

# CITIZENS' PERCEPTIONS ON SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY IN PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION ORGANIZATIONS: A CASE STUDY ON SPAIN

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## **Abstract**

This paper analyzes citizens' expectations on social responsibility of public administration organizations in comparison to other public and private organizations, and argues that the mission attributed to different institutions in society might guide citizens' perceptions and thresholds of satisfaction with sustainability standards. Three different survey studies were carried out to analyze citizens' expectations of social responsibility of public administration organizations, private companies and a public university in the same Spanish region. A list of indicators defining internal and external social responsibility practices was developed to compare expectations in the three institutional contexts, and MANOVA was used to test differences between participants in the three surveys. Results support the notion that citizens' expectations of social responsibility are related to perceived organizational goals in private and public contexts and the specific dimension of responsibility considered. Particularly, participants displayed higher expectations of external social responsibility in public administration organizations than in private companies and the public university analyzed, whereas citizens' expectations of internal social responsibility were more homogeneous in public and private contexts. Implications of the study and suggestions for further research are discussed.

**Keywords:** social responsibility, public administration organizations, public universities, private companies, citizens' expectations.

## 1. Introduction

Although the concept of social responsibility was originally linked to private companies, it is nowadays considered applicable to all types of entities (Rodríguez-Bolívar *et al.*, 2015; Gaete, 2008). In essence, it defines a new strategic paradigm for organizations to integrate social and environmental concerns into their operations with the aim of preventing and mitigating their possible adverse impacts and maximizing the creation of shared value for all their stakeholders (European Commission, 2001). Accordingly, the recommendations of several international institutions give special prominence to public administration's role in both regulating and representing a model of sustainability for other organizations by incorporating the principles and philosophy of social responsibility into its own structure and activity (European Commission, 2011). This paper delves into this second function by analyzing citizens' perceptions on social responsibility of public administration in comparison to other organizational contexts. Around this goal, we define public administration organizations as those that perform the government's administrative and management functions.

Previous researches analyzing citizens' awareness of social responsibility has focused on private companies, concluding that contribution to social and environmental causes may induce consumer goodwill towards firms and their products (Brown and Dacin, 1997; Becker-Olsen *et al.*, 2006; Alniacik *et al.*, 2011). In the public sphere, the main evidence in this regard comes from specific self-managed institutional contexts, such as public universities (Vallaey, 2008; Ceulemans and De Prins, 2010; González and Martos, 2010; Argandoña, 2012), supporting the same positive effects of social responsibility perceptions on students' experiences and attitudes towards the institution (Vázquez *et al.*, 2014). However, even when transparency and citizen participation is considered a key element of current policies in Europe (European Commission, 2006), there are yet few sustainability reports developed by other types of public organisms (Frost, 2007; Guthrie and Farneti, 2008; Mussari and Monfardini, 2010) or studies expressly aimed to analyze social responsibility of public administration (Dumay *et al.*, 2010; Navarro-Galera *et al.*, 2014). Presumably, this gap in the literature might have to do with the fact that social responsibility is usually considered a redundant topic in public administration organizations, as these are by definition oriented to meet social demands. However, this does not mean that citizens perceive public administration to be responsible in all its dimensions; quite the contrary, citizens usually report high dissatisfaction with functioning of public services (Gaete, 2008).

This paper considers the proximity of the concept of social responsibility to public administration's basic mission in society, and argues that organizational goals in different institutional settings might guide citizens' expectations of social responsibility and, consequently, thresholds of satisfaction on the matter. In particular, our basic research question is what type of responsible behavior do citizens expect from public administration organizations when compared to other private or public organizations? A better understanding in this sense may help public administration agen-

cies develop plans and strategies that are more efficient in their dual regulating and endorsing role in the social responsibility area.

From this framework, the paper contributes to the previous literature by comparing citizens' expectations of social responsibility in three organizational contexts: public administration organizations, private companies, and public universities. This design allows us, on the one hand, to define the social perception on social responsibility in public administration organizations in comparison with profit-driven companies, in which responsible behavior is more likely to be understood as voluntary. On the other hand, we analyze the extent to which perceptions on responsibility of public administration organizations differ from other public contexts. In this regard, we choose public universities for two main reasons. First, they represent self-managed institutions with a much more specific mission than public administration organizations, this probably affecting the way citizens frame social responsibility in public contexts. Second, in the last decades the concept of university social responsibility has been notably developed and incorporated into the habitual functioning of several European universities (Barañano, 2010).

