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Meta-Reviewing the Business and Society Field through Sociological Paradigms: Towards Pluralistic *Re*-Presentations of Corporate Social Responsibility

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Abstract: Although the growth of the field of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) calls for more diverse exercises of reviewing, most reviews of CSR research present the organising categories on which they build as taken-for-granted. In so doing, they reify a structural-functionalist orientation and a linear view of time while failing to represent accurately alternative post-structural and anti-structural CSR paradigms. Building on an analysis of 40 reviews of the CSR field and on insights from the social studies of science, this paper revisits the notion of field *re*-presentation and highlights the need for building on categories, which embed a richer set of ontological assumptions to represent the CSR field in a manner that could maintain a dose of ontological and epistemological pluralism and diversity. We finally discuss the implications of our analysis to enhance CSR theory-building, cross-fertilize insights from distinct CSR paradigms and develop alternative assumptions to investigate empirically CSR phenomena.

Keywords: Anti-structuralism, Corporate social responsibility, Literature review, Representation, Post-structuralism, Sociological paradigms

INTRODUCTION

Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) is an inter-disciplinary domain of study that has grown exponentially since the 1970s, establishing itself as central to management scholarship at the turn of this century (Crane et al., 2008; Lockett, Moon & Visser, 2006; Walsh, Weber & Margolis, 2003). More than 2500 articles on CSR were available in the Web of Science dataset in 2014; and since 2009, over 400 papers on this topic are published each year (Lu & Lui, 2014: 118). CSR can be defined as an "umbrella construct" (Gond & Moon, 2011; Hirsch & Levin, 1999) that hosts numerous related concepts—such as corporate citizenship (Matten & Crane, 2005) or corporate social performance (Wood, 1991; 2010)—and aims at capturing the relationship between corporations and their social, political and ecological environment.

Recent works have qualified, refined and criticized the CSR concept, pushing the field in many directions, for instance, by focusing on "strategic CSR" (Orlitzky, Siegel & Waldman, 2011) through the promotion of concepts such as "creating shared value" (Porter & Kramer, 2006; 2011), by highlighting its political dimension and studying the business-government-society nexus under the banner of "political CSR" (Frynas & Stephens, 2015; Scherer, Rasche, Palazzo & Spicer, 2016;

Scherer & Palazzo, 2011), or by considering the psychology of CSR at the individual level of analysis through investigations of "CSR micro-foundations" (Aguinis & Glavas, 2012; Gond, El Akremi, Swaen & Babu, 2017; Jones & Rupp, in press). The high growth rate of the number of CSR studies associated with the multiple (re)orientations of CSR call for recurrent 'review of the field' exercises.

This paper is concerned by the fact that most reviews of the CSR field—be them 'systematic' (e.g., Aguinis & Glavas, 2012; Walsh et al., 2003), 'analytical' and 'descriptive' (e.g., Garriga & Melè, 2004; Wood, 1991), focused on 'definitions' (e.g., Carroll, 1999), 'corporate-centric' (e.g., Secchi, 2007), 'person-centric' (e.g., Jones & Rupp, in press) or 'performance-centric' (Margolis & Walsh, 2003)—tend to undermine the pluralistic theoretical potential of the CSR concept through the choice of categories they mobilize to account for the field. In so doing, these reviews reify the dominant ontological and methodological orientations of the field and focus researchers' attention on questions, such as CSR impacts on performance, mainly because of their specific way of *re*-presenting the field.

For instance, adopting an 'input-process-outcome' type of representation inspired by behavioural psychology to review CSR studies (Aguinis & Glavas, 2012; Jones & Rupp, in press) overemphasize the improvement of CSR performance, and so are reviews that explicitly focus on the link between CSR and financial performance (e.g., Margolis & Walsh, 2003; Wood, 1991). The tendency of CSR reviews to focus on corporation or business as their main unit of analysis (e.g., Secchi, 2007; Wood, 1991) also tends to overlook the sociological dimension of CSR (Preston, 1975). Distinguishing between individual (micro), organizational (meso) and social (macro) levels of analysis to organize CSR studies (Aguinis & Glavas, 2012; Frynas & Stephens, 2015) involves assuming the existence of such levels, *de facto* ruling out the reliance of theoretical frameworks or ontological approaches that contest the very existence of such categories, such as actor-network theory (Callon & Latour, 1981; Hassard & Cox, 2013), when it does not seriously misrepresent the assumptions inherent to the growing stream of studies that promote post-structural perspectives on CSR (Banerjee, 2008; Fleming & Jones, 2013; Scherer & Palazzo, 2007).

