activists to fitting in their officialized position, by accepting restrictions and taking advantage of organizational resources, but also to overflowing CSR boundaries through covert initiatives. This brings contributions to the literature on boundary work by unveiling the role of symbolic resources in starting and sustaining a boundary work process, and to the literature on insider social change agents (Heucher, Alt, Soderstrom, Scully, & Glavas, 2024) by revealing how, through three channeling mechanisms, organizations and CSR practitioners simultaneously grant resources to employee activism and restrict its scope.

1. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

1.1. EMPLOYEE ACTIVISM OUTSIDE OFFICIAL CHANNELS

Employee or insider activism deals with employees pushing for social causes within their

organizations, whether as groups or individually. In a broad sense, it includes all types of insider social change agents (Heucher et al., 2024; Schaltegger, Girschik, Trittin-Ulbrich, Weissbrod, & Daudigeos, 2023), whether they have an official role linked to social issues within their organizations (Girschik, 2020; Sonenshein, DeCelles, & Dutton, 2014; Wickert & de Bakker, 2018) or not (Buchter, 2021; Morgan, 2006; Scully & Segal, 2002). Informed by theories on issue selling and social movements, the literature on employee activism has explored the tactics used by those activists and their effects on organizations (Buchter, 2021; Sonenshein, 2016). It has also studied the tensions experienced by those individuals as they pursue social agendas often at odds with their organizations' objectives and has shown how they engage in self-work to try and manage them (Meyerson & Scully, 1995; Sonenshein et al., 2014).

Girschik, Svystunova, and Lysova (2022) have argued for the study of employee activism outside rather than under "the CSR banner", as it offers hope for more radical change. Following their call, this article focuses on employee activists acting for social change from outside institutional channels. This implies increased challenges and risks for them (Briscoe & Gupta, 2016; Meyerson & Scully, 1995). They face possible stigmatization, damage to their reputation and career risks as they outstep their formal role, which leads them to focus on small victories (Meyerson & Scully, 1995; Scully & Segal, 2002), adopt a business rhetoric (Briscoe & Safford, 2008; Meyerson & Scully, 1995) or seek protection from managers (Scully & Segal, 2002).

It is particularly interesting to study this unofficial form of employee activism, and more specifically contemporary environmental employee activism, as it has potential to disturb official CSR in two ways, as we show in the following section.

1.2. ENVIRONMENTAL EMPLOYEE ACTIVISM AND CSR

1.2.1. Interacting with CSR practitioners

Most studies of employee activism have studied fights for LGBT and minority rights, which culminated in the 1990s in the US (Briscoe & Safford, 2008; DeJordy et al., 2020; Raeburn, 2004), as well as in France (Buchter, 2021). Studies of employee activism for environmental topics are more recent, with most cases studied starting in the late 2000s to the 2010s (Girschik, 2020; Howard-Grenville, 2007; Schifeling & Soderstrom, 2022; Skoglund & Böhm, 2020; Soderstrom & Weber, 2020). Moreover, almost each of those studies - except for Skoglund and Böhm's (2020) work on employees'' everyday environmental actions - focus on activism from within CSR or environmental programs and roles. This is revelatory of a new context for employee activism, when most organizations have now tasked specific departments with handling CSR and SD issues. It was not the case when employee activism for minority rights started, and employee activist groups became institutionalized only later on under the CSR or diversity banners (Briscoe & Safford, 2008; Raeburn, 2004).

The literature on CSR, sustainability and other professional groups mandated on social and environmental issues within organizations (hereafter "CSR practitioners") has investigated their emergence and institutionalization pushed by the necessity to address pressing stakeholders' demands (Acquier, Daudigeos, & Valiorgue, 2011; Augustine, 2021; Lounsbury, 2001). It has also outlined the fragile positions they hold (Augustine, 2021; Carollo & Guerci, 2018; Langley et al., 2019; Pamphile, 2022; Risi & Wickert, 2017; Wright, Nyberg, & Grant, 2012). For instance, Augustine (2021) reveals how sustainability manager positions appeared in American universities following students-led social movement campaigns, and how those managers voluntarily restricted their jurisdiction to appear politically "neutral". Risi and Wickert (2017) show that the institutionalization of CSR within firms has not led to increased professionalization for CSR managers, but rather to organizational marginalization, as they aimed at diffusing their expert knowledge across

departments. Overall, CSR practitioners' expertise appears shaky and easily contested, as members of this occupation do not share a common disciplinary background or knowledge base (Langley et al., 2019).

In this context, the emergence of environmental employee activism outside CSR departments can challenge CSR practitioners' legitimacy. This may drive them to defend their prerogative over environmental topics and fight against insider activists. On the other hand, CSR practitioners also often perceive themselves as internal activists (Carollo and Guerci 2018), looking for ways to push their agenda further and leaning on social movements to do so (Augustine, 2021). Hence, they may welcome environmental employee activists as potential allies in pursuing social change (Heucher et al., 2024; Schaltegger et al., 2023). Buchter's study (2021) offers a glimpse of such ambivalent relationships: it shows how LGBT employee activists provided much needed knowledge to diversity managers on topics such as transphobia, but diversity managers also had to handle activists to protect their organization's image. Overall, though, interactions between different types of insider social change agents, particularly between those holding formal roles and those outside such roles, remain understudied. This paper aims at answering recent calls to study such interactions (Heucher et al., 2024; Schaltegger et al., 2023), which have potential to transform how organizations deal with societal issues,

1.2.2. Questioning business as usual

While employee activism for minority rights brings radicality to the workplace by questioning power relationships (Scully & Segal, 2002), environmental employee activism can lead to questioning the fundamentals of business. Indeed, although all sustainability issues involve fundamental tensions that make them difficult for businesses to apprehend and tackle (Hahn, Pinkse, Preuss, & Figge, 2015), this is even more salient for environmental topics. Seriously

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addressing environmental issues means dealing with the direct negative consequences of economic activity – such as climate change, biodiversity loss, chemical pollution or resource depletion –, and leads to questioning the central notion of unlimited economic growth (Wright, Nyberg, Rickards, & Freund, 2018). Wright and Nyberg's study (2017) of companies tackling climate change has shown how, as they see their short-term economic interests threatened by longer-term environmental considerations, shareholders push organizations back to business as usual. This dynamic has led NGOs and academics to denounce the display of corporate action on the environment as mere hypocrisy, greenwashing, or symbolic compliance used to defend the status quo (Cho, Laine, Roberts, & Rodrigue, 2015; Feix & Philippe, 2020; Lyon & Montgomery, 2015).