According to this focus, next section reviews the literature on social responsibility in public administration organizations, summarizes main research evidence on citizens' perceptions on social responsibility, and proposes a model of indicators of internal and external social responsibility to compare citizens' expectations in different institutional contexts. Then, we describe and present the results of an empirical study aimed to analyze citizens' expectations of social responsibility in public administration organizations, private companies and a public university in Spain. Finally, the results of the study and their implications and limitations are discussed.

## **2. Conceptual framework**

### ***2.1. Social responsibility in public administration organizations***

In a study performed for the World Bank, Fox *et al.* (2002) identified four principal roles of public administration in the area of social responsibility: mandating, facilitating, partnering and endorsing. First, in their mandating role, public sector bodies define minimum standards for business performance embedded in the legal framework (for example, establishment of emission limit values for industrial installations). Second, as facilitators, public agencies incentivize companies and other key actors to engage with social responsibility initiatives by creating specific incentives and supporting appropriate management tools and mechanisms. Third, organizations of public administration may act as participants, conveners or facilitators of strategic partnerships with the private sector and civil society in tackling social and environmental problems. Fourth, in their endorsing role, public administration is expected to promote the concept of social responsibility through public diffusion, direct recognition of the efforts of individual enterprises and other related actions.

Public administration's endorsing role also includes the adoption of social responsibility principles in its own management practices, thus playing a driving and revi-

talizing role for society as a whole and representing a model of reference for citizens and organizations. In this context, public administration should not adopt an authoritarian position, but act as an agent of change. In other words, the institutions of the state administration, beyond their natural orientation towards the satisfaction of basic needs, should demonstrate an exemplary behavior and be proactive and emphatic with emergent demands, such as sustainable development, citizen participation and social cohesion (Gaete, 2008).

Notably, the EU strategy for corporate social responsibility encourages public authorities to play a supporting role through a smart mix of voluntary policy measures and complementary regulations to promote transparency, create market incentives for responsible business behavior, and ensure corporate accountability (European Commission, 2011). In addition, the strategy stresses the importance that public administration organizations demonstrate, and give visibility to their own responsible practices (Navarro-Galera *et al.*, 2014). These recommendations are in line with the principles for managing ethics in the public service established by OECD (1998), and are being progressively adopted by national governments in public administration's management systems and relationships with key stakeholders (Hernandez, 2007).

Particularly in Spain, the current strategy for enterprises, public administration organizations and other institutions to advance towards a more competitive and sustainable economy (Ministry of Employment and Social Security, 2014) calls public sector agencies to apply to themselves the same standards they apply to companies and other organizations. Within this framework, Spanish public management systems have become involved in several responsibility actions, including internal plans to promote equality of opportunity in employment, prioritization of public contracts based on social, environmental and parity criteria, elaboration of citizens' rights charters and participative budgets, and creation of the National Agency for the Evaluation of Public Policies and Quality of Services (Hernandez, 2007). Similarly, the adoption of United Nations' Agenda 21 by most public sector agencies in Spain represents a key milestone (Yera and Pin, 2010).

To facilitate the public sector's endorsing role, the national strategy encourages the elaboration of corporate governance and sustainability reports at all levels of public administration for presentation before higher government bodies, as expression of effective support and monitoring of social responsibility policies. Complementarily, consulting citizens regularly about their knowledge and awareness of the level of penetration of social responsibility in the Spanish society is considered a public administration basic tool in the design of further strategic plans. This reflects the evolution from a concept of citizens as customers of public services to an 'open government' in which citizens participate in the development of public policies (United Nations, 2010). Notably, consumer information and transparency are key elements of current policies in Europe, given that citizens have the power to provide effective incentives for social responsibility in several organizational contexts (European Commission, 2006).

The main evidence for this comes from studies carried out in private companies and focused on the implications of social responsibility for consumer behavior. In general, it is concluded that socially responsible initiatives may induce consumer goodwill towards firms, whereas irresponsible companies are likely to be punished (Brown and Dacin, 1997; Maignan, 2001; Becker-Olsen *et al.*, 2006; Alniacik *et al.*, 2011; Vázquez *et al.*, 2012a; Bae and Kim, 2013). Similar conclusions have been reached in certain non-profit or public contexts. For instance, NGOs often base their social legitimacy on transparency and social dialogue about social responsibility (Crespy and Miller, 2011); moreover, these organizations usually consider consumer reactions to social causes when collaborating with private companies in social marketing campaigns (Galán, 2011). Similarly, students' perceptions on social responsibility in public universities have been found to affect their perceptions of quality of services and experiences of satisfaction with the institution (Aza *et al.*, forthcoming).