In sum, the argument that we will defend in this paper is that representations of the CSR field or subfield (e.g., political CSR) conveyed by prior reviews tend to consider the ontological, epistemological and methodological orientations inherent in the categories and classifications they borrow as 'taken-for-granted', and that, in so doing, these reviews reify structural-functionalist analyses of CSR to the detriment of works that adopt anti-structural or post-structural stances on the CSR concept.

To uncover and address these limitations, we engage in a meta-theoretical exercise by examining prior reviews of the CSR field to investigate critically the assumptions underlying these CSR-focused literature reviews. From a theoretical viewpoint, our analysis builds on insight from actor-network theory and the social studies of science about the notion of *re*-presentation (Hacking, 1984; Latour, 1987, 2005; Law, 2008; Lynch & Woolgar, 1990) as well as recent developments around the notion of sociological paradigms in organizational analysis (Burrell & Morgan, 1979; Hassard, Kelemen & Cox, 2012; Hassard & Cox, 2013) to discuss the need to account explicitly for the ontological and epistemological assumptions underlying CSR studies when reviewing them. The analysis of 40 reviews of the CSR field allows us to identify, specify and illustrate recurrent problems in the modes of CSR reviewing.

To address some of these problems, we then propose an alternative *re*-presentation of the CSR field informed by the distinction between structural, anti-structural and post-structural perspectives in sociology and organizational analysis (Burrell & Morgan, 1979; Hassard & Cox, 2013). We show how this new *re*-presentation can enhance and promote pluralism in the ontological and epistemological choices for future CSR research by considering approaches to CSR that are understudied, and can generate new research question by supporting new approaches to meta-triangulation for developing future CSR studies (Hassard & Cox, 2013; Lewis & Grimes, 1999). The implications of the analysis for representing the field of CSR as well as other fragmented academic fields are finally discussed.

REVIEWING AS *RE*PRESENTING: A SOCIAL STUDIES OF SCIENCE PERSPECTIVE

Organizational scholars have built on the social studies of science (SSS) field (Latour, 1984; Law, 2008) to shed light on neglected dynamics in the constitution of organizational knowledge (Cox & Hassard, 2013), such as resistance to innovative methods like Bayesianism (Cabantous & Gond, 2015), the selective and biased uses of prior works (Mizruchi & Fein, 1999), or the misuses of insights from foundational authors such as Max Weber (Lounsbury & Carberry, 2005).

However, little attention has been devoted by organization theorists to a central insight from SSS, which points to the necessary non-neutral nature of any form of knowledge *representation* (Hacking, 1984). According to Hacking (1984) and SSS scholars, academics through their activities do not build "representations" of an external reality that exist independently from them, rather they usually engaged in the transformation of the world through multiple activities to test and develop representations, typically by designing experimentations in natural sciences (Latour, 1988). Accordingly, the production of scientific knowledge "adds to the world" (Muniesa, 2014) and is likely to produce effects in this world, a fact well illustrated by a growing stream of studies dedicated to the "performativity of economics" (Callon, 1998; MacKenzie, Muniesa, & Siu, 2007) that have uncovered how concepts and theories from economics and finance have contributed to shape the world according to their underlying assumptions (Cabantous & Gond, 2011; Ghoshal, 2005; Ferraro, Pfeffer & Sutton, 2005).

