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# Prosocial employee behavior: The dynamics of purpose, public accountability and hypocrisy

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ABSTRACT

Tensions can exist between organizational deeds and narratives of purpose. Employees who perceive such inconsistencies may go public with the aim of fostering internal organizational change oriented towards aligning rhetoric and reality. In doing so, they engage in a distinct form of prosocial behavior not yet fully examined in existing literature: societal-oriented prosocial behavior (SOPB) This behavior may be initiated through multiple motivational pathways – identification-repair, moral conviction, hypocrisy-aversion, or strategic calculation – all sharing four defining attributes: (1) employees adopting an external, public stance on (2), a societal-relevant issue with the aim of (3), promoting internal organizational change aligning organizational actions that are consistent with prior statements of purpose, thereby (4) signaling both their allegiance to and dissent from organizational practice. This paper explores both the distinctiveness of these motivational pathways and the specific content of employee societal-oriented prosocial behaviors.

## 1. Introduction

Wayfair, an online US furniture store, emphasizes the importance of empathy, inclusion, kindness and respect in interacting with "our teammates and partners".[1,2,3] and [4] Their staff, pointing out the contradiction between the company's value statement and its actions, publicly protested about their company's deal with a government contractor, BCFS, that was equipping detention camps in Texas housing thousands of asylum seekers. "So far, the Wayfair employees' efforts have persuaded the company to give a $100,000 donation to the Red Cross. It's a compassionate gesture, activists say, but one that doesn't directly aid those who are being held in detention centers. They're hoping that the company will change its policy on working with contractors along the Southern border and create a code of ethics to govern ethically fraught business dealings." (Powell, 2021, p. A19). At Google, a former proponent of bringing one's whole self to work, more than 20 workers were fired following sit-in protests related to a contract it had entered into with the Israeli government (Moore, 2024).

The cases are illustrative of how the contradiction between a company's statements of purpose and its actions, understood in terms of their perceived alignment with either the letter or the spirit of those statements, may lead employees to go public with the aim of fostering an internal organizational change that pursues or supports a social goal that the organization has explicitly or at least implicitly espoused as a social

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[1] https://www.aboutwayfair.com/how-we-work. Accessed 17 June, 2025.

[2] Sometimes, the action of an individual ignites actions from other individuals who share a similar experience and perceive that, together, they will be more effective in pursuing the prosocial agenda (see Krishna, 2021).

[3] In an early prefiguring, at Ben & Jerry's in the U.S., a secretary drove an environmental crusade in face of the senior managers' lack of interest (Mirvis, 1994).

[4] https://news.cathaypacific.com/let-s-move-beyond−232258. Accessed 17 June 2025.

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or ethical position. We thus explore the phenomenon of value contradiction between the organization's declared social values and organizational actions, triggering employees into going public with charges of hypocrisy and asking for realignment. The increasing relevance of public statements of purpose (Gartenberg & Serafeim, 2023) is not always matched by corresponding practices, creating perceptions of organizational hypocrisy (Brunsson, 2019). Employee actions such as these may be conceptualized as "societal-oriented prosocial behaviors" (SOPB), aimed at persuading their organizations to be publicly accountable for breaching what they have led employees and the public to believe was organizationally considered a social-ethical common good. In this paper, we use *contradiction* to describe the structural gap between organizations' declared values and their actual practices, and *tension* to refer to the attitudinal, emotional, and behavioral reactions that employees may experience in response to such contradictions. These tensions arise at the individual level but may escalate into SOPB when employees recognize shared concerns, align around a common framing of the contradiction, and then act collectively and publicly in efforts to realign deeds with purpose. At that point, the dynamic shifts to the organizational level, as management responds to SOPB, either defensively or authentically.

We define SOPB *as insider action that becomes collectively expressed and publicly visible as organizational members seek to realign organizational deeds with espoused social values by directing claims toward organizational authorities*. In this paper, we focus on SOPB as enacted by employees and develop a process model of how individual employee concerns escalate into collective, public action. The distinctiveness of these behaviors becomes clearer when specified in terms of four core conceptual dimensions: (1) employees, the "archetypal insiders" (Briscoe & Gupta, 2016, p. 10; Girschik et al., 2020), adopting an *external*, public stance on (2), a *societal-relevant* issue with the aim of (3) promoting an *internal* organizational change that makes the company's *actions consistent with its statements or purpose*, thus (4), signaling both their *allegiance to* and *dissent* toward their organization via these SOPB. Collective expression is thus not an initial condition but an emergent property of SOPB as individual concerns coalesce into coordinated, public action. It is the distinctiveness of these behaviors that we explore. There is a rich literature which has studied dimensions such as social movements, unionism, whistleblowing, among others (see Appendix) – but SOPB, a specific form of prosocial activism, as we have defined it, is distinctive. Its impetus comes neither from a social movement nor a union, and the aim is not to expose the organization as corrupt or fraudulent in the social or mass media, as does whistleblowing (Kenny, 2019). The aim is to make the organization accountable to social-ethical standards it proclaims and that employees support. Such action may be triggered when employees experience a breach of these standards. For some, the breach threatens a valued organizational identity, prompting an identification-repair response. For others, the impetus may stem from moral conviction, outrage at perceived hypocrisy, or calculated assessments of impact, even in the absence of strong identification with the organization's purpose.

Focusing on SOPB is important not only because it is conceptually distinct, but also because it advances broader discussions on prosocial behavior, corporate ethics, and activism. Research on prosocial behavior has long highlighted the role of moral identity in motivating voluntary helping (Aquino & Reed, 2002). SOPB complements this stream by showing that prosocial action can also take the form of dissent, where employees simultaneously support their organization's stated values while challenging its practices. In the field of corporate ethics, legitimacy theory emphasizes how organizations must align their claims with their actions to maintain credibility (Jones et al., 2007; Suchman, 1995). SOPB adds to this conversation by noting how employees act as internal guardians of legitimacy, invoking organizational purpose to demand accountability. Work on activism in and around organizations has examined how insiders and outsiders influence corporate responsibility (Briscoe & Gupta, 2016; Girschik et al., 2020). It is this line of inquiry, capturing a specific form of insider-driven protest, which is extended by the concept of SOPB.