Based on the previous reasoning, one can expect that citizens' assessments of social responsibility in public administration organizations serve also for reinforcing their positive experience with these government institutions. However, while the previous literature has analyzed public sector roles regarding social responsibility in different countries (Forum for the Future, 1999; OECD, 2001; Aaronson and Reeves, 2002; Bell, 2002), few studies have addressed how such measures affect citizens' perceptions and experiences (Vázquez *et al.*, 2012b). Similarly, previous research has not analyzed how citizens frame social responsibility in different organizational settings, and how it affects their assessments. A better understanding in this regard would provide useful insights for public administration and other organizations, helping them design their responsibility policies and strategies in a more effective way.

## **2.2. Citizens' perceptions on social responsibility**

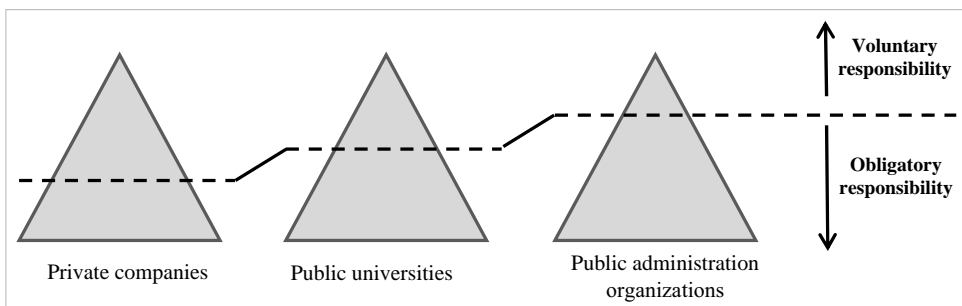
As previously stated, most previous researches analyzing the corporate behaviors that citizens perceive to be distinctive of social responsibility focus on private companies (Maignan, 2001), and conclude that consumers pay special attention to work conditions, transactions with consumers, respect for the environment and contribution to social causes. Responsible relations with other groups of stakeholders (i.e., business partners, suppliers and distributors, competitors, etc.) are considered to be less representative of the firms' basic responsibilities (Vázquez *et al.*, 2011).

On the other hand, the main evidence on citizens' awareness of social responsibility in public and non-profit organizations comes from specific institutional contexts. In particular, university social responsibility represents one of the most developed streams of research in the last years. From this view, public universities are considered a key figure in the education of people as citizens, professionals and executives (Vallaey, 2008; Ceulemans and De Prins, 2010), and are assumed to take responsibility for the impacts caused by their strategies, structures, policies and performances (González and Martos, 2010; Argandoña, 2012). Around this concept, a recent study by Vázquez *et al.* (2014) analyzed the perception on university social responsibility

held by students as main stakeholders of these institutions, and found the coexistence of six different factors: external projection, research, education in environmental values, internal management, university-firm relationships, and education in social values. Students perceived internal management concerning university staff's work conditions to be the most representative dimension of university social responsibility, whereas the external projection factor defining collaboration with external social actors was framed as less characteristic of university responsibilities.

The scarcity of studies analyzing other non-profit organizations – including public administration agencies – may have to do with their public service orientation, leading to assume that social responsibility is inherent to these organizations' general mission. Nevertheless, inefficiency and corruption characterize public services in many countries nowadays (Gaete, 2008). Internally, it is frequently observed that public employees lack the necessary qualification, remuneration and work recognition, whereas citizens' participation is not sufficiently incentivized, and large sectors of population appear to be excluded from public policies (Gaete, 2008). In particular, a recent report of the National Agency for the Evaluation of Public Policies and Quality of Services (2015) reveals that citizens report high dissatisfaction with public services functioning. Similarly, a study carried out in Spain by Vázquez *et al.* (2012b) suggests that citizens demand greater transparency in financial management, efficiency in the distribution of public resources, and establishment of responsible principles for public staff recruitment and management.

However, it is difficult to know whether the shortcomings identified by citizens in public administration organizations are understood as deficiencies in social responsibility or failures to fulfill their basic duties. According to this notion, the general hypothesis of this research is that citizens might frame the concept and assessment of social responsibility in the general mission and goals of different institutions, thus resulting in different expectations and, consequently, different thresholds of dissatisfaction. In this vein, Figure 1 represents social responsibility expectations that citizens may hold in three different organizational settings.