Other studies have shown how organizations react to challenges and pressures emerging from society - coming from social movements, consumers, political regulation - and end up structuring and institutionalizing CSR programs to deal with them (Acquier et al., 2011; Augustine, 2021; Soderstrom & Weber, 2020). As they believe environmental issues are not sufficiently addressed by their organizations, environmental employee activists may bring in tough issues and push for handling them better, thus disturbing this trend of normalization of societal issues within organizations. Wright & Nyberg (2017) have underlined the role of employees to initially push their organizations to commit more to environmental issues.

Hence, environmental employee activism situated outside institutional channels may challenge CSR both in terms of who is handling environmental topics - should it be reserved to dedicated practitioners? - and of what is done - are CSR programs going far enough? -. To better understand the dynamics at play in organizations as this environmental insider activism unfolds, we rely on the concepts of boundary work and boundaries.

1.3. THEORETICAL FRAMING: BOUNDARY WORK AND BOUNDARIES

Following Gieryn's (1983) seminal study on the demarcation of science from non-science by

scientists, boundary work focuses on how actors build and transform boundaries and spaces over time, through "ongoing activities or sets of practices" (Langley et al., 2019). It applies more specifically to occupations and professions drawing jurisdictional boundaries on who is tasked with doing what (e.g. Bucher, Chreim, Langley, & Reay, 2016; Burri, 2008). In this sense, CSR practitioners' efforts to define their jurisdiction and then covertly expand it may be interpreted as boundary work (Augustine, 2021). Employee activists seizing environmental topics within organizations can also be analyzed as boundary work, similar to the one conducted by new occupational groups (Edlinger, 2015; Langley et al., 2019; Mikes, 2011). As they act outside institutional arrangements such as CSR departments or official networks of "CSR ambassadors" tasked with embodying and diffusing CSR within organizations (Risi & Wickert, 2017), they question and disturb jurisdictional boundaries around sustainability topics.

In their review of the concept of boundaries across the social sciences, (Lamont & Molnár, 2002) distinguish symbolic boundaries - ""conceptual distinctions made by social actors to categorize objects, people, practices, and even time and space"" - from social boundaries - ""objectified forms of social differences"". Symbolic boundaries constitute ""tools"" necessary to draw social boundaries. For instance, a widely recognized expertise constitutes a symbolic boundary upon which professionals can build a social boundary in the form of a profession and its associated jurisdiction (Abbott, 1988). In the case of CSR as an occupation, CSR practitioners' expertise appears shaky as a symbolic boundary, which fragilizes their jurisdictional claims (Risi & Wickert, 2017). Since Gieryn's (1983) has shown how scientists battle over claims of specific knowledge and methods to protect their professional authority, expertise and knowledge have been recurring elements in studies of boundary work. The literatures on boundary work between professions and occupations have established the role of knowledge and expertise to draw social boundaries. Researchers have shown how nurses,

radiologists, or risk managers showcased their expertise to defend or establish their positions vis-à-vis other occupational groups (Allen, 2000; Burri, 2008; Mikes, 2011). Expertise is a resource that actors can mobilize in boundary work, for instance to establish legitimacy over the exclusive usage of a new technology such as MRI (Burri, 2008). In many cases, "boundaries of expertise" (Langley et al., 2019; Lefsrud & Meyer, 2012; Sanders & Harrison, 2008) are used as symbolic bases for constructing jurisdictional boundaries.

In the case of CSR practitioners, it seems that besides knowledge and expertise, the construction of the occupation and its jurisdictions is closely linked to norms and values coming from outside the organization. Studies have revealed how organizations created CSR departments and roles to respond to external pressures from social movements and even recruited CSR practitioners from social movements background (Augustine, 2021Augustine & King, 2022}. As links between organizations and their environment (Briscoe & Gupta, 2016; Weber & Waeger, 2017), CSR practitioners and employee activists can act as "carriers of movement praxis and ideals" (Augustine & King, 2022). However, institutionalized CSR practitioners may find difficult to defend those norms and values, as they have to play by the rules and protect themselves from being labelled as too "political" (Augustine, 2021). Employee activists, although they face potential stigmatization and career risks (Meyerson & Scully, 1995), might be in a better position to push forward those normative elements.

To investigate these complex dynamics, we ask the following research question: How does environmental employee activism affect the boundaries around CSR?

2. METHODS

2.1. EMPIRICAL CONTEXT

Groups of environmental employee activists (hereinafter referred to as "activist groups") now

exist in some 200 organizations in France (Brisepierre et al., 2023). Most activist groups were created around 2020 on the initiative of employees, in a bottom-up fashion, outside any institutional channel. They are mainly made up of non-executive managers, men and women of all ages, with a majority aged around 30. They range in size from a handful of members to several hundred members and followers, but most of them are run by a small number of highly committed individuals, who devote a considerable amount of time to this activity, in addition to their working hours. Such "core teams", as employee activists call them, range from 3 to 15 members and take responsibility for animating the whole group. Activist groups gather thanks to internal social networks and instant messaging software, they meet regularly and carry out diverse activities, which entail eco-actions in the office (e.g. eliminating plastic cups at the cafeteria), awareness raising through conferences and workshops, and advocating for better integrating environmental issues in operations, business models and strategy.

Contrary to similar employee initiatives for corporate climate action in the US (The Guardian, 2019), French activist groups do not engage in public protests and instead claim a cooperative stance vis-à-vis their management to push for change from the inside. A national association was created in 2021 by employee activist group founders to connect and represent them; it insists on their willingness to work hand-in-hand with organizations' managers (Les Echos, 2021). This eagerness to cooperate with management, while emerging from outside the official organizational structure makes such activist groups interesting to study in terms of boundary work.

2.2. DATA COLLECTION

We studied five activist groups within five French multinational corporations. This selection was based on three criteria: access to the field, variance in terms of sector, and existence of a CSR or sustainability department. While many activist groups exist today, not all are visible nor willing to work with researchers. To access the field, we simultaneously reached out to

publicly visible activist group members and relied on personal contacts. From there we conducted snowball sampling, to access more activist group members, and non-members inside the same organizations; this enabled us to build trust with people engaged in activities that may entail risks for their careers (Scully & Segal, 2002). Additionally, we sought out variance in our cases (Becker, 1998) in terms of sector, which could affect how environmental employee activism unfolds and how organizations react to it, as, depending on their sector, they are variously affected by environmental issues and exposed than others to public scrutiny and pressure. However, besides this difference, we made sure that all cases have in common the existence of a CSR or sustainability department, before the emergence of employee activist groups. This is important as it means that the organizations in which those groups operate have already dedicated official organizational actors to the management of environmental issues, creating a fertile ground for boundary work around those issues.