An important implication of this "anti-representationalist" assumption of SSS and performativity studies is the recognition that any constitution of a scientific account, be it from a scientific experiment, an anthropological field of study or a synthesis of prior literature, is always a deliberate reconstruction of what is (supposed to be "neutrally") represented. In this regard representing actually means *re*-presenting, that is presenting things differently from how they were presented before, and this 'gap' opens the possibility for multiple forms of representations and leaves room for social, political and material factors that partake in the making of a given *re*presentation. According to SSS scholars, one should unpack the social, political and material dimensions involved in the process of producing such re-presentations to fully appreciate what is at stake in the making of science (Cabantous & Gond, 2015; Law, 2008).

Producing a literature review can hence be regarded as manufacturing a "re-presentation" of an academic field in the sense of *re*-presenting (i.e. presenting differently) the literature to the members of this field. According to SSS assumptions, it is crucial to consider the material, political and performative dimensions involved in such an academic exercise. Reviewing a literature involves

operating within the *material realm*, and notably the material constraints set by journal editors (maximum space allowed, strict word-constraint). Reviewing is made possible by usually accessing articles through the use of databases and/or library, hence being shaped by and performed through the reliance on numerous material devices (search engines, spreadsheet, library, printers). Reviewing a literature is de facto *a political act* that involves specifying the boundaries of this literature – and hence necessarily including and excluding papers. Some of these choices are made explicit (e.g., deciding to review micro-CSR as opposed to reviewing CSR in general) while others remain tacit (e.g., widespread practice of excluding de facto all the articles written in another language than English). Finally, reviewing a literature is also a *performative exercise*, in the sense that it contributes to "bring into being", reinforce and/or reify the definition of what is the reviewed field and specifies the boundaries of the community of scholars involved in this field. A successful literature review, in becoming an obligatory passage point in terms of citations, is likely to shape the future according to its explicit and implicit claims and assumptions.

It is therefore crucial to scrutinize the practice of reviewing in a field in order to engage reflexively with its limitations and overlooked potentials. In the following section, we will engage in such an exercise.

DATA AND METHODS

We rely on the aforementioned assumption to investigate and scrutinize critically the categories, assumptions and influence of 40 reviews of the CSR fields published between 1975 and 2017. Appendix 1 provides the list of reviews that we will consider in the final paper. We included articles that as a whole provide a fair account of the evolution of the field. For this, we needed to identify systematically all literature review articles that were published since 1975. Even though literature on CSR is much older, we chose Preston's 1975 review as a cut-off point for our review (Preston, 1975). Our systematic search for CSR literature reviews included four steps: examining through key-word search all issues of review journals (*International Journal of Management Reviews, Academy of Management Annals,* and *Journal of Management* review issues); all issues of CSR journals (*Business Ethics Quarterly; Business Ethics: A European Review; Business & Society; Journal of Business Ethics, and Society and Business Review*); mainstream management, organisation theory, and accounting journals (*AMR, AMJ, ASQ, JOM, JMS, BJM, Organization Science, Organization Studies, Human Relations, Journal of Accounting Research, Journal of Accounting & Economics, Accounting Review, Review of Accounting Studies, and Critical Perspectives on Accounting*); and performing a general search in an online library database. Titles and abstracts were reviewed for all articles to determine relevance. This exercise resulted in finding 45 literature reviews, and an additional two articles that were identified as forthcoming publications. Discussion between the three authors on the content of the articles resulted in the deletion of 8 articles on the grounds of the articles not addressing the business and society field as a whole (e.g. review of a sub-field of environmental sustainability), or addressed the field from a different area (e.g. accounting or psychology), or the article was not a literature review paper (e.g. an empirical paper or a research agenda). Comments received from expert audience subsequent of a conference presentation resulted in the addition of 3 articles, which meant that the final scope of CSR literature reviews included 40 papers.

After determining the relevance of articles, papers were categorised according the construct labels they used to describe the field (e.g. CSP or CSR), their main objective (e.g. 'chart development of the field'), the main dimensions used to account for the literature (e.g. theoretical approaches), and

categorisations provided (e.g. Instrumental, Political, Integrative, and Ethical). These were identified through an in-depth examination of the full text of the articles. For ease of reporting, main objectives were summarised as one of the following eight key literature review purposes: scoping, integration, historical, agenda-setting, gap finding, state-of-the-art, theoretical, and linking. There is no definitive list for types of literature reviews in management research. Hence, we based our categorisation on the purpose of the reviews and aligned it with classifications from the natural sciences (Booth, Papaioannou, & Sutton, 2012).