**Figure 1:** Citizens' expectations of social responsibility in different organizations

Compared to private companies, citizens are likely to expect higher levels of compliance with responsibility standards in public and non-profit contexts. Notably, so-

cial responsibility principles are more congruent with the social mission attributed to public sector services than with profit maximization as a main function of private firms. Therefore, social responsibility practices will be likely framed in terms of 'added value' in private firms and as 'basic duties' in public contexts, this resulting in higher citizens' expectations in these organizations.

At the same time, it is posited that social responsibility expectations vary by type of public institution, depending on the service offered and the function performed in society. Public administration organizations perform the state management function, thus bringing citizens together with the political branch of the government to satisfy immediate public interests. Moreover, this function includes regulation of social responsibility in other organizations. All this might lead citizens to expect a high level of public administration involvement in responsible behavior, as part of its intrinsic *raison d'être* in society. On their behalf, other types of public organizations may share the same civic orientation, while maintaining a much more specific focus on a certain social area. For instance, public universities are probably assumed to have a basic responsibility in controlling education-related impacts (Vallaey, 2008; Ceulemans and De Prins, 2010); however, the involvement of public universities in certain practices oriented towards the improvement of the surrounding community and the satisfaction of citizens' basic interest might be more likely to be perceived as voluntary.

### ***2.3. Dimensions of social responsibility in different organizational settings***

When analyzing citizens' perceptions on social responsibility in different institutions, it is essential to define first the basic dimensions in which such organizations can be compared. The European Commission (2001) identifies two basic dimensions of corporate social responsibility: internal and external. The internal dimension primarily refers to employees, and is related to issues such as investing in human capital, promoting health and safety and managing change, together with other environmentally responsible practices related to the management of natural resources used in the production. The external dimension involves responsible relationships with a wide range of stakeholders, including business partners and suppliers, customers, public authorities, NGOs representing local communities, and the environment.

Although such dimensions were initially designed to define a model of social responsibility adapted to private companies, they can be easily generalized to public and non-profit organizations. In fact, many models of social responsibility in these institutional settings also consider relationships with internal and external stakeholders. In particular, most research on university social responsibility assumes an impact-based approach, focusing on the way organizations manage their effects on people, society, the economy and the environment (Vallaey *et al.*, 2009). In these terms, it is argued that universities cause four different types of impacts: educational, cognitive, organizational and social. While the educational and cognitive impacts are considered to be exclusive of university institutions, the organizational and social impacts correspond, respectively, to the internal and external dimensions of so-

cial responsibility of private companies. On the one hand, the organizational impact involves both labor and environmental responsibilities inside the organization, and aims to build a responsible campus supported by democracy and sustainability. On the other hand, the social impact extends beyond the doors of the institution, and aims to promote joint learning communities for sustainable development, by integrating teaching, research and external projection activities to address community, social and environmental concerns (Vallaes, 2008).

Similarly, social responsibility in public administration organizations should be based on the identification and management of ethical and transparent relationships with critical stakeholders in the exercise of the public function, both in the internal and external spheres (Gaete, 2008). In this vein, the Spanish strategy on social responsibility assumes that public administration must safeguard public staff's professional development and labor welfare, and respect and improve the social environment in which it operates (Ministry of Employment and Social Security, 2014). From this point of view, public administration's internal responsibility means providing public employees with appropriate opportunities and instances so they can carry out their duties in optimal tangible and intangible conditions. Likewise, to achieve an efficient management of its effects and impacts on the external community, public administration should promote the dialogue and negotiation with key external stakeholders (citizens, firms, suppliers, labor unions, other public entities, etc.).

### **3. Methodology**

#### **3.1. Sampling**

We conducted three different survey studies aimed to analyze, respectively, citizens' expectations on social responsibility of public administration organizations, private companies, and a public university. The three studies were carried out in the same Spanish region. In each case, the study population was defined as citizens maintaining a frequent exchange relationship with each type of institution analyzed. A total of 400 valid surveys formed the sample size for each study, according to representativeness for a confidence level of 95% ( $e = \pm 5\%$ ;  $p = q = 0.50$ ).

Accordingly, participants in the two first surveys were selected from the general population of adults older than 18 years old. In particular, the sample of the first survey on citizens' expectations on social responsibility of public administration organizations was composed of 222 females (55.5%) and 178 males (44.5%), aged 18 to 75 ( $M = 41.77$ ,  $SD = 14.47$ ). Similarly, the sample of the second survey on citizens' expectations on social responsibility of private companies comprised 220 females (55%) and 180 males (45%), aged 18 to 75 ( $M = 44.39$ ,  $SD = 15.87$ ). For the third survey on citizens' expectations on social responsibility of a public university, we considered students as the most representative group of citizens in touch with this type of institutions. Therefore, the sample was selected from the total number of bachelor degree students enrolled at the University of León at the time of the survey. A stratified procedure was used when selecting the distribution of students by academic fields:

social sciences (44%), engineering (25%), sciences (24.5%), and humanities (6.5%). The final sample comprised 159 males (39.8%) and 241 females (60.3%), aged 19 to 32 ( $M = 22.63$ ,  $SD = 2.01$ ).