We collected data from January 2022 to June 2024. We gathered multiple types of data to triangulate sources (Yin, 2018): semi-structured interviews with groups' founders and members, as well as non-members with relationships to the group - including with CSR practitioners whenever possible - (100 interviews in total), internal documents produced by the groups, public discourses by group members on professional social networks, and observations of meetings (see table 1 for a detailed account of data sources for each case). The interviews with group members covered the following topics: the history of the group since its creation, with detailed accounts of key events, its ambitions, its organization, the topics discussed within the group, the activities it carried out, its relationships with other organizational actors, in particular CSR practitioners, and their personal experience of environmental insider activism. The interviews with non-members mostly dealt with their links with activist groups and how they perceived their activities.

Table 1. Overview of data sources

	Organization's business	Group's birth	Data collected
Group A	B2B services	2021	-14 interviews (10 group members - including a CSR practitioner -, 1 former member) -Documents: manifestos circulated within the organization, emails between group's founders and top managers
Group B	Industry	2020	-39 interviews (24 members, 1 former member, 6 top executives - including a CSR manager -, 3 other non-members) -Documents: private group documents, videos and presentations circulated within the organization, emails between group members and top managers, public communications -Observations: group's first seminar, presentation of first research results to the group
Group C	Consulting	2021	-11 interviews (7 members, 2 former members, 1 non-member) -Documents: private group documents, newsletters produced by the group and circulated within the organization, public communications
Group D	Financial services	2020	-12 interviews (8 members, 1 former member, 1 non-member) -Documents: group's charter, public communications -Observations: 3 group meetings
Group E	Infrastructures	2017	-24 interviews (10 members, 10 non-members - including CSR managers -) -Documents: private group's documents, excerpts of group members discussions on internal social networks, documents produced by the group and circulated within the organization, public communications

2.3. DATA ANALYSIS

Following Eisenhardt's (1989) advice, we mixed, and iterated between, within-case and cross-case analyses. In line with the processual orientation of boundary work (Langley et al., 2019), we first created detailed accounts of each group's trajectory, through tables of events and narrative summaries. We then took a step back to compare the processes of development of the activist groups, by looking broadly at the evolution of their practices, their relationships with other organizational actors, and the links between those two dimensions. This allowed us to spot divergences, as activist groups ended up reaching different statuses within their

organizations, depending on whether or not they managed to reach an institutional arrangement with the CSR department. However, whatever the status they reached, – or their organization, number of members or ambition and degree of radicality –, they all followed similar steps, which would form the backbone of our process model: contesting then breaching CSR boundaries, before being channeled by their organizations and fitting in, and potentially overflowing, redefined CSR boundaries. To understand the driving forces behind this common process and tease out the differences we had spotted, we had dived again into each case and systematically coded our informants' interpretations of events. Simultaneously, we came back to the literatures on boundary work and professional boundaries. Through iterations between the data analysis and the uncovering of concepts such as symbolic and social boundaries (Lamont & Molnár, 2002) and epistemic communities (Akrich, 2010), we built a data structure (Gioia, Corley, & Hamilton, 2013) composed of first-order codes close to the field, second-order conceptual themes, and aggregate dimensions [*work in progress*]. We then articulated those elements into a processual representation of environmental activist groups' boundary work. This going back and forth between within and cross-case analysis allowed us to treat our five case studies as "literal replications" (Yin, 2018) of a same phenomenon of environmental employee activism and generate more general insights.

3. FINDINGS

Our findings show how, as they emerge, activist groups go through four successes phases, detailed below: contesting symbolic boundaries, breaching jurisdictional boundaries, organizational channeling, and fitting in and overflowing. It must be noted that there may be overlaps between those phases, and some back-and-forth, in particular as the contestation of symbolic boundaries unfolds and fluctuates during the whole life of activist groups. However, the overall process we now proceed to describe and explain is common to each of the five cases studied.

Employee activists started by contesting, in a more or less visible way, the symbolic boundaries of CSR. They did so by building an epistemic community and contesting CSR practitioners' commitment and knowledge, as well as their exclusivity over their domain.

3.1. CONTESTING SYMBOLIC BOUNDARIES

3.1.1. Epistemic community building

In each of the cases studied, activist groups emerged when a few employees started informal discussions on ecology and their company. They usually first met thanks to prior work relationships and identifying each other as sensitive to environmental issues. At this stage, they shared common references on environmental topics and a sense of not fully belonging within their organizations due to ideas at odds with mainstream business views. As in the examples below, many members of those groups - which they often call "collectives" - felt relieved to find like-minded employees to share their concerns with.

> "And at what point do we say to ourselves, 'No, the strategic decisions of our company don't match up at all with our vision of life'? And the collective allows us, in fact, to regroup. That's really important. I really feel that way. And to exchange ideas with like-minded people." (member Group A)

> "So we cling to our vision, well, the collective is also a comfort zone. We can talk about eco-anxiety." (founder Group C)

Across all cases, employees related first creating activist groups after going through ecological epiphanies triggered by videos and books from environmental experts. One such expert, Jean-Marc Jancovici, who has been particularly vocal and has gained a fervent audience on the professional social network LinkedIn by sharing analyses on energy and climate change and vehemently criticizing business as usual, was often cited as the origin of

those epiphanies. While initial knowledge and commitment to environmental topics served as a foundation for the activist groups, they also acted as a place for developing further knowledge, as members of activist groups brought in knowledge from those outside sources to discuss with their like-minded colleagues. This was for instance the case of the founder of Group E, who first created a discussion group on his company's internal social network, to share knowledge sources and analyses on environmental topics with his colleagues. In groups C and D, this quickly took the form of monthly meetings where activist group members shared updates on their ongoing projects as well as on environmental news, and offered each other quick trainings on specific topics, such as biodiversity or the concept of Anthropocene.

Moreover, contrary to typical CSR departments, activist groups gathered employees from various departments and positions within their organizations. This allowed them to share their views based on their distinct professional experience and to access information from across their organizations. This was particularly salient in Group E, where members produced analyses of their company's reported carbon footprint, founded on their business expertise. Mixing those two sources of knowledge - external, environment-related and internal, organization-related - enabled activist groups to build a unique lay expertise - i.e. an expertise situated outside official organizational spaces of expertise, such as CSR and sustainability departments - and understanding of their organizations.