TAKING STOCK OF LITERATURE REVIEWS OF THE CSR FIELD

Our analysis of 40 literature reviews confirms our starting intuition that, recently, a number of advances have tried to reorient the field in several new directions, such as political CSR, psychological micro-foundations of CSR or corporate sustainability. Figure 1 provides an overview of the constructs used in the analysed literature reviews.

Figure 1. Constructs used in CSR literature reviews 1975-2017 (N=40)
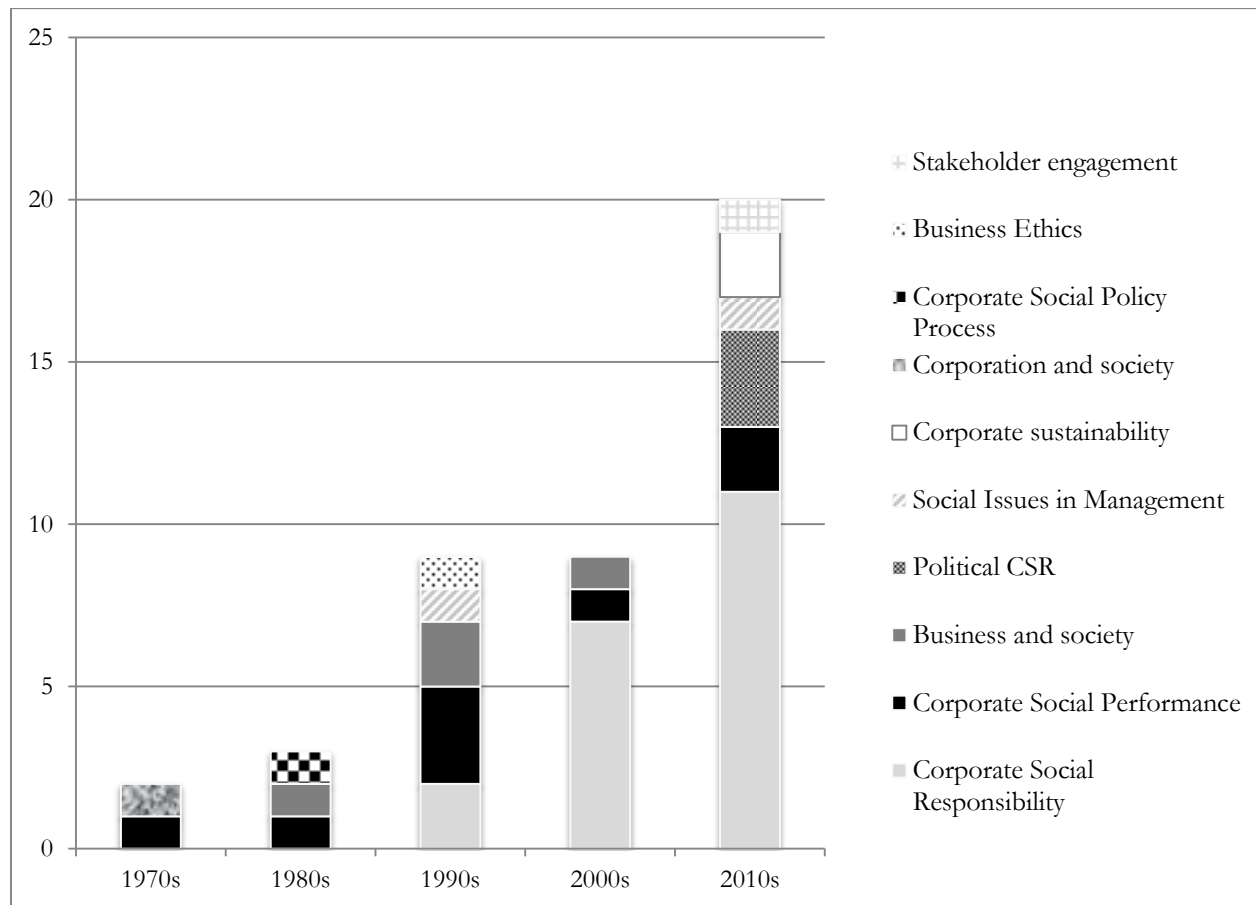