### 3.2. Measures

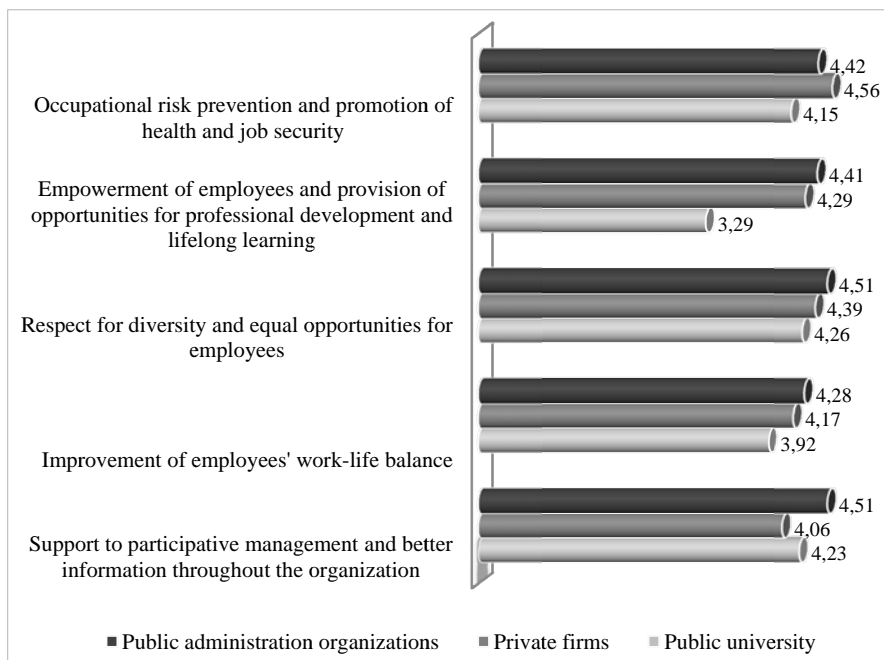
Participants in the three surveys were presented the same list of indicators defining social responsibility practices. The indicators were developed following a deductive approach that was based on a thorough review of the specialized literature on the concept and other similar instruments (Hinkin, 1995). In this respect, we chose the model proposed by the European Commission (2001, 2011), which identifies the internal and external dimensions of corporate social responsibility. As previously mentioned, such dimensions have been also identified in public administration and university contexts (Gaete, 2008; Vallaeys, 2008), and thus, were considered to be adequate for this research. A list of indicators were initially proposed to define each dimension; then, three experts judged the applicability of each indicator to the three organizational contexts analyzed. As a result, a final list of ten indicators was made. Five indicators referred to the internal dimension of social responsibility (Figure 2), and five indicators defined the external dimension (Figure 3). Participants in the three surveys were given the same instructions to indicate the degree to which, according to their experience, they could expect public administration organizations / private companies / the university to display the practices defined by each indicator in their habitual activity. Responses were rated on a five-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 ('low expectation') to 5 ('high expectation').

## 4. Results

### 4.1. Citizens' expectations of internal social responsibility

Figure 2 displays the mean scores obtained from participants when asked about their expectations regarding internal social responsibility in the three institutional contexts analyzed. In general, expectations were high for respondents in the three surveys, with most mean scores above 4 on the five-point scale of response. A one-way between-groups multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) was performed to check for differences between respondents in the three surveys (Table 1). The results showed a statistically significant difference between groups for the combined dependent variables:  $F_{(10, 2366)} = 19.03$ ,  $p < .001$ ;  $Wilks' Lambda = .857$ ;  $\eta^2 = .074$ . Then, differences were tested separately for each indicator. All differences reached statistical significance using a Bonferroni adjusted alpha level of .01.

Table 2 displays the results of a follow-up analysis performed to identify where the significant differences lay for each indicator. According to HSD Tukey post hoc tests, expectations of social responsibility in public administration organizations ( $M = 4.51$ ) and the public university ( $M = 4.23$ ) exceeded those associated to private companies ( $M = 4.06$ ) only in the item on 'support to participative management and better information throughout the organization'.