From this lay expertise and commitment, activist groups also quickly began claiming a role in transforming their organizations, whether in the form of written manifestos or less visible interactions. For instance, group A founders issued a call within their company for other employees to join them and transform their organization from within. This took the form of a one-page document, which ended with those sentences:

> "Our aim is to unite a community to transform [company A] from the inside, so
> that our company can play a full part in a resilient, inclusive and sober world,

consistent with the physical limits of our planet. Come and join us!"

This happened shortly after one of the group founder had signed a public manifesto in a newspaper with over 20 members of various activist groups, including B, C and D. Group B founders meeting with top executives to introduce their initiative, its purpose and intended actions is another example of how activist groups started early on to claim a role on environmental topics.

In sum, by developing a lay expertise on the environment and their organizations, sharing a commitment to transforming their organizations and affirming it by claiming a role: employee activists built epistemic communities, as defined by (Akrich, 2010): "a network sharing both general policy options and a certain knowledge basis".

3.1.2. Normative and knowledge contestations

Those epistemic communities formed a basis for normative and knowledge contestation of CSR. At this stage, interactions with CSR practitioners remained scarce, consisting mostly of informing them of employee activists' initiatives and trying to obtain approval (groups A, B, C, D). Moreover, some employee activists expressed skepticism on the ability of CSR departments to drive their organizations towards sustainability, due to a perceived lack of substantive progress or knowledge on environmental issues. Group E founder for instance was very critic of the CSR managers' track record in his organization:

> "for a long time, CSR directors have been very much into [eliminating plastic] cups. So when you realize this, you're like: 'There are 300 CSR managers, but what have you guys been doing?'" (E1)

Group D founder questioned their organization's CSR practitioners' background and depicted

them as "communication professionals or even former advertisers prone to self-satisfaction". Group C founder questioned not only their CSR's manager knowledge and commitment on environmental issues, but also the role of CSR practitioner itself:

> "The definition of CSR is a bit of a mishmash, because it's a bit strange that a single person, a single entity in any case, should be responsible for the ethical, social and environmental responsibility of a company. [...] And so she [the organization's CSR manager] pushes what she knows best and also, I think, what she has more personal convictions about, which are the social and ethical dimensions. [...] So she's doing some things, but when it comes to the environmental side of things she doesn't really know anything." (C1)

However, many employee activists shared a view that they could provide helpful support for CSR practitioners, by engaging in sustainability initiatives on their own or alongside CSR departments. This simple idea can also be interpreted as a contestation of CSR symbolic boundaries: employee activists question the exclusivity of CSR practitioners over matters related to sustainability. Since they share a commitment to environmental issues, they believe they should also be able to act on them. In some cases, this mere intention of getting involved into environmental issues could be perceived as a threat by CSR practitioners, as expressed below:

> "I think that CSR initially thought that we were sort of taking their job. They thought that employees thought that CSR wasn't doing its job properly, since they felt that there was no... We told them 'Oh no, not at all. It's just that we're reacting because we're aware that there's a problem and we want to get involved to solve it, and that's it'. It took us a while to make them understand that it's a way of giving meaning to employees and letting them have a hand, of getting involved." (D9)

In sum, from the shared vision and knowledge they had developed through building epistemic communities, employee activists started contesting the CSR symbolic boundaries by

questioning the commitment and knowledge of CSR practitioners, or even the mere fact that CSR should have exclusivity over sustainability topics within the organization. This contestation of symbolic boundaries then legitimized the employee activists' breaching CSR's jurisdictional boundaries, as we will see now.

3.2. BREACHING JURISDICTIONAL BOUNDARIES

Environmental employee activists breached CSR's jurisdictional boundaries by seizing issues and actions normally attributed to them and by engaging with stakeholders on environmental issues, in particular external stakeholders, a prerogative of CSR.

3.2.1. Seizing issues and actions

While, as seen above, some employee activists expressed skepticism and irony towards eco-actions such as eliminating plastic cups, it must be noted that such eco-actions - e.g. working with catering services to propose vegetarian meals at the canteen or promoting bicycle commuting to work - were still part of the repertoire of most activist groups (Groups A, B, C, D). Although many members acknowledged that those constituted only marginal improvements to their organization's environmental track record, they still saw it as a way of aligning better their ecological vision of the world with their daily experience at work and of pushing their organization towards exemplarity on those topics. Employee activists also perceived eco-actions as rather accessible and acceptable tasks to start with, allowing them to develop their actions further. While they sometimes sought cooperation with CSR or facility management departments to implement those eco-actions, they mostly started them on their own, which did not seem to pose an issue for CSR practitioners.

Besides eco-actions, most of activist groups' efforts at transforming their organizations were

focused on diffusing knowledge on environmental issues. They did so through various means: conferences, film screenings, public meetings, newsletters, sensitization and training workshops, as well as manifestos. One widely used format was the organization of Climate Fresks - 3-hour workshops explaining climate change mechanisms based on IPCC reports -, which they advertised to their colleagues through word-of-mouth (Groups B, C, D, E). In some cases, activist groups organized similar short trainings on related issues: climate change mitigation, biodiversity, green IT, as well as tailor-made training on the company's business (Groups C and D). Groups C and D also started issuing newsletters featuring information on the activist groups' initiatives, as well as a monitoring of environmental news. Group A's initial call, mentioned above, was also a medium to diffuse its ideas and share facts about environmental issues; the first paragraph recalled the Paris agreement:

> "196 UN member countries approved the Paris Agreement on December 12, 2015, collectively committing to efforts to stay well below a warming of 2°C above pre-industrial levels. More than 5 years later, current efforts are not sufficient to achieve zero-carbon objectives. In France, for example, the per capita carbon footprint has remained constant since 1990 at around 12 tCO2eq/inhabitant/year. To meet the objectives of the Paris Agreement, it would have to be divided by 6 by 2050. No country is meeting its commitments, even though they are insufficient to limit global warming to 2°C."

Activist groups also used environmental knowledge to advocate for business model and strategic changes. For instance, a few months after its initial call, Group A issued another manifesto, this time to push its company to embrace the status of mission-driven corporation. It argued that such a legal status would be a way to transform the company and use its assets in the service of the environment. This followed an intervention during the company's general meeting by two group members, calling out top managers on the same topic. Such advocacy strategy was also clearly assumed by Group E founder: in an internal video presenting his

group, he stated its goals as "informing", "supporting each other to maximize our impacts", but also "denouncing greenwashing" and "campaigning" to "call on our leaders". Group E put questioning its company's strategy and business decisions at the core of its activity and found numerous ways to address its company's leaders: notifying them on critical discussions on its online discussion space, commenting official announcements on the company's intranet to denounce greenwashing, asking environment-related questions during open meetings with top managers, putting up posters in the company's offices criticizing business decisions, and up to writing and internally diffusing reports advocating against a major strategic decision.