The phenomenon is worth investigating for a reason that is underexplored: the nature of both the employee SOPB and the processes that nurture or curb such behaviors. Two contemporary dynamics illustrate why such processes are particularly salient: First, organizations increasingly invite people to bring their 'whole self' to work (e.g., Cha & Roberts, 2019). Yet as Weber (1978) noted, organizational roles were historically designed to be limited and impersonal, separating personal identity from formal work responsibilities. When this bureaucratic logic collides with contemporary calls to approach mundane work as "a calling and do what they love" (Dobrow et al., 2023, p. 540), employees may experience dissonance when practices diverge from proclaimed values, in consequence feeling entitled to articulate this tension through their whole person. Second, firms' public claims about sustainability and social responsibility "filter into the workplace to influence employees' social identities" (Rheinhardt et al., 2023, p. 403), creating expectations that heighten sensitivity to contradiction. These tensions are amplified by digital communication, which render mismatches more visible and strengthens pressures for public accountability, reinforcing the resonance of prosocial activism (Kramer et al., 2014). Together, these forces create conditions under which SOPB may emerge, and in turn shape how organizations respond in ways that can nurture or suppress it, highlighting the need to theorize the process. We consider employees' SOPB conceptually, as a specific expression of *insider* prosocial activism that aims to produce an *internal* change and, thus, *re-alignment* of the words' and 'deeds' of the *organization authorities* that employ them. We ask: *when and how does employee societal-oriented prosocial behavior emerge, and what ways do organizational responses shape its trajectory?*

## 2. Foundations of societal-oriented prosocial behavior

### 2.1. Motivational pathways to societal-oriented prosocial behavior

Employee SOPB can arise through multiple motivational routes (Fiss, 2011). Employee's emotional identification with an organization may help in some cases, but it is neither necessary nor sufficient. Motivations can also be rooted in broader value commitments, independent of employee identification with an organization (Aquino & Reed, 2002). Employee organizational identification and value commitment have distinct qualitative differences. Identification links employees' self-concept to the organization as a collective (Ashforth & Mael, 1989), whereas value commitment anchors behavior in broader ethical or societal principles (Aquino & Reed, 2002). In the case of SOPB, these principles overlap with those professed by the organization. As such, prosocial behavior may emerge when employees act to defend values they see as universal and organizationally endorsed, even if they do not feel loyal to their organization. While value commitment tends to sustain prosocial action, the role of identification is more ambivalent: it can energize action when purpose–practice gaps threaten a shared identity (Ashforth & Mael, 1989), but it can also suppress dissent when loyalty norms or fears of reputational damage prevail (Morrison & Milliken, 2000).

One important response pathway is *identification-repair*, where employees act to restore coherence between their organization's espoused purpose and its practices when hypocrisy threatens a valued organizational identity (Ashforth & Mael, 1989). For Gulati (2022), such identification denotes membership of a 'moral community'. When employees feel that expectations and organizational promises of a moral community are not fulfilled, tensions, defined as "[s]tress, anxiety, discomfort, or tightness in making choices, responding to, and moving forward in organizational situations" (Putnam et al., 2016, p. 5) arise between the (promised) organization's identity and employees' prosocial concerns. Strong identification intensifies these tensions because employees experience contradiction not merely as organizational failure but as an identity violation that affects their sense of self (Ashforth et al.,

2008). Emotional ambivalence, in this case characterized by simultaneous pride in belonging and disillusionment with the organization, creates a moral dissonance that may catalyze reparative action (Ashforth et al., 2014). As Ashforth and colleagues (2020) note, such ambivalence can become a *generative tension*, enabling employees to engage in constructive attempts to reconcile conflicting values and restore integrity. In this sense, organizational identification not only binds employees to the organization but also motivates them to defend its moral coherence, linking belonging with moral agency.

A second motivational response pathway involves *moral conviction* where employees act from deeply held ethical commitments that are independent of any organizational loyalty (Aquino & Reed, 2002). A third response pathway is one of *hypocrisy-aversion*, in which perceived false signaling, indicated by the gap between what the organization says and what it does, provokes moral outrage and efforts to correct the discrepancy, even when identification is weak or negative (Jordan et al., 2017). In some cases, antagonism or disgruntlement may also spark prosocial action when employees see hypocrisy as a breach of trust, reinforcing the centrality of value–action contradiction across pathways. Finally, a fourth response pathway is one of *strategic calculation*, in which employees pursue SOPB after assessing that conditions favor such action, particularly when external opportunity structures, such as public visibility or coalition potential, make action seem feasible (Acharya et al., 2022; van Zomeren et al., 2008).

In these responses pathways employees leverage their organization's purpose and values as symbolic resources to legitimize protest. To do so they may draw on mission or vision statements or senior leaders' social-responsibility proclamations, using these to promote or initiate an organizational dissonance. In undertaking such action employees may adopt a public stance, focused on the perceived dissonance, while not raising issues through social movements external to the organization or supporting externally triggered movements (DeCelles et al., 2020). It is this internally initiated (both individual and collective, although mainly collective[2]) protest, expressed publicly to build support to reform contemporary practices, that characterizes employee SOPB.

Unlike Federman's (2022) emphasis on historical wrongdoing, SOPB centers on contemporary practices that embody organization hypocrisy. Such action is prosocial because it is a voluntary, intentional behavior, directed at advancing collective ethical standards, even if personal considerations or calculations are also present. When organizations fail to uphold purposively expressed values they provide a unique motif for SOPB. Employees may act to defend their organization's purpose, to respond to hypocrisy, or to fulfill personal moral obligations. In each case, it is the declared purpose that reinforces the perceived legitimacy of this symbolic action, allowing employees to hold leaders publicly accountable for inconsistencies between words and deeds (Acharya et al., 2022).

### 2.2. Defending legitimate purpose

Employee SOPB occurs in defense of purpose that is legitimate in the sense that the purpose is both socially-ethically valuable and (explicitly or implicitly) embraced by the organization. When an organization has purposefully adopted a rhetoric of corporate social responsibility, for example, employees can leverage this idea when they perceive that the purpose proclaimed is not being practiced. When Google workers protested the violation of the companies' values in its operations in China they held the organization to account in terms of its expressed purpose of not doing evil (Conger & Wakabayashi, 2018). The company's variance between its actions and its values in practice enables employees to assume a prosocial position. The variance can be used as proof of their loyalty to the ultimate *explicit* legitimate values of the organization and the illegitimacy of its violation by the organization's compliance with Chinese censorship practices. In this case, employees' protest reflected loyalty to espoused values; similar defense of legitimate purpose can also be motivated by moral conviction, outrage at hypocrisy, or strategic calculation.

Employees may also resist hierarchies to defend what they can legitimately represent as violations of *implicit* values (Courpasson et al., 2012). As Weick explained (1969, p. 5), for hierarchy to be maintained, those above must be "sending acceptable orders to the person below (in Barnard's [1938] language, orders must be within the zone of indifference for subordinates)". When orders fall outside the zone of indifference, engaged employees will be tempted to act. As contradictions between espoused/declared values and practice become increasingly apparent, orders will more likely fall outside the zone of indifference and contradictions will be experienced. Contradictions are "[b]ipolar opposites that are mutually exclusive and interdependent such that the opposites define and potentially negate each other" (Putnam et al., 2016, p. 6). It is the contrast between discourse and practice that may lead employees to protest via prosocial moves.