Figure 1 highlights at least two important insights of our meta-reviewing. First, Corporate Social Performance has always been addressed in the literature, and relatively constantly. Both old and new literature reviews deal with this foundational concept in CSR. In fact, it is probably because Carroll's

(1979) seminal contribution to the field delineated this construct that a constant number of subsequent reviews of CSR centrally address this construct too. A likely additional explanation is the anchoring of the CSR field in strategic management. Such filiation comes with strategic management's central concern about corporate performance, whether strictly economic or more broadly conceived (e.g. Porter, 1985).

Second, while prior to approximately 2010, the CSR review landscape was relatively stable and concerned with broad constructs, such as business & society, the 2010s brought a wide dispersion in a previously homogenous review field. From the late 2000s, literature reviews start addressing more precise and narrow constructs, such as political CSR or sustainability. This can be partly explained by the fact that previous knowledge is already acknowledged by an ever increasing number of prior literature reviews. To distinguish themselves as knowledge accumulates, new reviews have to focus on more specific constructs, rather than simply reviewing 'CSR' very broadly. Such a process of increasingly detailed research within a paradigm corresponds to Kuhn's normal science (1962). An alternative explanation, mentioned above, is that reviewing is a conscious re-presentation exercise, whereby authors present their own views of the field. Given that the CSR field has been accepted as a legitimate and well-established field of study in management studies in the 2000s, scholars are trying to impose their own view of the field when reviewing it.

Our analysis therefore also tackled the stated objectives that our analysed reviews put forth. Figure 2 illustrates the evolution of these different stated aims by review authors.