While not as firmly as groups A and E, the other groups also questioned their company's business and found ways to express their voice. Group B also took advantage of open meetings with top managers to raise difficult questions on the compatibility of some profitable business segments with environmental issues; Group C used its newsletter to push a reflection on how to transform the consultancy sector to be in line with the IPCC recommendations; Group D invited managers to its monthly meetings to discuss their company's ties with fossil fuel companies. Those advocacy efforts also led activist groups to engage various stakeholders, including external ones.

3.2.2. Engaging stakeholders

Employee activists engaged and cooperated with a variety of stakeholders. For instance, in the context of a takeover of their organization, group A leaders reached out to their new shareholders to argue for their company to become a mission-driven corporation. Afterwards, they engaged employee representatives on the same topic, and trained them on the legal framework of the mission-driven corporations. After issuing an internal manifesto arguing for this transformation, they were finally invited to discuss it by their new CEO and Strategy and CSR director. Another example was groups B, C, D, E directly reaching out to team or

department managers to obtain approval to train their teams with Climate Fresk workshops.

In some cases, activist groups also engaged external stakeholders. As mentioned above, Groups A, B, C and D founders joined an interorganizational network of employee activists leading environmental activist groups and signed a newspaper article with their own and their organization's names. Before that an NGO pushing for French companies to commit to the ecological transition had published online information on Groups B and D, based on interviews conducted with their founders. While Group B founder did so on his own, without informing his CSR department or managers, Group D founders had to go through the validation of its CSR team, which was no easy task and led to negotiations on what could be said or not during the interview (D8). Group D founders also contacted an NGO critical of their organization and its investment policy, to organize an internal debate between the NGO and organization's representatives. Group E also engaged external stakeholders when one of its members leaked a controversial report, written and diffused across the organization by other members, to its organization's sector professional association.

Thus, while still unofficial, activist groups behaved as official, independent organizational actors, establishing ties with other actors without going through the intermediary of their top management or the CSR department, except in a few instances. They drew confidence and legitimacy from their belief in the utmost importance of their cause, as well as from the lay expertise they had developed. Overall, they started shaking up jurisdictional boundaries by taking on topics, missions and relationships not officially assigned to them. In most cases, this led to tensions and suspicion from CSR practitioners, as expressed by founders:

> "Overall, the Sustainable Development Director, well, I've heard off the record
> that he says, 'ah yes, they're young guys who want to show off'. That's his vision.
> What we, or at least the rest of us, are thinking is, 'It's crazy, because for years,
> Sustainable Development has been the only one in the company, and now there's
> an army of people rising up in the company who share exactly the same values as

they do... And in fact, they see it as a threat or as...' (Group A founder)

"To tell the truth, since we started the collective, we've had a complex relationship with the CSR teams because we share the same niche, but as we don't have the same agenda (or the same constraints) we shake them up. Unfortunately, and even though it's their job, I don't think they've yet understood the state of emergency we're in, which requires drastic changes. [...] (We'll try to convince them, but we need them as allies to be able to move forward)" (D - email from a group founder to a member of the interorganizational network)

Group D members also explained that as the activist group expanded (it reached an audience of over 300 employees in less than a year), CSR practitioners started seeing them as a potential threat. However, it was not until they breached CSR boundaries by engaging with specific external stakeholders that they triggered a strong reaction from CSR managers, as is the case for other groups.

3.3. ORGANIZATIONAL CHANNELING

In the first two phases, activist groups acted quite independently within their organizations, with only occasional discussions with managers and CSR practitioners. While members of groups A and D reported the early presence of CSR practitioners within their online discussion groups, presumably to monitor their activities, they did not face direct organizational interventions into their activities. However, as activist groups breached CSR boundaries, they ended up triggering organizational reactions, which took different forms depending on the groups and organizations: organizations reacted by formalizing activist groups - under the rule of, or in cooperation with, CSR departments -, by exfiltrating individuals towards environment-related positions or projects, and by selecting some

initiatives to take over and give resources to. In each case, we argue it is a way to channel employee activism and put it at the service of the organization and its CSR policies while preserving the organization from potential threats that unleashed activism might bring.

3.3.1. Group formalization

Formalization occurred for Groups B, C and D. For Groups C and D, after an initial period of growing suspicion, specific initiatives perceived as provocative or threatening the organization's reputation triggered those reactions. When Group D organized a debate with a critical NGO, communication and CSR managers deemed this event too subversive and pressured the organizers to cancel the debate, before issuing them a formal warning. Following this, the activist group proposed to write a charter to make explicit what they could and could not do. After tough negotiations (D9), this charter ended up stipulating that group members "take care not to convey political or trade union messages" and submitting the group's initiatives to pre-approval by the CSR department. Group C faced a similar backlash after they put up maps of surrounding vegetarian restaurants in their offices and their CEO was concerned with customers possibly seeing them. Considering this as provocative, he summoned the group's founder. Group C subsequently became an official employee network under the supervision of the CSR manager, subject to a validation process for its actions and communications, and with a new, chartered name.

The case of Group B formalization was less conflictual: as its members were trying to gain recognition from the organization, they met several times with top executives, including the CSR manager. At some point, he offered to officially sponsor the group, on the condition that it would structure itself and act as a unique point of contact representing environmental employee activists within the company. This led group members to a 3-month work of benchmarking similar internal and external groups and defining the group's aims, values and

behaviors, missions and organization. This work resulted in documents noticeably affirming that "Group B members are not expected to take the place of existing Company teams".

In both cases B and C, group formalization was made easier by the preexistence of official employee networks on diversity issues, with which CSR managers had already established relationships.

3.3.2. Individual exfiltration

In cases A and E, the main mechanism through which the organization channeled the activist group was exfiltrating individuals from the group. When a controversial report written by members of Group E leaked outside the organization, the management started an internal investigation and threatened to dismiss the report's authors. Subsequently, most of the report's authors ended up being recruited to environment-related positions within their company. While they could still be part of the activist group, this was a way to incorporate them into the official structure and to take advantage of their knowledge and commitment on environmental issues. Indeed, some of the most active group members were also designated as official experts on the environment, as part of a corporate program giving selected employees some time to work on developing and diffusing a specific expertise. This designation of employee activists as experts was exceptional as none of them had the two official years of experience normally required on their topic of expertise.