### 2.3. Responding to words-deeds inconsistencies with societal-oriented prosocial behaviors

SOPB are not *ultimately* aimed at defying organizational actions and decisions but at making them more authentic, i.e., aligned with their declared (and, sometimes, implicit) purpose. SOPB are a message, addressed to the organization: "be yourself, walk the talk". Rheinhardt et al. (2023) note that the organization-stakeholder ecosystem is becoming more dynamic, its elements strategically interacting. When contradictions become salient, employees may resort to SOPB as a response. Employees may protest *prosocially,* even when they anticipate or face an unfavorable organizational response; hence, some SOPB endure until organization authorities make efforts to close that gap, after weighing reputational, legitimacy and market considerations.

### 2.4. Definitional boundaries of societal-oriented prosocial behavior

Several conceptual dimensions support the distinction between employee SOPB and other forms of activist prosocial behaviors, which can be identified through the following boundary criteria: (1) action is carried out by employees as insiders; (2) agency is collective, initiated by one or more employees but sustained collectively; (3) action is expressed in the public arena; (4) action entails defiance or resistance to organizational practices; (5) action leverages organizational values or purpose; (6) action targets the internal organizational authorities. Together, these six criteria establish the boundary conditions that distinguish SOPB from adjacent forms of prosocial activism, providing the foundation for the definitional attributes we discuss next (see also Appendix).

*An insiders' activity.* Prosocial actions are carried out by employees as organizational insiders, not by outsiders. While other expressions of action, such as social activism (Rheinhardt et al., 2023) and whistleblowing (Kenny, 2019), are carried out by both insiders and outsiders, employee SOPB is an insider activity.

*Collective agency.* While whistleblowing, principled organizational dissent, prosocial rule breaking, and worker social intrapreneurship tend to be performed at the individual level, employee SOPB occurs collectively, although it may be initiated by a single employee. To be prosocial, other employees must join the action.

*Publicizing for internal effect.* Employee SOPB aims at influencing the *internal* audience by making the protest *public* (see Krishna, 2021). This distinguishes it from some other expressions of prosocial behavior, such as principled organizational dissent and prosocial rule breaking, which seek to influence only an internal audience without calling for public support.

*Defying/resisting.* Organizational change activism (i.e., employees' participation in a social movement within the organization in favor of or against a change in their workplace) is confined within the organization's boundaries. It is not explicit employee defiance or resistance enacted against authoritative imperative commands constituting

organization actions (Mars & Lounsbury, 2009); it may even be seen as a benign reminder from the organization's point of view. Employee SOPB is initiated *internally* and expressed *externally* (Krishna, 2021).[3]

*Leveraging organizational values and purpose.* A further dimension focuses on whether the action aims at leveraging socio-political and ethical values or the pursuit of narrow self-interest. Even while using organization purpose as a target, societal-oriented employees often aim to align the organization's action with its purpose. For some, this reflects endorsement of and identification with the organization's professed identity. For others, it may instead be driven by moral conviction, outrage at hypocrisy, or the calculation that invoking purpose provides the most effective legitimacy for action.

At the same time, SOPB may blend collective and self-interested motives. Protesting employees may be concerned not only with organizational hypocrisy and genuinely focused on a worthy societal principle or goal but also have a self-interested preoccupation with the erosion of their own rights. When teachers from public schools publicly defend 'public schools' for educational development of young citizens, or physicians from state healthcare organizations publicly defend national health systems and citizens' rights, those protests may also reflect legitimate material interests alongside broader societal commitments. Constituting a 'general interest' or voicing the defense of a 'public good' can therefore intertwine societal motives with elements of self-interest, without disqualifying the behavior as prosocial.

*Targeting internal organizational authorities.* Employee SOPB is addressed to organizational authorities, with the explicit aim of provoking internal change. This contrasts with whistleblowing, for whom the primary audience is external entities able to enforce sanctions, such as regulators or the media (Near & Miceli, 1985). Even internal whistleblowing differs from SOPB, as it usually centers on exposing "illegal, immoral or illegitimate practices" (Near & Miceli, 1985, p. 4) and may be initiated by either current or former employees (Miceli & Near, 1994; Kenny, 2019). By contrast, SOPB is carried out by current employees to hold the organization accountable to its espoused social values.

In the sections that follow, we treat words–deeds contradiction as the core contradiction that gives rise to employee tensions; SOPB is the collective, public response aimed at internal realignment.

## 3. The process of employee societal-oriented prosocial behavior

We now discuss how the process of employee societal-oriented prosocial behaviors unfolds (Fig. 1), revealing how the interplay between several categories of factors operate to engender SOPB, how organizations respond, and what the consequences of these responses are for employees.

The starting point lies in the structural contradiction that emerges when organizational actions fail to live up to explicit or implicit values publicly claimed by the organization. Employees recognize this contradiction and begin to experience tensions in the form of attitudinal, emotional, and behavioral reactions. At this stage, whether employees