**Figure 2:** Citizens' expectations of internal social responsibility

**Table 1:** Results of MANOVA (internal social responsibility)

Variable	Wilks' Lambda	F	$\eta^2$	F	$\eta^2$
Occupational risk prevention and promotion of health and job security	.857	19.03***	.074	31.82***	.051
Empowerment of employees and provision of opportunities for professional development and lifelong learning				36.43***	.058
Respect for diversity and equal opportunities for employees				10.13***	.017
Improvement of employees' work-life balance				17.02***	.028
Support to participative management and better information throughout the organization				34.46***	.055

Note: \*  $p < .05$ ; \*\*  $p < .01$  (Bonferroni adjusted level); \*\*\*  $p < .001$ .

**Table 2:** HSD post hoc analysis (internal social responsibility)

Variable	Organization (I)	Organization (J)	(I - J)	Std. Error
Occupational risk prevention and promotion of health and job security	Private firms	Pub. admin. org.	.13*	.053
	Private firms	Public university	.41***	.053
	Pub. admin. org.	Public university	.28***	.053
Empowerment of employees and provision of opportunities for professional development and lifelong learning	Private firms	Public university	.36***	.059
	Pub. admin. org.	Public university	.49***	.059
Respect for diversity and equal opportunities for employees	Private firms	Public university	.24***	.054
	Pub. admin. org.	Public university	.24***	.054
Improvement of employees' work-life balance	Private firms	Public university	.24***	.064
	Pub. admin. org.	Public university	.36***	.064
Support to participative management and better information throughout the organization	Pub. admin. org.	Private firms	.46***	.056
	Pub. admin. org.	Public university	.28***	.056
	Public university	Private firms	.17**	.056

Note: \*  $p < .05$ ; \*\*  $p < .01$ ; \*\*\*  $p < .001$ .

However, contrary to our initial predictions, expectations concerning ‘occupational risk prevention and promotion of health and job security’ were higher in private companies ( $M = 4.56$ ) than in both public administration organizations ( $M = 4.42$ ) and the public university ( $M = 4.15$ ). Differences between expectation of social responsibility in public administration organizations and private companies in the three remaining items were not statistically significant. The mean scores obtained by respondents in the private companies survey were significantly higher than those obtained by respondents in the public university survey in the items on ‘empowerment of employees and provision of opportunities for professional development and lifelong learning’ ( $M = 4.29 > M = 3.29$ ), and ‘improvement of employees’ work-life balance’ ( $M = 4.17 > M = 3.92$ ).

When comparing perceptions on internal social responsibility in different public contexts, citizens’ expectations were significantly higher in public administration organizations than in the public university analyzed for the five practices considered. These results support our initial prediction.

#### 4.2. Citizens’ expectations of external social responsibility

Figure 3 displays the mean scores obtained for participants in the three surveys when asked about their expectations of external social responsibility in public administration organizations, private companies, and the public university. Again, expect-

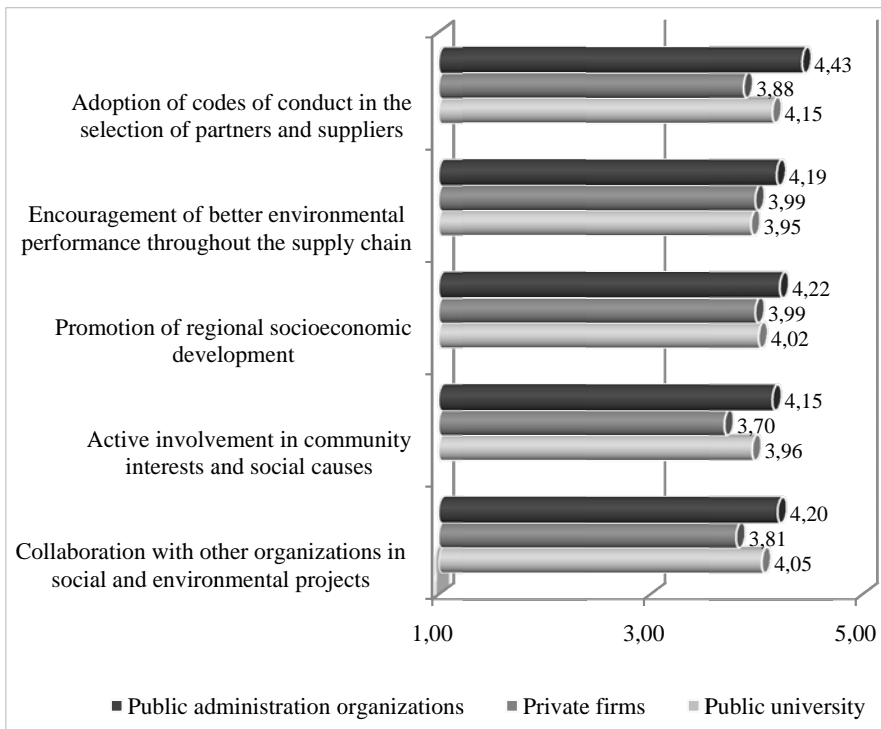


Figure 3: Citizens’ expectations of external social responsibility

tations were high for respondents in the three surveys, although slightly lower than those obtained for internal social responsibility indicators.