Similar individual cooptation happened in groups B, C and D, in line with employees' wishes, who could finally spend most of their working time focused on environmental topics, instead of just the few hours they managed to put aside for their activist group. In Group B, one of the most active and radical members joined the CSR team; Group C founder was tasked on a consulting mission to help a company set up its own environmental employee network; in

Group D, one of the founders became responsible for sustainability training across the company. In each case, their experience within their activist group was key to reach their new position, and they could remain in their groups.

In other cases, important activist group members had to leave their groups. This happened to one of Group's A leaders, and the highest-ranked employee among the group members: after a meeting with the new head of CSR, who did not seem to welcome the existence of an employee activist group within the organization, nor the activist stance displayed by the group member, he was asked by his manager to leave the group (A14). Subsequently, the former group member was put in charge, along with two other managers, of the purpose-driven corporation project he had been pushing with the activist group. Organizations also let activist group members exit the company. This was the case for Group A, where the takeover of their company resulted in the departure of dozens of members, including one of the group founders. This also happened in Group B, where its founder's attempts at obtaining an internal CSR position were left unaddressed, until he decided to leave the company.

3.3.3. Initiative venturing

Organizations also channeled employee activism by taking over, or "venturing", part of their initiatives. The most salient example is how CSR and Training departments ended up integrating Climate Fresks as official trainings, with company-wide targets on the number of employees to be trained. This happened in each case where activist groups had first informally started organizing Climate Fresks (groups B, C, D, E). While taking over the initiative, and thus giving it official support and resources (a fee is paid to the Climate Fresk association for corporate trainings), the companies still relied on activist group members to animate most of those workshops, often on a voluntary basis. In cases C and D, activist groups even trained CSR practitioners on climate change, either using the Climate Fresk or a tailor-made training

workshop focused on the company's sector. In both cases, this was also a necessary step for validation of the training workshops by the CSR department, before venturing could take place.

In case A, the creation of an official company project on the mission-driven corporation status, by putting one of the activist group leaders in charge of the project after requiring him to officially exit the group, is another example of an initiative takeover. In the end, the company formulated a purpose with the help of its employees, including activist group members but did not become a purpose-driven corporation, as initially demanded by employee activists. Case C offers a spot-on example of organizational venturing, as the very initiative of creating a group of employees pushing for environmental transformation of the organization was then sold as a consulting project to another company, project which was led by Group C founder. Finally, in case B the organization made an attempt at venturing: as Group B founder proposed reflections on how to transform the company's business model and make it more sustainable, managers pushed him to submit his ideas to the corporate incubator. He decided not to do it as he wanted to focus on building and animating his activist group.

In most of those cases, we see close links between the exfiltration and the venturing forms of channeling, as venturing happens through the exfiltration of one of the activist group's leaders; this allows the organizations to build on those individuals' knowledge and develop on their ideas while retaining control over their work by inscribing them into the official organizational structure. Whether it happens through group formalization, individual exfiltration or initiative venturing, or a mix of those mechanisms, organizational channeling acts as a way to coopt valuable environmental knowledge and commitment from employee activists and frame their initiatives within extended but clarified boundaries around CSR.

3.4. FITTING IN AND OVERFLOWING

As employee activists fit in new CSR boundaries that now include their activities, they simultaneously face a potential restriction of the scope of their discourses and actions, as well as an increased access to organizational resources and legitimacy. Moreover, while this fitting in limits their ability to contest symbolic boundaries, in some cases, employee activists find way to overflow CSR boundaries.

3.4.1. Fitting in

Group formalization led to a form of institutionalization which both limited activist groups' activities and brought them resources. For instance, following Group B's work of structuring itself, official cooperation with the sustainability manager begun: regular meetings were set up to share news and ideas, the sustainability manager helped forecast an official webinar to introduce the activist group to the whole company, and he presented it to company's top executives as an initiative he was backing. From this new official position, group members were reassured that they had a right to express and propose their ecological ideas to their organization. This led them for instance to work with managers on the organization of a one-day environmental seminar for the company's top executives. Moreover, they now had access to resources that helped them expand their audience within the company and greatly increase their membership, through the use of official communication channels, and communicating on the CSR manager's official approval. They also made sure not to cross the rules they had set up for themselves for example by avoiding engaging in critical advocacy against a new company compensation policy that did not take enough into account environmental criteria.

Groups C and D also restricted their scope of action, either because of self-regulation, or required validation from CSR practitioners. Both groups interrupted their newsletter. In case C, because of the burdensome process of validation by CSR and internal communication teams, before they finally started it again with a new validation process; in case D, following

an organizational ban, as employees not holding official representative positions were not allowed to issue newsletters. However, formalization also provided them with resources: they were able to access official communication channels and gained visibility. They also gained legitimacy, reassuring would-be members of the acceptability of joining such groups and gaining attention from managers, who Group D started inviting to share organizational information and debate during its monthly meetings. As expressed by a Group D member: "We are a recognized stakeholder now".

In the case of Group E, the conjunction of the leaked report crisis and the exfiltration of many active members towards official CSR positions devitalized the group: discussions came to a halt and almost no new initiatives emerged afterwards. This is because, the most active members were now more wary of entering public critical discussions and were also more engaged and satisfied in their new job, from which they could now officially organize Climate Fresks and work on assessing their organization's carbon footprint and imagining alternative business models. However, most of them now pushed for environmental issues with a way less critical angle than they could do before as employee activists with no official position. This led one of them to wonder: "Has the company succeeded in its trick of giving people like me bones to gnaw on [...] to disarm them?". This echoed the remark from a manager who had hired employee activists into CSR positions: "When they are inside, they have to shut up".

Group A also ended up devitalized partly as a result of individual exfiltrations from the group. This, and the subsequent closure of the mission-driven corporation project, left the remaining group leader with little motivation to continue her activism. Still, company's managers identified her as a resource on activism and environment-related issues: communication managers invited her to several conferences to share her experience leading an employee group, and the CSR director kept on reaching out to her for advice on sensitive issues, for instance corporate communication on climate change mitigation targets and how to deal with

critical reactions from NGOs.