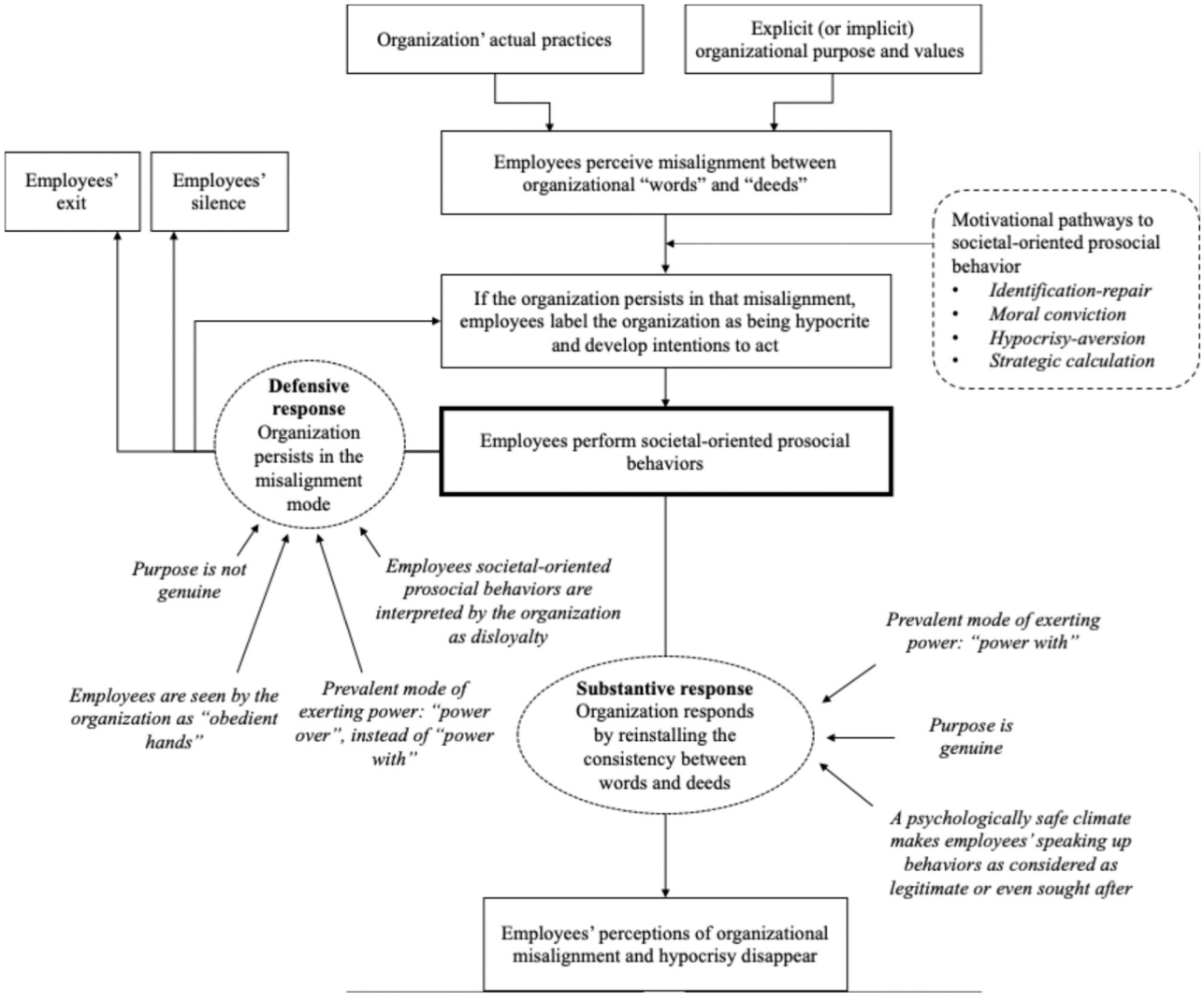



**Fig. 1.** How the process of employee societal-oriented prosocial behaviors unfolds.

move from perception to action depends on motivational responses as pathways to action. Four distinct pathways may lead to SOPB: (1) *identification–repair*, where employees act to protect and restore a valued organizational identity; (2) *moral conviction*, where deeply held personal values compel action; (3) *hypocrisy-aversion*, where employees react against perceived duplicity and (4), *strategic calculation*, where employees weigh costs and benefits and decide that prosocial action is feasible or worthwhile.

Once employees decide to act, they may engage in SOPB. At this point, organizational responses that can be grouped into two broad patterns of response are critical. One is defensive, allowing the contradiction to persist. The organization continues to maintain the contradiction and regards SOPB as disloyal opposition. Here, employees view purpose as inauthentic, these employees are labeled "troublemakers," and power is exercised as "power over." Such defensive responses silence or marginalize employees, often driving them toward exit or silence, maintaining contradiction by exercising power over them. The other option is that the organization takes SOPB seriously and works to restore alignment between words and deeds, resolving the inauthenticity of their contradiction. Purpose is enacted as genuine, power is exercised as "power with," and a psychologically safe climate legitimizes or even encourages employees to speak up. In this scenario, employees' perceptions of hypocrisy diminish, and SOPB becomes a constructive force that strengthens organizational integrity.

We distinguish between defensive and authentic organizational responses to purpose–practice tensions. Defensive responses deny, suppress, or ritualize engagement with the issue, often via symbolic gestures, a culture of silencing issues, removing them from agendas, or through ritualistic compliance to protect authority or avoid conflict (Ashforth & Gibbs, 1990; Morrison & Milliken, 2000). Authentic responses engage the tension directly, opening dialogue, enabling voice, and adjusting practices in ways that learn and realign deeds with purpose (Ashforth & Gibbs, 1990; Suchman, 1995). We will use this pair consistently throughout the paper to characterize organizational handling of these tensions.

In both cases, the process hangs on the initial perception of contradiction, which sets the stage for how tensions are expressed and managed. The following sections examine these dynamics in detail: how employees react when professed values are perceived to be at risk; how organizations frame contradictions; how power relations determine whether concerns are expressed or silenced; how engagement and disengagement affect employee responses; and how different motivational pathways lead employees from recognition to action.

### 3.1. When professed values are perceived as being at risk

Organizations, as Weick (1969, p. 10) explained, "have several different and contradictory rationalities". Competing organizational rationalities, articulated through an overarching purpose, inevitably pose possibilities for tensions to be experienced (Townley, 2002), even if only in terms of personal unease. When employees perceive an incongruence between the organization's purpose and its practices, they will respond attitudinally, emotionally and behaviorally. Prior work shows that perceived gaps between what leaders say and do elicit strong reactions, shaping trust, identification, and voice (Morrison, 2023; Simons, 2002). Some employees may rely on taken-for-granted 'implicit voice theories' about when speaking up is risky or futile, which can lead to silence even when moral discomfort is high (Detert & Edmondson, 2011). However, perceptions of a breach in the psychological 'social contract' on the part of the organization create moral and emotional tensions that intensify the need to speak or act (Robinson & Rousseau, 1994). Directly or indirectly, implicitly or explicitly, employees may articulate their unease about the non-purposive alignment of these practices and that organization (Morrison, 2011). Internally, this can involve voice and speaking up behaviors, or it can assume external form as SOPB when an organization is perceived as hypocritical regarding an implicit value or declared purpose, as not doing justice to professed values, not respecting them in its actions.

Where organization authorities adopt a defensive response, a divergence between employees' ethics and those of the organization's declared values/purpose and practices intensifies (Argyris, 1990). By contrast, when leaders respond authentically and acknowledge the contradiction, the sense of incongruence can be reduced, at least temporarily (Ashforth & Gibbs, 1990). As Jones et al. (2007, p. 141) remind us, stakeholder management is "fraught with tension … [involving] the allocation of benefits and burdens among human beings and, hence, involve moral questions" (Jones et al., 2007, p. 141). Employees frame these moral questions in terms of financial versus social goals, or hypocrisy versus genuine commitment, and organizational responses shape whether these contradictions remain manageable or escalate into public, as visible prosocial protest.

When organizations act in ways that contradict their stated purpose, employees face a dilemma: should they speak up about the inconsistency or remain silent (Morrison, 2011)? Purpose statements, with their moral components, become a reference point against which actions are judged (Clegg, 2023). Faced with these contradictions, organizations can respond in two ways. An authentic response acknowledges the inconsistency and engages with employees' concerns, turning protest into a source of constructive change. A defensive response dismisses or suppresses criticism, which only deepens perceptions of hypocrisy.