A second MANOVA was performed to investigate the effect of the institutional context on the five indicators of external social responsibility. Results displayed in Table 3 supported a statistically significant difference between groups for the combined dependent variables:  $F_{(10, 2366)} = 12.31, p < .001, Wilks' Lambda = .904, \eta^2 = .049$ . Likewise, when results for each indicator were considered separately, all differences reached statistical significance using a Bonferroni adjusted alpha level of .01.

**Table 3:** Results of MANOVA (external social responsibility)

Variable	Wilks' Lambda	F	$\eta^2$	F	$\eta^2$
Adoption of codes of conduct in the selection of partners and suppliers	.904	12.31***	.049	45.06***	.071
Encouragement of better environmental performance throughout the supply chain				7.80***	.013
Promotion of regional socio-economic development				9.14***	.015
Active involvement in community interests and social causes				24.96***	.040
Collaboration with other organizations in social and environmental projects				18.54***	.030

Note: \*  $p < .05$ ; \*\*  $p < .01$  (Bonferroni adjusted level); \*\*\*  $p < .001$ .

Table 4 displays the results for the HSD Tukey post hoc tests performed to analyze where the differences between institutional contexts lay. In line with our initial predictions, respondents in the public administration organizations survey expected higher involvement in the five practices analyzed than respondents in the survey of private companies. Similarly, expectations in the public university were higher than those associated to private firms for three indicators: 'adoption of codes of conduct in the selection of partners and suppliers' ( $M = 4.15 > M = 3.88$ ), 'active involvement in community interests and social causes' ( $M = 3.96 > M = 3.70$ ), and 'collaboration with other organizations in social and environmental projects' ( $M = 4.05 > M = 3.81$ ). Differences between expectations of external social responsibility in private companies and the university in the two remaining items were not statistically significant.

Concerning perceptions of external social responsibility in different public institutions, results supported our initial prediction that citizens' expectations are significantly higher in public administration organizations than in university contexts. In this respect, the mean scores obtained for respondents in the public administration organizations survey exceeded those of participants in the public university sample for the five indicators studied.

**Table 4:** HSD post hoc analysis (external social responsibility)

Variable	Organization (I)	Organization (J)	(I – J)	Std. Error
Adoption of codes of conduct in the selection of partners and suppliers	Pub. admin. org	Private firms	.55***	.058
	Public university	Private firms	.27***	.058
Encouragement of better environmental performance throughout the supply chain	Pub. admin. org.	Public university	.28***	.058
	Pub. admin. org.	Private firms	.20**	.065
Promotion of regional socio-economic development	Pub. admin. org.	Public university	.24**	.065
	Pub. admin. org.	Private firms	.23***	.060
Active involvement in community interests and social causes	Pub. admin. org.	Public university	.21**	.060
	Pub. admin. org.	Private firms	.45***	.064
	Public university	Private firms	.27***	.065
Collaboration with other organizations in social and environmental projects	Pub. admin. org.	Public university	.18*	.065
	Pub. admin. org.	Private firms	.39***	.064
	Public university	Private firms	.23***	.064
	Pub. admin. org.	Public university	.16*	.064

Note: \* p < .05; \*\* p < .01; \*\*\* p < .001.

## 5. Discussion and conclusions

The general proposition of this paper was that citizens frame their perception on social responsibility of public administration in the basic mission that they attribute to this institution in society, resulting in different expectations when compared to other organizational settings. Moreover, the results of this study support the notion that citizens' expectations on social responsibility are related to perceived organizational goals in private and public contexts, and the specific dimension of responsibility considered.

Particularly, when analyzing external social responsibility practices, citizens were found to display higher expectations of compliance with sustainability standards in public administration organizations than in private companies. Hence, it seems that social responsibility is perceived to be more congruent with the social mission attributed to public services than with profit maximization as main goal of lucrative firms. Accordingly, practices such as adoption of codes of conduct throughout the supply chain, active involvement in regional development and collaboration with local organizations in social and environmental projects might be more likely to be identified as public administration organizations' basic duties, this resulting in higher expectations on the matter.