Figure 2. Main objectives of CSR literature reviews 1975-2017 (N=40)
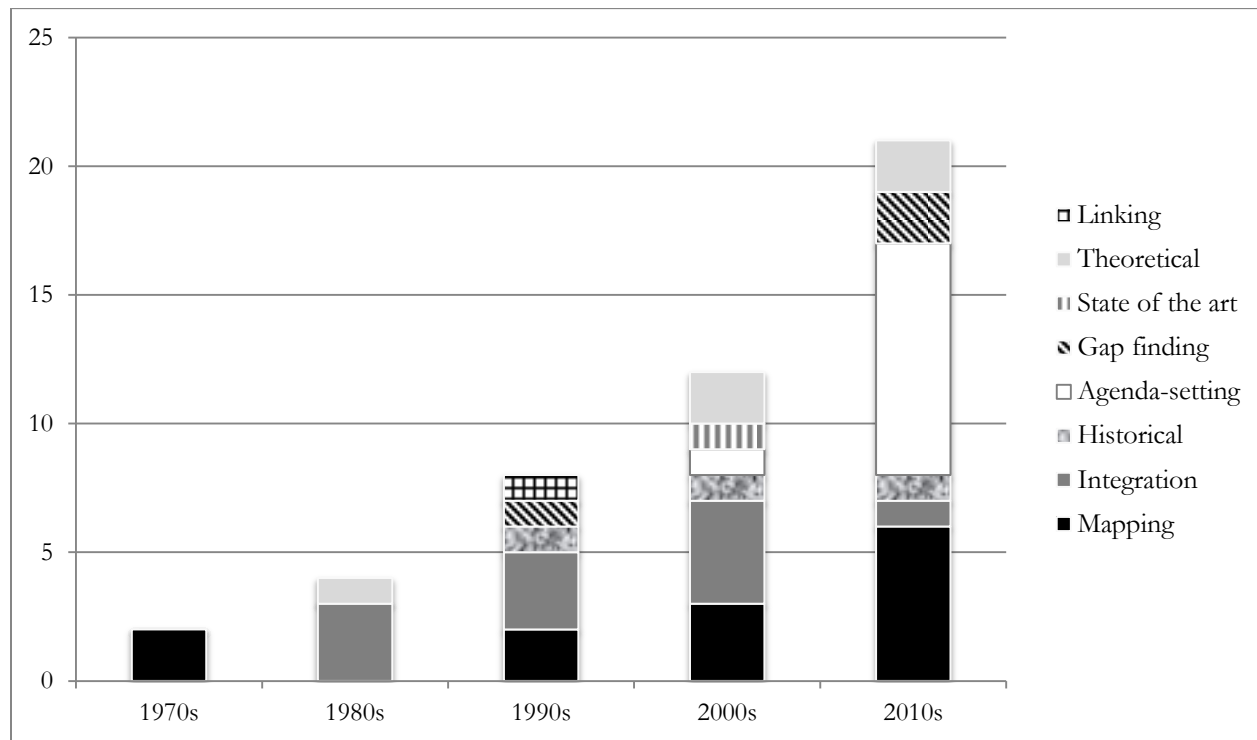
Our analysis shows that throughout the period under review (1975-2017), there is a constant objective of *mapping* the field. This indicates that, as review authors *re*-present their views of the field, such *re*-presentation starts with an explicit goal of presenting the field. More interestingly, we show with our analysis that while *mapping* is a regular objective in CSR reviewing, additional objectives arise in recent years. While prior to the 2010s, *mapping* was often stated as an objective alongside *integration* of different CSR perspectives, from about 2010 onwards, *mapping* rather appears with an objective of *agenda-setting*. Echoing our analysis of construct labels used above, recent years have witnessed the proliferation of different CSR studies, but also different theoretical or empirical perspectives. As mentioned above, it seems that review authors attempt at setting the agenda in this increasingly diverse landscape of CSR, rather than trying to integrate the field from a single perspective as was often done prior to 2010. As mentioned above too, integration was more likely when the field of CSR was emerging and as authors were trying to legitimize it in the wider management academy. Integrating core issues and constructs within CSR was needed to establish it as a distinct area of study. Now that CSR is taken for granted (e.g. with divisions or standing working groups at major management conferences and associations), such integration objective is less needed and authors try to steer the agenda of this established area of study in different directions.

Finally, our analysis also examined the different dimensions that review authors use to *re*-present and categorize the CSR field. Despite a wide variety of dimensions used to review the field of CSR, we identify recurring patterns. First, review authors usually distinguish between CSR studies or theories by looking at their theoretical backdrop. When doing so, they often elaborate on ethical / moral / philosophical theories, performance-based / instrumental / strategic theories, and finally social / political theories. Reviews can address on or more of these three theoretical dimensions. Second, another prominent way of delineating dimensions of CSR studies is related to which level of analysis they examine. Another set of reviewers therefore details and categorize studies according to three levels of analysis: individual, organizational and societal or institutional. Studies can be classified as pertaining to one or multiple of thee categories. Third, some reviews use 'focal points' of CSR studies as dimensions, such as antecedents, processes, variables, or outcomes, among others. Reviews categorize studies according to focal dimensions usually use an input-process-output model. There can be variations for each of these dimensions, such as replacing process by mediator/moderator for those reviews mostly reviewing quantitative studies.

DISCUSSION AND FUTURE DEVELOPMENTS

Identifying Three (Re)Current Problems of CSR Representations

Beyond allowing us to identify some important trends in the development of the CSR field, our analysis of the 40 reviews of the CSR literature suggests a few lasting trends that we will analyse in-depth in future versions of this paper: (a) *the dominance of structural-functionalist orientations*, and in particular a focus of the CSR field on performance as the main outcome of CSR activities and a corporate-centric bias; (b) *the reification of 'taken-for-granted' categorizations presented as self-evident* such as 'input-process-outcome' or 'micro-meso-macro' tha*t contributes to create recurrent problems in the field*; (c) *the misrepresentation or marginalization of non-structural perspectives on CSR* (e.g. post-structuralism, actor-network theory) that do not fit neatly structural-functionalist taken-for-granted categories or assumptions.