### 3.2. Contradictions as organizational framing

Statements that are performative "have effects; they make differences; they enact realities; and they can help to bring into being what they also discover" (Law & Urry, 2004, p. 393). When an organization commits to a purpose, that commitment is expected to have performative effects. Statements of purpose or adherence to a value are acts that may inspire others to align with them (Christensen et al., 2013). For example, when Patagonia states that it cares about the planet, this expression of care is presumed to be genuine. All such expressions of purpose may evolve into contradictions, such as the need to choose between user safety and environmental pollution (O'Rourke & Strand, 2017). While these contradictions are not predictable, when occur they can be tackled in different ways. Organizations may frame contradictory but mutually enabling alternatives constructively (Farjoun, 2010), accepting that the contradiction can be properly addressed. In doing so, the organization exposes itself to criticism from different stakeholders, including engaged employees, but signals that the generative potential of contradiction can be harnessed.

Internal criticism of the incongruence between organizational purpose and practices is more likely within specific boundary conditions (Pamphile & Ruttan, 2023). When hierarchies are steep and authority is concentrated, 'power over' (Follett, 1942) becomes the dominant mode of coordination. Such structures often suppress dissent and discourage upward communication, generating cultures of silence that erode employees' sense of influence (Morrison & Milliken, 2000). Coercive forms of control amplify disempowerment because they limit employees' psychological safety and agency (Detert & Edmondson, 2011; Edmondson, 1999). Under these conditions, purpose tends to be articulated for instrumental reasons, and organizations frame protests as a form of disloyal opposition, so that employees consequently feel that public silence is the price of their continuing employment.

In these circumstances, organizations frame tensions dismissively. Dismissive framing leads to forced choices, pushing employees to align with either the statement of purpose or current practice, without offering ways to reconcile the two. Organizations' statements of purpose often serve instrumental ends, as a branding tactic (Rey et al., 2019). Purposeful hypocrisy may be adopted to align with normative pressures or from the desire for "governing the [employees'] soul" (Rose, 1990; see also Bailey et al., 2017). When such statements of purpose do not align with organizational practices, their lack of authenticity becomes

evident (Jocum, 2021).

In these cases, SOPB often reflects a form of rational calculation. Engaging in risky prosocial behavior depends on employees' appraisals of personal cost, perceived efficacy, and available support (Detert & Edmondson, 2011; van Zomeren et al., 2008). When moral conviction outweighs perceived risk, when the loss of moral integrity seems costlier than sanctions, employees may still act, despite anticipated penalties. When employees feel that a loss of status or punitive action from the company is less urgent than the prosocial issue at hand, they are more likely to act prosocially.

Importantly, hypocrisy may not result from illegitimate intent so much as a flawed response to contradictory demands. Institutional pressures can trigger inconsistencies (Berti & Simpson, 2021) as organizations adopt practices, policies, and solutions, not because they are appropriate to their purpose and context, but because they are generally accepted within their institutional environment (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). Such institutional conformity can lead to decoupling, where formal commitments to values or purpose are maintained symbolically while underlying practices remain unchanged (Ashforth & Gibbs, 1990). In such circumstances, their adoption becomes a form of mimetic corporate virtue signaling, producing an appearance of virtue without substantive change. Consequently, even well-intentioned organizational leadership could embrace overambitious claims that clash with current capacity to deliver, projecting a lack of authentic engagement with the issue. These legitimacy-seeking adaptations, while intended to preserve organizational reputation, often heighten internal contradictions, which employees perceive as hypocrisy. While social-ethical reasons for adopting employee SOPB in favor of organizational purpose increase in these circumstances, employees' fear of their advocacy also increases because institutionalized conformity and the defensive responses it generates heighten perceived personal and professional risks associated with speaking up (Detert & Edmondson, 2011; Morrison & Milliken, 2000).

An example comes from Cathay Pacific. Cathay Pacific employees that supported Hong Kong's democracy protests were "made redundant" by the organization, sparking public protests by employees against the organization's actions (Cheung & May, 2019). Cathay espouses the company's values as "progressive", as well as "thoughtful – to respect and care for everyone",[4] but these values were not upheld in relation to employees' pro-democracy protests. Protest was seen as disobedience that threatened the organization in the changing institutional context of the People's Republic of China (PRC). In the past, Cathay assumed a progressive purpose, to which employees signaled adherence. As the external context of PRC rule changed, pressure to conform to the changing rules was increasingly applied internally.

### 3.3. Power relations

Power relations play an important role in whether and how SOPB are, or are not, carried out and how the organization responds. We focus here on how power is exercised: coercively as 'power over' or collaboratively as 'power with' (Follett, 1942). These two modes directly shape whether SOPB is suppressed or enabled. Embedded in "aspects of organizational culture consisting of beliefs, values, and practices that have evolved for solving problems and otherwise manage stakeholder relationships" (Jones et al., 2007, p. 137), power relations play a pivotal role in handling tensions. When employees confront decision-makers with contradictions between purpose and practice, leaders may respond authentically, exercising 'power with' by acknowledging tensions and treating employee as part of a legitimate moral community (Jones et al., 2007). In this case, SOPB can be generative and corrective. Where responses remain defensive, 'power over' dominates, hypocrisy persists, and authority is used to enforce compliance rather than address the contradiction.

How power is distributed also determines whether employees can voice concerns or are silenced. Rhodes (2021) notes that employee SOPB can assuage appetites for more fundamental emancipatory projects, but its viability depends on organizational openness to critique. Deliberative organizational mechanisms, such as more organizational democracy or more organizational domination, shape power dynamics and value implementation, framing how employee prosociality is expressed (Gond & Moser, 2021). Research on participatory governance suggests that democratic structures, such as consultative decision-making, shared governance forums, and representative participation, enhance both perceived fairness and the psychological safety required for giving voice (Edmondson, 1999; Morrison, 2023). Fostering participatory forms of democracy in which voice is widened and innovative agendas opened to new actors encourages employees to raise issues more actively. When such participatory mechanisms are absent, hierarchical distance and fear of retaliation inhibit constructive dissent (Morrison & Milliken, 2000). Where there is a balance of power between stakeholders, employee concerns are more likely to be addressed constructively. By contrast, when power is heavily imbalanced, employees are more likely to experience silencing, and SOPB is curtailed. These dynamics set the stage for how employees engage with contradictions, to which we turn to next.