At the same time, this study supports the prediction that expectations of external social responsibility also vary depending on the social function performed by different types of public institutions. In this respect, citizens' expectations on social responsibility of public administration organizations in the relationships with external stakeholders exceeded those attributed to a public university. According to our initial reasoning, this result might mean that public universities' responsibility in the satisfaction of public interests is perceived to be restricted to education-related impacts, whereas further involvement in the improvement of the surrounding community and the satisfaction of basic needs is probably framed as a public administration's basic responsibility. Consequently, citizens are more likely to expect higher compliance

with social responsibility standards in public administration organizations than in other public organisms that maintain a more specific focus on a certain social area. In support to this reasoning, our results also show that citizens' expectations of social responsibility in the public university studied were not statistically different from those associated to private companies in areas such as encouragement of better environmental performance throughout the supply chain and promotion of regional socio-economic development.

However, when considering the internal dimension of social responsibility, our results reveal that boundaries between citizens' expectations in public and private contexts turn vaguer. In particular, only expectations of public administration's support to participative management exceeded those attributed to private companies, whereas expectations of occupational risk prevention and promotion of health and job security were higher in lucrative firms, and there were not statistically significant differences by institutional context in the other indicators analyzed. In sum, these results might point that citizens are more aware of the importance of responsible human resources management than of other external social responsibilities, independent of the institutional context considered. Consequently, they would be likely to frame internal social responsibility as a basic duty of all types of organizations, resulting in similar levels of expectations. In support to this notion, the mean scores obtained by participants in the study were slightly higher for internal than for external indicators of social responsibility.

In the context of this interpretation, one intriguing result of the study refers to the lower expectations of internal social responsibility found in the public university in comparison to both private companies and public administration organizations. This result might be due to the type of sample used in the three surveys of the study. While expectations of social responsibility in public administration organizations and private companies were studied on samples of citizens that were representative of the general population, the survey on citizens' expectations on university social responsibility relied on a sample of undergraduate students. Related to this, students probably have less professional experience as employees of both public and private organizations than other samples of citizens, thus resulting in a lower level of knowledge of human resources management practices in organizational contexts.

The results of this study have several theoretical and research implications. Primarily, they contribute to on-going efforts to improve the understanding of public administration's social responsibility (Guthrie and Farneti, 2008; Mussari and Monfardini, 2010; Navarro-Galera *et al.*, 2014). To this end, our research recommends considering citizens' expectations when developing plans and strategies to adopt and communicate responsibility standards in public administration organizations, as citizens are more demanding with internal than with external dimensions of social responsibility.

Related to the previous, the results of this study suggest that the positive effects of perceived social responsibility on citizens' attitudes that have been documented

in private companies (Brown and Dacin, 1997; Becker-Olsen *et al.*, 2006; Alniacik *et al.*, 2011) and public universities (Vázquez *et al.*, 2014) can be also expected in public administration organizations, although baseline thresholds of citizens' satisfaction may vary by type of institution. In this respect, citizens are less likely to tolerate irresponsible practices in public contexts than in private companies, in which responsible standards are usually framed as voluntary. Similarly, citizens seem to be more demanding with social responsibility in public administration organizations than in other public contexts with a more specific focus on a certain social area. In other words, the baseline under which an organization can be labeled as responsible in citizens' minds may depend largely on its public or private nature, which can lead to frame the same practice as compulsory or voluntary in different settings, and thus, to increase or reduce citizens' expectations on appropriate organizational behavior. Consequently, social responsibility standards and guidelines are hardly generalizable to different types of organizations.

This study suffers from some limitations that should be addressed in future research. As previously stated, one main limitation of the research conducted relates to the comparability of the samples used in the three surveys. Although the sample of university students is considered useful to analyze the social perception characteristic of the most immediate group of stakeholders of university institutions, participants in the study had specific traits in terms of age and life styles, which make them a less comparable sample. For that reason, future attempts should be devoted to overcome this weakness. In line with the previous observation, further research should be aimed to replicate the results of the surveys described here in other regional contexts and countries, in order to test the generalization of the results described here. Complementary to this, it would be also pertinent to analyze the role of other cultural and political factors in the relationship between institutional context and social perception on internal and external social responsibility. Finally, future studies should extend the spectrum of institutional settings considered here to other types of organizations, at both public and private levels, in an attempt to build a more complete vision of the topic and its practical implications in different contexts.

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