Finally, at the initiatives level, venturing brought resources and reach to the activists' initiatives, but was also a way for the organizations to restrict their scopes. For instance, in case E, company managers were wary of the activist group using Climate Fresks as a space to diffuse its critics against major strategic decisions. When they turned the workshops into an official company training, they framed it so as to prevent this risk. The selection of some initiatives to be taken over by the organization, and given organizational resources, can also be read as a way for the organization to encourage some actions and not others, which lack official recognition and resources to be implemented more broadly. Group C for instance pushed for the officialization of the Climate Fresk but also of another climate-related workshop more focused on mitigation solutions, at the individual, organizational and societal levels. Only the Climate Fresk - which has become more mainstream in France as it has been implemented by numerous companies - was taken over by the company, while the other workshop - which involved reflecting on potential organizational transformations - received no organizational support.

3.4.2. Overflowing

After organizational channeling, besides fitting in, employee activists can also find ways to overflow organizational boundaries. In cases C and E, activist group members decided to stand for election as employee representatives. They were elected and could then, under the French law, create employee commissions on environmental issues. This allowed them to address directly top managers on environmental topics, without going through hierarchical processes or validation by CSR, now imposed by their group's official status (in case C). The links that many activist group leaders have with the national interorganizational network of environmental employee activist groups can also help them overflow their organization's

boundaries, as when a Group D member went to train members of company C on environmental issues related to their sector, alongside a member of Group C.

Other instances of overflowing were more covert, with two activist groups engaging in relationships with internal and external stakeholders. The leaders of one formalized group directly reached out to the company's managing director and obtained an appointment with him, to discuss suggestions on company governance and the inclusion of environmental issues in decision instances. They also engaged the team handling employee saving schemes to work on better environmental targeting of their investments. They did so in a hidden fashion, without informing either the CSR teams they usually report to, nor their broader activist group. However, according to them, the existence of a larger activist group backing them was key for the success of such internal connections, as it granted them visibility and legitimacy in the eyes of their interlocutors.

Even more secretly, some group leaders cultivated relationships with two NGOs, to exchange information and ideas for pushing their companies further on environmental issues. In another company, an activist group leader was covertly contacted by an employee of the governmental agency on ecological transition; they arranged a meeting to provide her with insider knowledge, enabling her to better challenge the company's environmental commitments.

Thus, after being channeled into redefined CSR boundaries, employee activists can still find spaces outside them to push for their organizations' transformation.

4. DISCUSSION

Through our analysis of five cases of environmental employee activist groups' boundary work, we reveal a process whereby activist groups start shaking CSR boundaries by

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contesting their symbolic foundations (commitment, knowledge, exclusivity). This legitimizes their breaching into CSR jurisdictional boundaries by seizing issues and actions and engaging with stakeholders, which then leads to organizational channeling: different mechanisms through which organizations integrate employee activism back into CSR boundaries. Finally, activist groups fit in those redefined boundaries and sometimes find ways to overflow them.

Figure 1: process model of environmental employee activists' boundary work
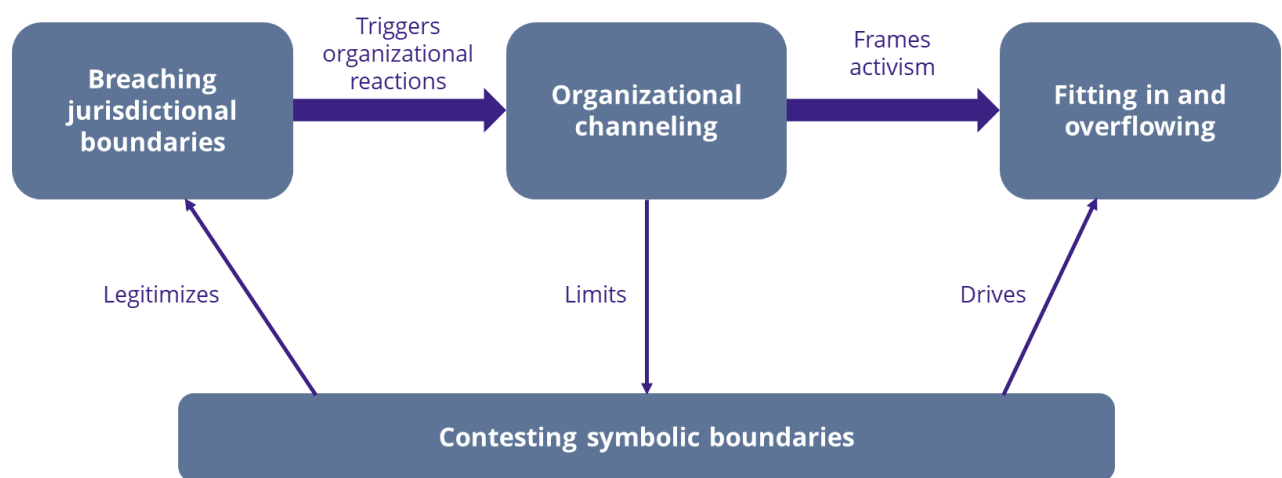
This paper contributes to the literature on boundary work inside organizations (Langley et al., 2019) by unveiling the role of symbolic resources imported from society to trigger and sustain a boundary work process, through the formation of epistemic communities. It also contributes to the literature on insider social change agents (Heucher et al., 2024) by diving into the interactions between (unofficial) employee activists and (official) CSR practitioners and conceptualizing three organizational channeling mechanisms.

4.1. SYMBOLIC RESOURCES FUELING BOUNDARY WORK PROCESSES

The literature on boundary work has underlined the role of knowledge and expertise as

resources used by established and nascent professions and occupational groups (e.g.: Gieryn, 1983; Burri, 2008). Values and norms imported from social movements, in addition to knowledge, have also played a role in the institutionalization of sustainability managers' positions in higher education in the US (Augustine, 2021; Augustine & King, 2022). The boundary work studied in this paper is unusual compared to traditional battles over professional or occupational jurisdictions: it involves groups of employees rather than established or nascent occupational groups (Langley et al., 2019). As they start, activist groups, composed of middle managers from various departments, do not boast any authority over CSR topics, nor, more broadly, over organizational policies or structures. As organizational members, employee activists have access to insider knowledge, a resource they can use to navigate internal politics and push for organizational change (Briscoe & Gupta, 2016). We show here that they mix this insider knowledge with outsider knowledge and values, which they import into the workplace (Scully & Segal, 2002), acting as links between organizations and their environment (Briscoe & Gupta, 2016; Weber & Waeger, 2017).