### 3.4. The power of (dis)engagement

The stronger the employees' engagement and identification with the organization, the greater the tension they may experience when faced with gaps between values and practices (Simbula et al., 2023). Maintaining loyalty to an organization that appears inconsistent and hypocritical is difficult for ethical members that strongly identify with the organization (Miao & Zhou, 2020). Strong identification may, in some cases, be more likely than weak adherence to trigger prosocial action, especially when such action is framed as seeking alignment with the purpose on which identification is grounded. Yet other motivations, of moral conviction, hypocrisy-aversion, or strategic calculation, may also drive SOPB.

A common response to contradiction is ritualistic obedience to orders, in which individuals strive to "comply with any and all injunctions with complete literalness and to abstain overtly from any independent thinking" (Watzlawick et al., 1967, p. 218), a phenomenon not unknown in organizations (e.g., Tracy, 2004). Under such circumstances, compliance is less a sign of loyalty than a defensive mechanism, signaling withdrawal rather than support. No apparent conflict is visible, but the appearance reflects resignation in the face of domination. Members confronted with contradictions may lack metacommunication possibilities (space for communicating about the way we communicate; Watzlawick et al., 1967) to expose or negotiate these.

Power relations shape whether engagement translates into voice or into withdrawal. When 'power over' prevails and is exercised coercively, contradictory orders cannot be accommodated, contradictions cannot be negotiated (Berti & Simpson, 2021). Employees' options narrow to exit or instrumental loyalty (Hirschman, 1970). In practice, this may mean being instructed to be spontaneous but punished for spontaneity, or being asked to speak up only to be criticized for saying the wrong things (Cunha et al., 2023). Defensive responses in such contexts are paralyzing; employees either exit, resist subtly, or accept contradictions cynically, adjusting their diligence accordingly (Fleming & Spicer, 2003). As contradictions persist, less committed employees may become negligent rather than diligent, signaling disengagement without vocalizing it. By contrast, when 'power with' prevails and relations are more balanced, orders can be negotiated and tensions reduced, lessening the motivation to go public and enabling voice within the organization.

### 3.5. From motivations to action: the role of committed employees

While motivational pathways explain why employees may be predisposed to SOPB, committed employees represent the point at which concerns escalate into visible collective action. Here, strong

commitment, whether rooted in identification with the organization, deeply held moral convictions, aversion to hypocrisy, or strategic calculation, transforms latent tensions into actual protest, often despite managerial resistance. Escalation typically occurs when the persistent incoherence between rhetoric and practice makes those motivational concerns impossible to ignore, prompting employees to act collectively.

Prosocial action may be variably consequential in terms of organizational reactions (Bolino & Grant, 2016). While employees may articulate their voice because of wider political phenomena, such as the protests in Hong Kong against the increasing imposition of authoritarian PRC rule, organizations may learn to trim their course to the prevailing winds of change (Zhao & Valentini, 2022). The view of employees as citizens may collide with an orientation that assigns managers the expertise and the right to define the organization's action and adjust legitimacy to the changing context (Mirvis, 2012). Managers act as gatekeepers of what counts as legitimate voice, shaping whether concerns surface or remain silenced (Suchman, 1995). Managerial control over legitimacy boundaries reinforces traditional hierarchies of authority, even in organizations espousing participatory values. These managers have an interest in diminishing the presence of conflict and debate, even when the organization proclaims its purposive credentials (Courpasson et al., 2012). When authority is viewed as a managerial prerogative, employee SOPB may be interpreted as deviance and punished, intensifying experiences of organizational hypocrisy. By contrast, empowering employees to act with autonomy and psychological ownership fosters constructive voice and moral courage in confronting organizational inconsistencies (Detert & Burris, 2007).

### 3.6. An overall perspective

When unresolved contradictions fall outside the zone of indifference, they may accentuate employees' voice, enacting purpose for which certain conditions are necessary. For one, employees need to be empowered to perceive themselves as change agents as well as being supported by managers that act as stewards of the organization and its purpose. Such empowerment partly stems from self-agency, the capability to do things; it is also a response to context. When an organization states that it values a cause, through the imprimatur of organizational legitimacy, it empowers the agency of those actors it employs that support the cause. Concerted effort may produce productive dialogue and feedback mechanisms informing the organization and employees, either positively or negatively.

The performative cycle thus engages different actors in dialogue and functions as an organizational stabilizer. Such stabilizing effects occur when conflict is seen as an expression of difference. Breaches of normative order come to be defined as anomalies, i.e. "observable events that violate widely shared expectations" (Marti & Gond, 2019, p. 488). Such events are seen by different participants as signifiers of the system's complexity, rather than symptoms of domination disrupting moral community (Julmi, 2022). Research shows that when contradictions are approached dialogically, tensions can stimulate adaptive learning and integrative solutions (Hahn et al., 2014; Smith & Lewis, 2011). When anomalies are approached through a mitigation strategy, righting a mismatch between words and actions, organizations and employees can work in concert to narrow contradiction. In this case, tensions allow actors to negotiate contradictory demands, and the organization provides "escape routes" (Tracy, 2004, p. 142) that reduce systemic absurdities.

When employees articulate organizational values to counter some organizational practice, they risk being framed as engaging in acts of organizational disobedience, instead of expressing loyalty and commitment. Insurgency needs to be countered, agents disempowered, the legitimacy of the organization recast. In traditional hierarchies this may not be a major problem as people will know that the organization is a hierarchy in which obedience is key. In less hierarchical organizations, the prevailing rhetoric and practice may be different. When employees are presented as being more than experts in obedience (Jacques, 1995), when the logic of 'bringing the whole self to work' prevails (Cha & Roberts, 2019), blindly accepting discrepancies may be inconsistent with the organization's rhetoric of empowerment and participation, aligning organizational and personal senses of purpose (Rey et al., 2019). These tensions can become either *generative*, if managed through openness and learning, or *degenerative*, if met with defensiveness and control (Smith et al., 2013). As a result, organizational cultures that promote empowerment may nonetheless disempower those who exercise it in unsanctioned ways, reproducing organizational hypocrisy.

Most organizations try to accomplish many different things, creating ambiguity and multiple interpretations about organizational goals. When many diverse actions can be attributed to an organization, its rhetoric, speech acts and language games are likely to be just as multiple (Mol, 2002). Such multiplicity is not inherently problematic; it becomes harmful only when defensive organizational responses suppress rather than channel these differences into constructive dialogue (Hahn et al., 2015). With our conceptual model we contribute to explaining the conditions in which this ambiguity ceases to be employable, and the tension caused by the contradiction between perceived actions and perceived statements becomes irreconcilable, triggering SOPB and prompting organizational resistance in a dynamically escalating mode.