_Re_-representing the CSR field through sociological paradigms: Research Strategies for Pluralizing CSR Studies

In the long version of this paper, we will also leverage our prior critique to provide suggestions of review strategies that can help pluralizing the paradigms in-used, with the aim to simulate the development of alternative representation of the field grounded in a multi-paradigmatic approach. Three specific topics will be specifically discussed: (a) _the need to focus on neglected ontological and epistemological orientations_; (b) _the need to rebalance approaches within specific CSR stream of studies_ and we will use the cases of "Political CSR" and "Micro-CSR" and "CSR communications" as three substreams of CSR studies that are subjected to attempt at balancing epistemological orientations in different manners; (3) and finally, we will derive the more _general implications of our exercise of meta-reviewing for the academic practice of reviewing beyond the field of CSR_ and in relation to forms of meta-triangulation.

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APPENDIX 1. LIST OF REVIEWS CONSIDERED SO FAR

Please do not hesitate to provide us with feedback on the list and or to signal us any important review of the CSR field or sub-field we may have missed and that you think should be included in the full version of this paper.

	Article / review	Field or construct label
1	Preston (1975)	Corporation and Society
2	Carroll (1979)	Corporate Social Performance
3	Jones (1983)	Business and Society
4	Wartick & Cochran (1985)	Corporate Social Performance
5	Epstein (1987)	Corporate Social Policy Process
6	Wood (1991)	Corporate Social Performance
7	Swanson (1995)	Corporate Social Performance / Business and Society
8	Gerde & Wokutch (1998)	Business and Society
9	Carroll (1999)	Corporate Social Responsibility
10	Richardson, Welker & Hutchinson (1999)	Corporate Social Responsibility
11	Swanson (1999)	Corporate Social Performance / Business and Society
12	Werhane & Freeman (1999)	Business Ethics
13	Schwartz & Carroll (2003)	Corporate Social Responsibility
14	Walsh, Weber & Margolis (2003)	Social Issues in Management
15	Garriga & Melè (2004)	Corporate Social Responsibility

16	De Bakker, Groenewegen & Den Hond (2005)	Business and Society
17	Lockett, Visser & Moon (2006)	Corporate Social Responsibility
18	Windsor (2006)	Corporate Social Responsibility
19	Secchi (2007)	Corporate Social Responsibility
20	Lee (2008)	Corporate Social Responsibility
21	Schwartz & Carroll (2008)	Business and Society
22	Carroll & Shabana (2010)	Corporate Social Responsibility
23	Du, Bhattacharya & Sen (2010)	Corporate Social Responsibility
24	Gond & Crane (2010)	Corporate Social Performance
25	Maon, Lindgreen & Swaen (2010)	Corporate Social Responsibility
26	Noland & Phillips (2010)	Stakeholder Engagement
27	Wood (2010)	Corporate Social Performance
28	Scherer & Palazzo (2011)	Political Corporate Social Responsibility
29	Aguinis & Glavas (2012)	Corporate Social Responsibility
30	Windsor (2013)	Corporate Social Responsibility
31	Montiel & Delgado-Ceballos (2014)	Corporate Sustainability
32	Frynas & Stephens (2015)	Political Corporate Social Responsibility
33	Rupp & Mallory (2015)	Micro-Corporate Social Responsibility
34	Crane & Glozer (2016)	Corporate Social Responsibility Communication Studies
35	Frynas & Yamahaki (2016)	Corporate Social Responsibility
36	Scherer, Rasche, Palazzo & Spicer (2016)	Political Corporate Social Responsibility
37	Wood & Logsdon (2016)	Social Issues in Management
38	Bansal & Song (2017)	Corporate Social Responsibility vs. Corporate Sustainability
39	Gond, El-Akremi, Swaen & Babu (2017)	Micro-Corporate Social Responsibility
40	Pisani, Kourula, Kolk & Meijer (2017)	Corporate Social Responsibility