However, contrary to the sustainability managers studied by (Augustine & King, 2022), or to employee activists for minority rights (e.g.: Raeburn, 2004), they do not import those knowledge and values from their participation in a social movement. While some environmental employee activists studied built on prior links with an interorganizational network of environmental employee activists, most of them did not, nor were they involved in social movement organizations. Instead, they first developed environmental knowledge and values as sensitized individuals who informed themselves through books, videos and conferences, and by following environmental experts on social networks. Only after, they created epistemic communities within their organizations, which enabled them to share and develop further their knowledge and commitment.

Those epistemic communities, understood as "network[s] sharing both general policy options

and a certain knowledge basis" (Akrich, 2010), were the vehicles through which employee activists could contest symbolic boundaries around CSR. Similar to Akrich's (2010) study of the emergence of epistemic communities through online conversations around health issues, employees with no recognized environmental expertise first gathered around a common interest, then shared ideas and information to build a knowledge basis out of their experience and external sources, which enabled them to start acting based on this knowledge and to challenge recognized experts, here CSR practitioners. Taking strength in their symbolic resources - commitment, knowledge and also sheer number -, they questioned the exclusivity of CSR practitioners over their domain, and the contrast with their perceived lack of track record or strong commitment, environmental knowledge, and even organizational resources needed to act.

Thus, the contestation of symbolic boundaries, which is made possible by the creation of epistemic communities, then legitimizes breaching jurisdictional boundaries. Here, we draw on the distinction by (Lamont & Molnár, 2002) between symbolic and social boundaries to explain the process through which actors use resources to conduct boundary work. In the cases we studied, those resources are symbolic, linked to knowledge and values which have gained salience in the broader society and question professions and organizations (Howard-Grenville, 2007). This is in line with literature showing the role of knowledge in boundary work (Burri, 2008). We argue this also applies to other cases of employee activism: in Buchter's (2021) study of LGBT activism for instance, employee activists bring much needed knowledge to their organizations on topics such as transphobia, which allow them to claim a role on those issues, sometimes alongside diversity managers. In other cases, resources used for boundary work, can take other forms, for instance they can be material, in the case of the introduction of CT or MRI scanners in the medical context (Barley, 1986; Burri, 2008).

Further research could investigate further how different types of resources are used for

boundary work and where do they come from. Additionally, while this paper focuses on boundary work led by employee activists, it would be interesting to consider how the boundary work process unfolds when it is led by other employees or professional groups and what are the key resources they use to contest symbolic boundaries.

4.2. CHANNELING EMPLOYEE ACTIVISM: RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN DIFFERENT CATEGORIES OF INSIDER SOCIAL CHANGE AGENTS

This article reveals a dynamic whereby environmental employee activism is pushed towards officialization by organizations, and more specifically CSR practitioners. This forms part of the trend of normalization of CSR: first driven by societal pressures, CSR policies and practices ends up restricted as CSR practitioners' have to demonstrate to shareholders or to their employers the compatibility of their mandate with business objectives (Augustine, 2021; Wright & Nyberg, 2017). In our cases, organizations and CSR practitioners push employee activists to conform to already accepted CSR practices and roles. As shown above, they do so through three mechanisms: 1) formalizing activist groups and integrating them into the organizational structure, tightly linking them to CSR departments; 2) exfiltrating individuals from activist groups either by letting them into official CSR roles or by letting them leave the organization; 3) venturing initiatives: selecting some initiatives and taking them over as part of the CSR policy, pushing them thanks to organizational resources. Through those mechanisms, organizations channel employee activism towards the official organizational structure and thus restricts its scope in terms of topics discussed - challenges to business models and strategy orientations become unwelcome - and relationships with stakeholders - interactions with external stakeholders are closely monitored and often discouraged. After CSR, employee activism is normalized in turn (Wright & Nyberg, 2017).

Thus, it seems that institutionalized CSR departments and practitioners act as gatekeepers on

societal issues, by coopting employee activism. This echoes the risks of organizational cooptation underlined by the literature on employee activism (e.g. Briscoe & Safford, 2008; Meyerson & Scully, 1995; Scully & Segal, 2002), to which we add the precision that this cooptation can occur not just by the "organization" or the "management" taken in a broad sense, but precisely through the part of the organization that is dedicated to handling societal issues. This is line with (Heucher et al., 2024, p. 12)'s observation: "Those persons holding formal positions may have greater resources for making change, but also increased pressure to buffer the organization from more substantial change (Rothenberg & Levy, 2012)". However, we must qualify this pessimistic vision, with two observations. First, although they see their scope of activity restricted, formalized employee activist groups also benefit from organizational resources and legitimacy to extend their reach, in terms of member base and of colleagues and managers sensitized or trained on environmental issues. They can also now act without the fear of being punished by their organizations, knowing that their initiative is officially approved. Those positive effects of channeling justify their fitting in. Second, this cooptation remains incomplete: as shown in our cases, after being channeled into organizational boundaries employee activists found ways to overflow them, either by overtly running for employee representatives elections, or by covertly engaging with internal and external stakeholders. Such covert links can be a way to exploit employee activists' insider knowledge by providing it to outsider activists, who have more freedom to criticize and challenge the organizations (Briscoe & Gupta, 2016). Indeed, as suggested by Wright & Nyberg (2017), a potential way to overcome the normalization of CSR is for organizational members to cross organizational boundaries and work alongside NGOs and social movements to push for political solutions.

Finally, in the same way Scully & Segal (2002) have shown how the "umbrella" of management provides both protection and constraints to employee activists, the channeling by

CSR affects employee activism in nuanced ways. The role of the context must be noted: in the cases studied here, most CSR managers came from other areas within their organizations (e.g.: communication, strategy). This is different from Augustine's (2022) results in the context of US higher education, where sustainability managers were first recruited out of social movements backgrounds. Such background differences may have a strong impact on the dynamics between official CSR practitioners and unofficial employee activists; it would certainly be fruitful to study those dynamics interactions in similar contexts to the one studied by Augustine (2022), where employee activists and CSR practitioners might more easily perceive each others as allies.

Additionally, future research could examine more specifically whether employee activism pushes CSR forward, through bringing in valuable, specialized knowledge and internal pressure that CSR practitioners could levy to push for their topics and extend their jurisdictions, in the same way they use external pressure and relationships (Augustine, 2021). Indeed, as many CSR practitioners are highly committed individuals, at times considering themselves as employee activists (Carollo & Guerci, 2018; Ghadiri, Gond, & Brès, 2015; Wright et al., 2012), they may be able to take advantage of unofficial employee activism to push their action further. Another potential direction for research would be to compare organizational transformations brought by employee activism and by purely external social movements, as the former may be a faster, more direct conduit between organizations and their external environment, pushing them to adapt quicker to societal changes.

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