## 4. Implications, limitations and future research

### 4.1. Implications

We contribute to the literatures on prosocial behavior, corporate ethics, and activism by clarifying how employees can simultaneously express *commitment* to broader values and *critique* toward their organizations through SOPB. By conceptualizing SOPB as a dual form of allegiance and dissent, our framework extends current understandings of prosocial behavior from individual moral action to a relational, processual dynamic shaped by organizational purpose and responses to prevailing power relations. This contribution advances existing theory by integrating insights from the voice, identification, and organizational tension literatures to explain how purpose–practice gaps can trigger prosocial dissent and how organizations' defensive or authentic responses influence subsequent outcomes.

Employee SOPB signals both allegiance and dissent towards one's organization, a force for public accountability and against organizational hypocrisy. By engaging in SOPB, employees signal both allegiance to and dissent from their organization. We address a gap that research on prosocial protests has not yet fully examined, dissent-allegiance behavior. At the same time, we contribute to research on the processual antecedents of such prosocial behaviors or responses. A potentially important (but partially untapped) process is highlighted. Employees that care for a cause constitute a powerful resource potentially at the service of an organization, strengthening mutual commitment in the pursuit of organizational reputation and social and political legitimacy (Stryker, 2000; Suchman, 1995). In other words, they see their jobs as socially useful and meaningful (Walo, 2023).

This is particularly relevant in contexts where organizations strive for legitimacy by adopting socially responsible actions. A contradiction between proclaimed organizational narratives and deeds may end up creating negative reactions on the part of customers (and other stakeholders) which, one way or another, may even reignite or further fuel employees' SOPB via any of the pathways. That employees are considered critical to delivering purpose (as opposed to being regarded as 'functionally stupid;' see Alvesson & Spicer, 2016) helps harness their critical spirit. Hence, organizations need to develop ways to both allow and negotiate expressions of prosocial action; not doing so squanders a precious resource and may give rise to counterproductive effects among both employees and other stakeholders. Our conceptual model aims to account for how organizations can (through their practices and decisions) manage societal-oriented prosocial action effectively. This has

important managerial implications.

Our work indicates that some organizations may be prepared to accept and engage with prosocial responses of employees as a way of enhancing their legitimacy by confirming their purposive values, signifying value resilience in the face of changing expectations. Those organizations that are resistant to genuine employee SOPB must be ready to deal with its negative reputational, legal and financial consequences (Federman, 2022). Consistent with previous work, we suggest that the strategic direction of CSR and social agendas in general will not be exclusively defined at the top. If managers are to avoid accusations of organizational hypocrisy and the correspondent reputational illegitimacy, even economic-financial damages, they must develop a genuine and dialogic process with employees (Buber, 2003; Burrell, 1994; Calton & Payne, 2003), expressing their purposive commitments to employees performing strategy as practice (Siltaloppi et al., 2021).

Employees need to be regarded as constructive critics. Instead of seeing employee SOPB or responses as adversarial manifestations of illegitimate and disturbing resistance to what is being done, they can be represented as a sign of loyalty to the strategic purpose. Creating a culture of respectful and purposeful dissent (i.e., "healthy disrespect"; Kets de Vries, 2016, p. 13) may help manage tensions more effectively. Employees resist because they care (regardless of the degree of altruism of their motives). Strong organizational identification and engagement is a potential source of more intense contestation. However, tension can elicit an authentic response: if organizational authorities are able to regard the contestation as legitimate, they may seed important internal changes in such contestation. It is the combination of value divergence/dissonance *and* one or a combination of the four pathways (i-e-. identification-repair, moral conviction, hypocrisy-aversion, strategic calculation) that triggers employee SOPB.

Even if creating a culture of respectful dissent does not necessarily lead to better management of employee SOPB, it helps create favorable opportunities for conflicts clarifying viewpoints. These should be regarded as opportunities for organizational learning rather than as occasions for retribution against 'disloyalty'. Listening to employees able to say 'No' towards organizational deeds that contradict the organizational purpose may be a constructive and fruitful way of making better decisions (Nemeth & Goncalo, 2011). Indeed, it is an approach that can be particularly helpful in dealing with competing stakeholders' interests and goals (Calton & Payne, 2003; Carmine & De Marchi, 2023). Conceptually, we predict that people with a sense of belonging and organizational identification may be useful critics because they belong to a collective with whom they identify. Although in identification-repair, the sense of belonging to a collective whose actions one doesn't identify with but whose values one shares leads to employees to strive to align individual and collective values and identities, critical voices can also emerge through other pathways. Employees may act from moral conviction, hypocrisy-aversion, or strategic calculation, even in the absence of strong organizational identity. It is therefore important that organizations are aware that 'troublemakers', 'rebels' and 'rogues' involved in prosocial protest may truly *be* 'heroes' (Nemeth & Goncalo, 2011) of organizational purpose and sustainable performance (Ren et al., 2023).

Societal-oriented prosocial employees should be distinguished from resisters or instrumental critics. Potential gains accrue from the engagement of these employees. For organizations, strong identification is a predictor of voice requiring careful consideration. Employee SOPB, using the strength of organization rhetoric against organization practice, will either precipitate negotiation or call out of hypocrisy. Dissent can be an opportunity to create a more democratically negotiated meaning in workplaces. For this to occur, it is necessary for the organization's authorities to avoid a defensive position. In practice this also means that managers learn to view conflict and harmony as polyphonic elements (Kornberger et al., 2006). By contrast, the absence of conflict may signify a false consensus on values. Equipped with a polyphonic understanding of organizational life, managers are more open to embrace contradictions and employee prosocial activity via 'both-and' approaches (Smith & Lewis, 2011); in its absence, they may feel that they should 'solve' contradictions through hierarchical fiat, imposing false consensus.

Being prepared to accept and engage with prosocial *protesting* organizational members is not risk free. Organizations and their senior executives may genuinely aim to pursue a social purpose agenda with unanticipated consequences. The ouster of Danone's Emmanuel Faber for his pro-environmental stance attests to this, as social purpose was not balanced with profits in the view of significant stakeholders (Abboud, 2021). A socially responsible agenda is not monothetic: different employees and stakeholders may interpret the organizational purpose differently or have different socio-political-ethical agendas in mind (Hahn et al., 2024).

### 4.2. Limitations

We have discussed societal-oriented prosocial expressions and their organizational reception either positively or negatively as polar types (Weber, 1949). It is realistic to consider that organizations might use a combination of coercive and supportive approaches instead of just one or the other. Intra-organizational differences might result from, among other factors, team-level differences in psychological safety. Evidence suggests that managers create diverse micro-cultures regarding psychological safety (Cunha et al., 2019), potentially affecting employee motivation for SOPB. In defense of our argument, it can be noted that, over time and through habituation, most organizations will express a propensity, a "central tendency" (Briscoe & Gupta, 2016, p. 14), to align with one or other of the approaches that will become dominant and characteristic. As noted above, we suggest that an authentic response has positive repercussions, whereas a defensive response, suppressing debate, is debilitatingly negative. Extant work explains why these tensions produce negative outcomes (Berti & Simpson, 2021). It is possible, however, that over time people will grow accustomed to these situations and adapt, normalizing them through the reduction of expectations (Li, 2021). For this reason, it is premature to accept that the two approaches will necessarily lead to distinct organizational outcomes.

### 4.3. Future research

While we discuss the process that explains when and how employees adopt, or do not adopt, SOPB, we have not considered individual characteristics that make employees more or less likely to carry out those behaviors. While our approach is consistent with the collective agency view that we adopt to conceptualize SOPB, we acknowledge that individual characteristics do matter (Thielmann et al., 2020). Therefore, future studies may investigate the role played by characteristics such as employees' courage (Detert & Bruno, 2017), concern for others (Thielmann et al., 2020), or the dispositional belief in a just world (Guo et al., 2022). The desire to belong to a collective of individuals that pursue a social cause, especially if that cause gets wide media attention, may also motivate some employees to adopt SOPB. Future studies may consider the role played by organizational and team characteristics (e.g., team psychological safety; Edmondson & Bransby, 2023), and leadership behaviors (e.g., servant leadership: Eva et al., 2019; paradox-savvy leadership: Waldman & Bowen, 2016; responsible leadership; Rego et al., 2022).

A promising direction concerns the emotional underpinnings of organizational identification as a motivational driver of SOPB. Strong identification may introduce an affective tension (i.e., simultaneous *pride* in belonging and *discomfort* with perceived hypocrisy), that transforms dissonance into motivation for moral repair. Future research could explore how this emotional ambivalence links identity-based attachment with moral agency and how such emotional dynamics shape employees' readiness to act on perceived purpose–practice gaps (Ashforth et al., 2008; Ashforth et al., 2014). This line of inquiry may

connect research on identification with emerging conversations about emotions and moral action in organizations.

Economic, social, and political conditions may also foster SOPB. Considering the socio-political nature of the issues raised by the employees, future studies may explore how antecedents and consequences are framed socially, by market, government, and community contexts, as well as by organizations and employees. Moreover, some specific SOPB are more likely to be adopted when the contradiction between the purpose and the organizational action refers to a sensitive social and political issue in a particular moment (e.g., immigration, race, gender). Some collective, extra-organizational phenomena may make employees more likely to respond prosocially to a contradiction between purpose and actions. Future studies may thus investigate how and when prosocial motives empower and disempower different constituencies as well as the role played by political conditions. Research may consider the role of political conditions on the appearance and disappearance of employee SOPB. Longitudinal work may be especially revealing, as will be cross-country comparisons between activism in different political regimes.

Scholars may also explore how some employees operate as role models and socio-emotional contagion agents that make them more able to attract other employees (as well as public and media actors) for a cause that, initially, only a few others embrace. Another important research avenue consists in exploring the interaction between individual attributes and the situation or context (Simpson & Willer, 2015). For example, a particular organizational situation may make some employees experience tension as paralyzing, while others may reinforce their societal-oriented prosocial stance and therefore recruit their renitent peers to adhere. Individuals with some specific characteristics (e.g., prosocial personality, moral courage, a strong sense of self and its identity, as well as the belief in a just world) may adopt a prosocial response in some situations but not in others. Future studies may consider the nomological network (i.e., correlates, antecedents, consequences, outcomes, mediators, and boundary conditions) of employee SOPB. Multilevel analysis can track the phenomenon emerging at both (and across) the individual and collective levels, to explore the role of employee activism in responses to grand challenges. Research may also explore nomological networks and their relations with forms of prosocial behavior.

Future studies may explore the conditions that lead organizations to respond positively rather than negatively to employee societal-oriented prosocial efforts. For example, it is likely that employee SOPB is received more positively by an organization when senior managers (1) espouse values that are consistent with those pursued by the activists, (2) anticipate that the changes proposed by the employees will have a positive impact on other stakeholders, such as customers and the community at large, or (3) fear the negative reputational and market consequences of countering activists (Wowak et al., 2022).

Another promising area for future research refers to the boundaries and overlaps between employee SOPB and interrelated forms of activism, resistance and contestation (e.g. Amer & Bonardi, 2023; see also Appendix). Operationalizing the construct's content, convergent, discriminant, and predictive validity, is also necessary. We consider that the plurality of levels (individual, dyadic, team, organizational, and extra-organizational) at play in the phenomenon is a source of complex research challenges that, given the practical relevance of the phenomenon, must be faced with perseverance and cooperation among researchers from multiple disciplinary domains (e.g., management, organizational behavior, labor studies, organizational studies, human resource management, leadership, corporate social responsibility, economics, sociology).

## 5. Conclusion

Our work, in summary, advances three significant ideas. First, employees use SOPB both for signaling their allegiance to and dissent from their organization. In contrast with employee activism research, prosocial research has not fully examined the tensional dissent-allegiance component. Second, we contribute not only to understanding the process of employees' SOPB but also the tensions that employees may experience as an organization reacts to public protests against purpose-actions contradiction. Third, while employee SOPB may be a 'blessing' for the organization's reputation and legitimacy as a socially responsible organizational citizen, it is also rife with challenges. Tensions may be unavoidable, and the last approach that organizations should adopt is to confront employees with choices that may have a negative impact on both them and the organization.

Employee SOPB is an important emerging underexplored phenomenon of activism. It should be studied because, among other reasons, social media make employee voices easier to amplify and therefore more difficult to ignore. The individual, organizational and societal consequences of employee SOPB should not be underestimated. For organizational members as well as their organizations, the process involves risks and opportunities. We argue that, depending on organizational purpose and values, employee SOPB can be a source of authentic or defensive responses. The two have consequences at the individual, organizational and societal levels. We explored the process conditions that trigger the emergence of the phenomenon, showing that in addition to being a source of integration of voices and interests at the boundary of the organization and society, it can also be a cause of perceived organizational hypocrisy, debilitating for the parties involved. Thus, instead of seeing it as inherently positive or dangerous, organizational scholars may consider the process of employee prosocial behaviors to illuminate the nexus between purpose as rhetoric and purpose as practice and thus the process dynamics of purpose and hypocrisy.

## CRediT authorship contribution statement

**Stewart Clegg:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Conceptualization. **Cunha Miguel Pina e:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Conceptualization. **Abrantes António Abrantes Cunha Meneses:** Writing – review & editing. **Arménio Rego:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Conceptualization. **Banejee Bobby:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Conceptualization.

## Author statement

I confirm that this paper represents the authors' work not that if AI and that it is not under consideration elsewhere nor is it published in any other media.

## Data availability

No data was used for the research described in the article.

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